

The elevator pitch: communicating your strategy

Senior leadership in the not-for-profit sector is a tough job. Leaders are called upon to think, act and above all *communicate* at the highest level.

Communicating strategy – selling the difficult priorities and choices that will drive the organisation forward for the next 3-5 years – can be a particular challenge. A new strategy implies change and many people aren't necessarily comfortable with change or the uncertainty that can come with it. That said, our experience of working with senior managers suggests *implementing* the new strategy is a lot easier if you find ways to *communicate* the change in ways that will really engage people, and then regularly *reinforce* the message.

So the ability to 'sell' ideas to staff, funders, users and other stakeholders, can be critical to the success of your strategy. At =mc we have adapted a tool called the *elevator pitch* to help you communicate the changes you want and the results you need clearly, concisely and, above all, effectively.

What is the elevator pitch?

Imagine this scenario...

You need to convince the Head of Fundraising to adopt a new donor care strategy in her department. By chance, as you enter the lift on the top floor of the building, she follows you in. You have the two minutes it takes for the lift to reach the ground floor to make your pitch.

The premise of the elevator pitch is that, if you can't distil your strategy or idea for change into a two minute 'pitch,' you are probably going to struggle to communicate it generally. The idea of the elevator pitch is borrowed from Hollywood where the aspiring director has only seven floors or two minutes to pitch their idea to the movie mogul.

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The discipline of a good two-minute pitch – whether or not you work in a building with a lift or hang around in Hollywood – is that it enables you to:

- communicate the strategy or change concisely and powerfully
- get others excited about the possibilities it presents
- respond effectively and quickly to questions and concerns

Preparation: who is this about – you or them?

Often managers get anxious about how they will come across. *But actually the key thing is to focus on the audience or their interests.* To prepare an elevator pitch, begin by being clear on who your audience is and what their needs and concerns are. Are you pitching to:

- a group of senior managers?
- a colleague whose support you need to secure?
- a team that you need to implement the strategy?
- a partner organisation that will be affected by the new strategy?

Whoever the audience, it is essential to put yourself in their shoes and ask what they have to gain, or lose.

Think, Feel, Do...

Now you know the audience and their needs, ask yourself the following three questions:

<p>Think:</p> <p>What do you want your audience need to <i>think</i> as a result of your pitch? What information or knowledge do you need to transmit in the short time you have?</p> <p>For example, <i>“I was talking to Peter Westwood at a reception last night. He says he’s had no feedback about the project he’s funded for six months. He’s not happy.”</i></p>	<p>Feel:</p> <p>What do you want the audience to <i>feel</i> as a result of your pitch? Evidence shows that the most effective messages are those that appeal to values and emotion, as well as to understanding.</p> <p>For example, <i>“Peter’s an extremely generous donor and he could be interested in leaving us a legacy. He’s also a very nice and sincere man who believes passionately in our cause. He really deserves to be treated as well as we can.”</i></p>	<p>Do:</p> <p>What do you want your audience to <i>do</i> as a result of the pitch? It’s all very well to communicate the importance of the strategy, but what action are you asking for?</p> <p>For example, <i>“I think there’s learning here for the way we look after all our donors. Clearly Peter needs to be contacted, apologised to and updated straightaway. But I also think we need to introduce account management into the department to make sure it’s absolutely clear whose responsibility is each of our high value donors. Let’s not lose anyone because of lack of care on our part.”</i></p>
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Stories, examples and visuals

In two minutes, there is only so much information you can transmit. There are a number of techniques you can employ to enhance the power and impact of your pitch:

- Give *examples* of how the strategy will impact on a person – whether real or imaginary – to help your audience understand the positive end result of the strategy. (“Aisha can genuinely live independently rather than having to ring her care worker every time she wants to go out.” “Joley gets to go to school and learn and play with other children.”)
- Draw on *metaphors* to help people understand why the strategy is necessary. (“We need to break through the glass ceiling.” “Everything might seem rosy now, but there are weeds just beneath the surface. We can’t afford to let them grow.”) And of course the idea of an ‘elevator pitch’ is itself a metaphor.
- Ask *rhetorical questions*. (“Are we really making an impact here?” “What’s the likelihood of child abuse ending in our lifetime?”) These encourage people to engage in your subject.
- Look for ways to *involve* your audience. You can organise a quiz asking people for their views on a subject before or after your presentation, get people to show

hands for their feelings, get them to turn to the person next to them and share ideas.

- Use *visuals* – can you draw a picture of the change, or a graph, or even simply a series of numbers, that represent the essence of the strategy? Is there an image that really carries the key idea? (“We’re here to help Annie [show picture] and the 36,000 Annies who are the victims of domestic violence in the UK today.”)
- Use *props* to help illustrate your point – simple everyday items such as a light bulb (Edison: keep trying until you get it right) or a pack of cards (what we’re going to do could be risky – a gamble) or a Brazil nut (hard nut to crack but worth the effort).

Don’t use too many of these ideas – chose one and stick with it.

Beyond the elevator pitch

When you have prepared and rehearsed your elevator pitch, you can adapt it to different audiences and different time frames. With practice, you will find people getting behind a strategy more quickly and with greater enthusiasm. Which at least removes one of the hurdles of strategic leadership...

Need more help?

If you would like to know more about communicating strategy, join us on **=mc**’s **Strategic Leadership** programme. This is a challenging and demanding 3-day programme that helps you explore your strengths and weaknesses as a leader, and introduces tools, techniques and approaches to develop and communicate strategy and change.

Strategic Leadership

For further information and to book your place, please visit:

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Or call us on **+44 (0) 20 7978 1516**.

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