

6 Strategies for Surviving Executive Presentations

- **Use Your Sponsor:** Presenting to top-level decision makers is "by invitation only." You'll have a sponsor who is higher up in your own functional area. That person has a lot riding on your success, and wants you to hit the ball out of the park. He or she can enlighten you about the political realities before the meeting, keep things on track during the meeting, and help with the follow up summaries after the meeting. Get him or her on board early in the process.
- **Prepare, Prepare, Prepare:** "What happens before the meeting is more important than what happens at the meeting," says former NetApp Chairman, Dan Warmenhoven. With your career hanging in the balance, plan carefully for that top-level presentation. Analyze the audience. Find out who supports you, and who opposes you. Know the competing priorities and projects. Check and recheck your numbers. Don't step into a decision-making meeting unprepared. If you do, you'll be sorry.
- **Get To The Point!:** "You have 30 seconds to get to the point," says Steve Blank, cofounder and former CEO of Epiphany. "In the past five years, PDAs have gotten so good that I now have a telephone, a TV, the Internet, a computer, and my email at my fingertips. If you don't get right to the point, I'm gone." Executives live with unrelenting time pressure. Get to the point immediately, and be prepared to sacrifice two thirds of your time for discussion.
- **Dump The Slides:** "Senior executives are not a bunch of PowerPoint receptor machines," noted Felicia Marcus, Director, and Western Regional Natural Defense Council. Dramatically slash the number of slides... but have back-up slides in case they want to do a "deep dive." Executives want a discussion, not a slide-driven lecture.
- **Live By The "10 / 30 Rule":** The "10 / 30 Rule" says that if you are scheduled for 30 minutes on the agenda, prepare just 10 minutes of material. The executives will hijack the other 20 minutes for discussion. Dan Warmenhoven warned, "If you have a half-hour presentation on the agenda, you're not going to get through a half-hour presentation. We're not going to let you. Remember, it's our meeting."
- **Improvise:** Successful C-level presenters perform like jazz musicians. When things go off the track, they improvise. In its May, 2009 issue, The Harvard Business Review observed, "The best team leaders are like jazz players, improvising constantly as they go along." The downfall of the over-prepared, nervous, mid-level presenter is the dogged determination to stay on script. Guaranteed failure.