

## The Executive Dilemma



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Imagine this scene: An account team sits around a glass-plated conference room strewn with papers, laptops and half-consumed cups of tepid coffee. They have been wrestling with a political problem at one of their firm's largest clients. Most people in the room spend nearly all of their time serving this client organization. However, the deal currently on the table will require them to be positioned in parts of the client's company far from their comfort zone.

Just then, the CEO of the company walks by the conference room. He is vaguely aware of this meeting, remembering the memos about the large deal and wondering if he will be able to count on the business in this fiscal year. He pops his head in the door.

"Hey, how's it going in here? How is that big deal shaping up?"

All eyes turn to the VP of Sales, who is in the meeting as a coach to the team. "We're working at it," she says. "This team is doing really great work, but it's a very challenging deal."

Smiling, and perhaps a bit relieved not to be drawn into the session in the middle of a busy day, the CEO responds, "Well, if I can help in any way, don't hesitate to ask!"

The group thanks him and returns to their work. At the end of the table, an idea pops into the Strategic Account Manager's head. Later that day, after the working session has concluded, the SAM walks up the stairs to the executive suite. Beth, the CEO's assistant, is not at her customary post, so he makes the bold move of knocking gently on the CEO's door jam. The CEO looks up from his mahogany desk, eyes re-focusing over his reading glasses on the SAM in the doorway.

"Bob, come in!"

"Hi, Gene. Hey, thanks for dropping by our meeting today."

"No problem, Bob. You know that this deal is really important to us, especially if it could impact this year. I'd do anything I could to help out."

"Well, Gene, that's exactly why I'm here. I need some advice and I wondered if you could help out."

"Sure, Bob. What's up?"

"You know that this deal with Mirroplex is pretty unusual. We're trying to figure out exactly how to position ourselves there. It's tough because the decision is being made outside our usual operational area. The team is kind of stuck. I guess I was wondering if you had any ideas."

"How about if I come down and work with you guys for fifteen minutes or so tomorrow. I have a jam-packed schedule, but I'll make the time for this. It's really important and very high-profile." *I know*, Bob thinks, *you don't have to rub it in!*

Realizing how little time Gene really has to invest in the meeting and knowing his reputation for taking things over, Bob hesitates. Maybe he should have stayed downstairs. But now he has a problem: Can he really "un-invite" Gene at this point? What will his boss, the VP of Sales, say to that? And what will happen next time he needed Gene's help?

So, swallowing his reservations with a last gulp of stale Colombian coffee, he replies, "OK, that would be great, Gene. We start at 8:00."

The next day, Gene joins the Mirroplex team, brimming with good intentions but short on time. After a full five minutes of clipped

background, he looks at his watch and jumps in.

"Let me cut to the chase. It sounds like we have a good shot at this deal. I mean, we've been running the trial program for Mirroplex on our platform and we know many of the key players. But we need to get positioned with the other four line executives on their buying committee so that we don't have any surprises. Here's what we should do: We'll use our executives to get these meetings. Bob, you and Jim," he said, pointing at Bob's sales manager, "can come along. I'll drive all of the scheduling through Beth so that she can coordinate the calendars and position the meetings."

Bob feels a bit alarmed at the approach. "But how are we going to explain those meetings? What makes us think that they will take the appointments when we call them?"

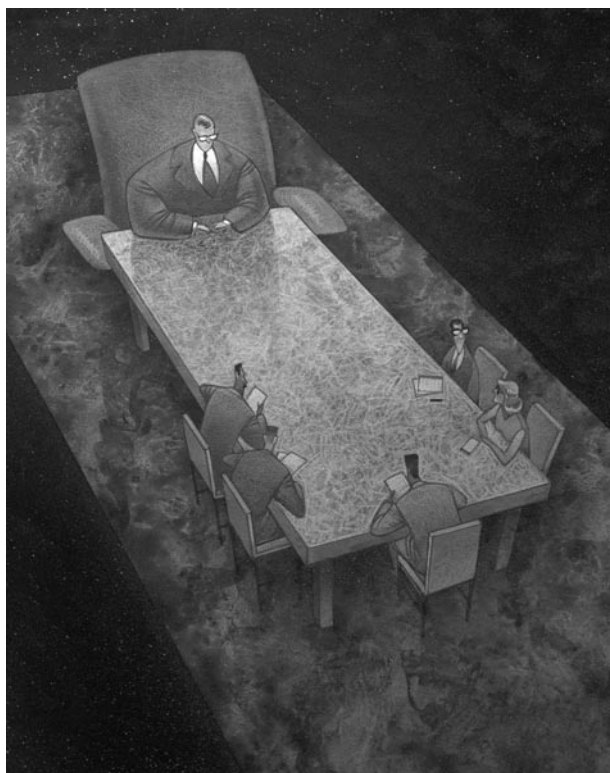
Gene is already standing, striding toward the door as he looks at his watch. "Listen, when they get a call from the CEO's office asking for a meeting, they'll agree to do it. Don't worry." He was gone before anyone could object.

A few days later, Bob receives an unpleasant phone call. His primary contact at Mirroplex, Jan Davis, is on the line and she is upset, to say the least. Apparently, Beth had called several senior executives asking for appointments. Confused as to the purpose of the meetings, several of them called Jan asking for clarification. Anyone passing near Bob's cell phone would have easily heard Jan's pointed comments as they hissed hotly from the receiver.

"Bob, we won't be having Gene, your other executives or you parading through our halls wasting the time of our executive team. I hope you'll think twice before pulling another stunt like this.

Your company has done good work, but there are others out there who can do the job too." Her threat is barely veiled.

"I'm sorry, Jan. It won't happen again," Bob says contritely. In his head, he promises himself not to fall into the trap of involving executives from his company in the delicate work of dealing with his key account. Never again, he mouths to himself.



## **"HERE'S WHAT WE SHOULD DO: WE'LL USE OUR EXECUTIVES TO GET THESE MEETINGS."**

After Bob deliberates with Jim for half an hour, the phone rings in Gene's office. It is Jim. He had drawn the short straw and been elected to tell Gene about the Mirroplex problem. Gene hangs up the phone three minutes later and quietly berates himself for ever getting involved in the Mirroplex situation. He should have known better than to put his reputation on the line with a typically shoot-from-the-hip sales team. Better to stay involved with board members, shareholder meetings and senior

executives. He has no doubt that he will be pinned with this failure. The pattern is predictable. Within days, Beth would wander into his office, conspiratorially sharing the word on the street that he had fouled up the big deal. Never again, he mouths to himself.

While this story is not exactly true, we have heard versions of it many times. Strategic account managers try to involve senior executives in work with clients, thinking it will provide better information to their team, advance their proposal or bring a taste of client reality to their own leaders. Too often, this executive engagement does not work out as planned. Everyone loses: the account manager, sales executives, their senior executive colleagues and ultimately, the customer. While everyone has good intentions, including senior executives in strategic accounts can be a minefield for everyone involved.

Please do not misunderstand us: There are many good reasons to involve senior executives in strategic accounts. They bring additional credibility to client interactions, add unique competence or knowledge to strategic relationship discussions, have the authority to quickly garner resources for the account team and often gain new insights into the company's marketplace.

However, risks abound as well. The executive usually has considerably less contact with clients in general, and certainly the strategic account in question. Executives are not always available for the level of preparation they need to credibly play their role in the client meeting. Moreover, failures involving the executive are visible and delicate. No one likes to be the one who has to deliver the message that they lost a deal largely because of the President's involvement in a sales process.

Despite all this, we steadfastly support involving executives regularly in discussions with strategic clients. We believe that preparation is half the battle, and therefore offer three critical questions that account teams and senior executives should answer to ensure success.

### **The Timing Question: When should we position executive calls with our clients?**

Like much of life, timing is everything when it comes to executive calls. Some account teams first introduce executives near the end of a formal buying process. Introducing executives during the formal RFP process – especially if you are hoping they will open doors in the client’s executive suite – is nearly fruitless. The social script of a formal RFP process makes it nearly impossible for your prime contact in the client organization to agree to your meeting with their senior leaders. Clients can easily interpret your introduction of a senior executive into the process as a move of desperation, an attempt to “bring in the big guns” to seal the deal.

Besides, clients expect you to bring executive presence to sales presentations. Instead of reserving executive visits for meetings about pending deals (i.e., when it will benefit your company), why not flip the question on its head? When would the unique contribution of an executive bring the most value to the client? The possibilities for customer-focused executive meetings abound, but here are a few we have seen utilized to great effect:

**1. Quarterly and / or annual summits:** Many of the best strategic suppliers conduct regular joint meetings with their most important clients to evaluate their work together, plan future direction, and share important learning. These are perfect opportunities to invite relevant executives from your own company. They stand to learn a lot about an important customer’s business, gain a deeper appreciation for how day-to-day operation of your company

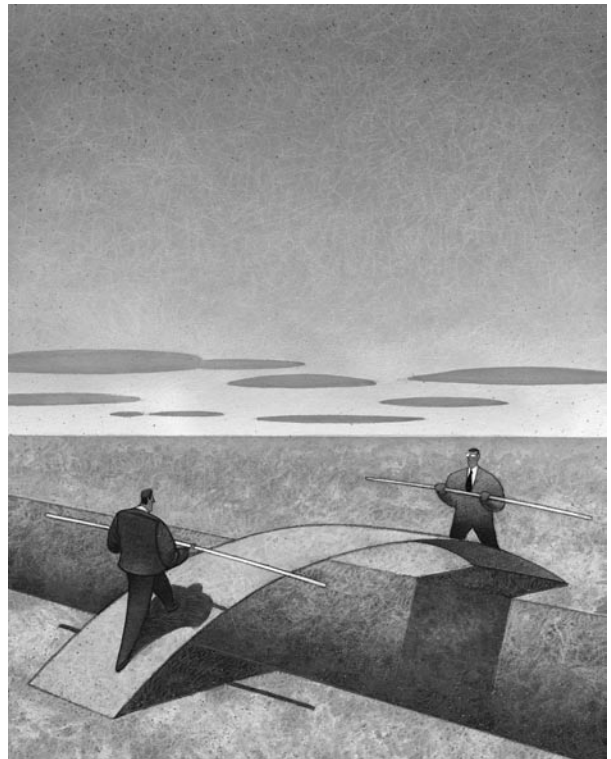
affects customer performance and catch a glimpse of how they can tangibly support the efforts of your account team. When these sessions are solution-oriented, they can also take immediate, specific actions to make business easier and more productive for the customer.

**2. Executive interviews:** We are big believers in the disciplined practice of conducting regular interviews with client executives. These interviews are not sales calls. They are business calls where the prime agenda is to understand the impact of industry trends on the customer’s priorities. With that information, suppliers can identify and prioritize opportunities to add more value to the relationship. While these interviews are sometimes useful during a formal buying process, they have even more power when they are conducted well before the RFP is issued or after a buying process is completed. The added insight, credibility and weight of a well-prepared executive can give these meetings increased value to clients.

**3. Business consulting:** While we understand that the market for free consulting is unlimited, your client may be facing a business problem that one of your executives has successfully tackled in the past. As an example, perhaps your client is facing reorganization, deregulation, a new product rollout or a new business partnership. Even though their business problem may not be addressed by your proposed product solution, your executive may be able to provide valuable insight to help your client strategize. Cross-functional sharing of best practices between leaders only strengthens the bond between companies.

### **The Executive Matching Question: Who is the best executive to bring to the client?**

Beneath this question, most salespeople hear the implicit question: Who will be the least likely to embarrass me with this important client? Many strategic client managers erroneously assume that they should bring the people with the biggest titles. They almost seem to think that their job is to wow the customer with their personal ability to bring executive



### **FAILURES INVOLVING THE EXECUTIVE ARE VISIBLE AND DELICATE.**

firepower to their accounts. Clients are impressed, as long as the executive provides value at the meeting.

Other account managers use a simple personality test. If someone is great in front of customers, they bring them along. This usually means that the executive in question tells good stories, tells their own company’s story well, has excellent interpersonal skills and possesses a generous expense account. We have nothing against scintillating personalities, but using this criterion as

the major basis for selecting an executive resource is probably shooting a bit low.

So, how do you select the right executive to attend the client meeting?

**1. Select the proper client contact.** As tempting as it is to focus on “decision-makers”, you may want to focus more on which functions of the business will be most responsible for the realization of your client’s annual corporate goals. Your objective is to get information that you can use to align your solution with the goals most important to the organization.

**2. Match the proper executive to the client contact.** Once you have identified who you need to meet with and why, we suggest running each candidate through the following checklist to help you chose just the right executive from your organization to attend the meeting:

This executive has unique insight into an underlying business priority or business process issue of great interest to the client contact. This knowledge could easily bring value to the customer in question.

This executive will be open to playing the role most needed for this contact meeting.

### **The Preparation Question: How do we prepare everyone to play valuable roles with the customer?**

So if all goes well, you have picked the right time and people for involvement with clients. Now the vital work of preparation stands before you. As our not-too-fictitious story at the beginning of this article made clear, both the SAM and the senior executive should insist on adequate preparation prior to any involvement with customers. Anticipate that preparation will require substantial investment. Here are a few ideas on how to make preparation as expeditious as possible:

**1. Provide just the right amount of information.** Senior executives privately complain that they get one of two extremes in preparation: too much or too little. Sometimes, they are delivered a huge dossier of client information. Given their busy schedules, packed with all sorts of problems to solve, they can

the preparation meeting, all title, function and rank should be temporarily left at the door. The relevant question for the group should now become: What roles can each person play in this situation to best serve the customer and advance our work with them? If we cannot see a meaningful role for someone, they are excused from participation in this client interaction.

**3. Map out a plan.** Once roles are decided, the whole team needs to get clear on how they contribute before, during and after the client interaction. This eliminates one of the biggest complaints from senior executives and account managers alike: No one follows up on commitments to the team and to the client. For instance, instead of waiting until you are in the airport after the client meeting, dashing to make it through security, be clear on who will follow up on operational and relationship issues before leaving the meeting. This can even be decided prior to the client meeting. Give one of the team members “nagging rights” to follow up with other team members (including the senior executive) about agreed-upon action items. The same discipline follows for clarifying individual contributions before and during a client interaction.

**4. Rehearse.** Actors rehearse for big shows. Athletes practice before big games. Musicians go to the studio before they tour. Why shouldn’t account teams practice for their client interactions? Most people would agree that it is sensible, but most account teams skip this step. When they actually rehearse the client meeting, especially with a skilled provider of feedback, they discover important, overlooked details. One account team did this so well for a client presentation that the client pulled them aside privately, in clear violation of the RFP rules, and told them that they had never seen anything like it. They easily won the business that day.

**5. Prepare the customer.** If you go through all of these steps, you are almost ready to host a successful meeting between your company’s executives and

## **YOUR CLIENT MAY BE FACING A BUSINESS PROBLEM THAT ONE OF YOUR EXECUTIVES HAS SUCCESSFULLY TACKLED IN THE PAST.**

This executive has responsibility for a part of our company with direct impact on the client’s ability to create competitive advantage in its market.

This executive has relevant industry experience.

This executive has relevant functional experience.

This executive is well-networked in a field of interest to the client.

This executive can make time available at a time that makes sense to the client.

This executive will make adequate time available for preparation before seeing the client.

easily feel overwhelmed. Executives are extremely proficient at reading and analyzing information, but they have little patience for disorganized or superfluous data. Of course, too little information is equally frustrating. It leads the executive to think that they will have to perform a miracle to salvage the meeting and their reputation with the client. We generally think that three to five pages of relevant, well-organized information helps the executive get ready to participate in an intelligent conversation with the account team.

**2. Decide on roles.** While some may assume that titles define roles in a client interaction, we advocate a much more fluid approach. When people walk into

your client's executives. One vital detail remains preparing the client. Most client executives have experienced supplier "executive visits" at some point in time. Unfortunately, many of these meetings fall into a category affectionately known as "howdy calls." Howdy calls offer the client very little beyond a happy face and a firm handshake. At best, everyone leaves the meeting thankful it wasn't too painful. At worst, clients leave the meeting wondering why they wasted their time on a purposeless meeting. There is a simple, if not easy, solution. Clearly articulate the purpose of the meeting and the payoff to the client for accepting the meeting. This purpose and payoff should also be communicated to your day-to-day contact to avoid any concern or confusion they may be experiencing.

### How It Can Work

As testimony to the effectiveness of this process, consider the experience of a sales team from a major telecommunications company. For years they had provided and maintained the telecommunications system for a large medical client in their area. Suddenly, they received notice from the client that they would be given six weeks to prove that their solution was the most effective system for the medical facility. If they failed, their system would be removed and replaced with a competitive product.

Taken aback by this surprise request, the team met immediately to consider their options. First, they considered having their top executive call on the CEO of the medical center to find out what was behind this request. Next, they considered a complete system audit so that their Sales VP could go and remind the client about the technical merit of their system, since it was clear that they had forgotten! Eventually, they chose a different and much more effective approach.

The team held a two-day internal account review session where they

reviewed everything that they knew about the medical center. They discussed not only technology, but, more importantly, what they understood about the business objectives of the medical center. They also reviewed what they knew about the healthcare industry, the medical center's top goals and critical success factors, the medical center's key specialty services



## WITH PROPER PREPARATION, EXECUTIVE INVOLVEMENT WITH STRATEGIC CLIENTS CARRIES THE POTENTIAL FOR TREMENDOUS VALUE.

and their major health care competitors. Quickly seeing that they had some gaps in their information, they brainstormed about how they could learn more about these key issues. They wanted to select a few key client executives who could quickly shed light on the situation, so they looked for key functional areas at the medical center that would both be primarily responsible for advancing the corporate goals and who would be profoundly impacted by a change in the telecommunications system. (Notice that the team focused less on who was making the telecommunications decision than they did on who would be impacted by the decision.)

With this functional list identified, the account team looked at their own list of executives, their current roles, their backgrounds and their expertise. On this basis, they matched their own executives with the functional heads of the medical center and began to plan for a meeting where they could discuss each function's goals in more detail. A few focused weeks later, they had conducted a handful of very fruitful informational meetings, effectively leveraging their own executives' involvement to gain vital intelligence.

In their final presentation, they used the information gathered at these executive meetings to discuss their technology's specific application to the most current goals of each functional executive at the medical center. Not only did they keep their system in place, but they were able to expand it. They improved the service to their client by using their executives to host function-specific conversations. As postscript, these executive meetings are now part of their annual account plan so that they stay informed as the goals of their customer change. This reduces the chances of their receiving this type of surprise request in the future.

In our opening story, Bob and Gene both drew an unfortunate conclusion from their experiences: "Never again." We believe that conclusion is misguided. With proper timing, selection and preparation, executive involvement with strategic clients carries the potential for tremendous value. Strategic account managers receive support, executives receive learning and clients get the best their suppliers have to offer. Success requires careful preparation and thoughtful investment, but the benefits almost always outweigh the costs. 🤝

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