

“The C-Level or Aspiring to C-Level Resume: A Challenge of a Higher Order”

For a senior Communications or IR executives wanting to tell a story of success in a resume that qualifies them for the top jobs, the challenge is a whole new order of difficulty. How can they distance themselves from the excellent and talented implementers at the Director level?

How can they describe the intangibles that qualify them for leadership positions?. These excellent performers are not judged by tactics or by what they DO at the C-level (it is assumed they are fully qualified to be under consideration.) It is more about who they are, their judgment, business savvy and chemistry. If the “doing” were in question, the candidate would not be at the starting gate.

Questions a “C” Level Resume Must Answer

Trying to create a resume that makes the point, “I have arrived and merit being at this level” reveals a **gaping blind spot**, called, “I don't know how to explain how I became a success.”

Another difficult yet essential question to answer is, “How can I present my talents clearly and impressively?”

And, along those same lines, does a CCO have a strategy to answer the implied question, “**What can I say about me without sounding self-centered?**” (Can I craft responses to these questions so that the hiring manager or the first level “gatekeeper”/screener finds what I have to say is compelling and relevant?)

How can an aspiring or “arrived” CCO or CIRO answer this key question through the narrative in the resume: “**Am I ready to attend a meeting with the CEO** and add value to the conversation?”

The easy way out for a lucky few is that they are recognizably in the “C” slot and simply listing their titles, reporting level and company affiliations are shorthand for saying, “I'm where I need to be.” The often heard remark when calling a candidate (about a new position) who is at this level and not on the market is, “I haven't written a formal resume and what I have is an informal update.” That comment implies that the individual does not need to produce a well-crafted resume. This casually prepared document is sufficient to get him/her an introduction to the hiring organization. In my opinion, the discipline and rigor required to produce an effective resume are critical elements to winning a “C” level position.

The Resume is not About What You Have Done

The **overall impression a resume should leave is not that you have “done it all”** but rather that you are a leader with vision and a contributor to the business strategy of the organization. You have accomplished that by mobilizing the corporate communications and/or the IR functions at a strategic level to support the business. And, you are focused on meeting objectives and getting the job done. So, how can we answer these tough questions?

Let's begin at the end point of this story, which is about the company, and work our way back to your role as told in the resume. It is essential to know what the **strategic goals of the organization** are and my suggestion is to talk about the top 3. Be prepared to describe the company briefly in order to put the strategy in context. Once those 3 goals are listed, talk about the communications and IR roles and how they mesh with the overall plan. Comment about resources and budgets. If you were very efficient at extracting value from limited resources, that is relevant.

Discuss the process and decisions that you were responsible for and the results. If you were instituting new approaches or finding new solutions to solve existing issues that were innovative or original, this would be valuable information to establish you as a strategic contributor/problem solver.

If you built a department and expanded your team over time or found ways to broaden the scope of your work, that would one way to make your point about the level of contribution. **Your reporting relationship is critical.** Did you join the company reporting to a middle manager and work your way to a de facto direct report to the President or CEO? Who hired you?

Your True Reporting Lines

In some organizations the IR or Communications function reports to an Administrative officer but the hiring process takes the incumbent up to the CEO. That is a true signal about the value of the function within the organization and is legitimate to mention in the narrative. Has your title changed? Have you been granted "key employee stock options?" That indicates how highly you are thought of. These are facts of your situation and are important to weave into the narrative under each position.

Discuss how you were able to convince your leadership that your solutions would solve company problems or would defuse difficult situations. Talk about what meetings you attended and presentations you made to committees of the Board or the full Board. Do you travel with the CEO, President, CFO or other senior officers? Do you arrange Board receptions and attend major quasi-social events over breakfast, lunch or dinner? This tells us that you know how to handle the nuances of social business communication.

Routes to the Top Job

Proving your value as a "right hand" to the President/CEO is a direct route to the top job in a company. These opportunities develop often in fluid, informal environments where quick thinking and action are required. Media crises, hostile takeover situations are the most often mentioned as moments when a Corporate Communications or IR officer gained the trust of the Board. Stories describing these moments establish your ability to deliver results in the most stressful of times and are highly sought after capabilities.

The **global nature of business** provides an opportunity for a well-educated, multi-lingual executive to describe how s/he orchestrated programs internationally. This is yet another element that is growing in importance for a leadership-level hire.

A Two-Page Resume

It is essential that the resume be no longer than 2 pages. It must be as crisp and powerful as the experience you are describing. It is not about squeezing in many lists about your expertise and specific tasks you have accomplished. As with resumes in general, I prefer the reverse chronological order with brief "stories" about your accomplishments listed under each position.

How to pare down to the essential elements of your career successes is challenging. Some executives start by recording all of the major jobs held and the duties and responsibilities along with details about specific successful projects. This is the raw material that is whittled down to the true highlights. If, practically speaking **your last two or three jobs are what will get you your next assignment, focus on those** and briefly mention the other positions simply to fill in the work history.

Answering the Tough Question

Let's now go back to the tough question that most **senior officers** can't answer about **why they are successful** and why they have trouble talking about success (without seeming self-centered). I think there are many executives who have refined their instincts because they are smart and observant. They have learned to be politically astute and savvy about how decisions are made in large organizations. They are very bright in a practical (not academic or theoretical) way and have a certain degree of poise and charisma. They are naturally positive and have the energy and enthusiasm to "get the job done." These performers are successful from the get go and take their success as "normal." They "win" regularly and expect to do well.

Rather than saying in a resume, "I am your 'A' candidate;" these successful professionals need to **focus on the story of their careers progressing precociously** through a series of more and more important jobs. The titles move quickly from junior-level manager to Senior Manager to Director and above. However, while it is inappropriate to say, "I am an excellent candidate" in a resume, when asked, the job seeker should have a clear answer about the reasons for his/her success. A lame comment about luck and being in the right place at the right time will undermine the entire process. Work on a response that talks about accomplishments, fitting in elements of the strategy of the organization, work ethic and a passion for what you do.

From Senior Agency to Top Corporate Jobs – A Difficult Transition

Senior Agency or professionals from consulting firms find transitioning to "C" level positions challenging. The career paths of successful agency professionals who move to corporate jobs and up to "C" level posts happens most easily at the Agency Director or Manager level. This is when the tactical and project management skills honed at the agency most naturally fit the corporate structure.

As consultants progress into leadership roles, the emphasis is on building client business and increasing billings. Agencies, while developing excellent relationships with corporate clients, are innately project oriented and contract focused. When an agency executive tells me s/he wishes to transition to a corporate position, and then sends me a resume highlighting her/his success in increasing billings, I know they do not have the right mindset.

Corporate success is long term and fundamentally not project oriented. Increasing billings do not translate into a goal that applies to a corporate communications department. The bridge that the resume needs to build should talk about developing client relationships, helping solve problems and adding a fresh perspective to the work to be accomplished. If you have direct contact with heads of organizations and are part of planning sessions, that indicates your opinion is valued (without using that beaten-to-death phrase) "strategic contributor."

Tell stories about how you initiated a major campaign or a company-wide positioning initiative. Did you brief the chief executive? Write speeches? Create a crisis communications plan? Did you step forward to suggest the communications effort be expanded and win approval? How large are the budgets you've been responsible for? What is the largest group of people you've managed directly? These examples are some of the best ways for a potential employer to judge if you've functioned at a high enough level to tackle his/her assignment. (Or, conversely if you are overqualified.)

Another way **to indicate you are succeeding is by describing the companies you represent**, their business, size and complexity. It's one thing to be a Director for a \$300 million company, quite different to hold that same title at a \$30 billion company. (BTW, always describe the business the company is in. Never assume the reader knows anything about your employer.)

If this sounds like you are writing a 4-page resume, that is exactly what not to do. The point is to keep it to 2-pages and edit the copy so you are not cluttering the page. (While resumes are submitted on-line, people download resumes and read them as hard copies. Keep the look of a resume inviting, not daunting.) Done well, a resume "sells" by leading the reader to the conclusion you are "an A team player." You build that by telling the right factual stories and removing adjectives that praise your achievements.

Talk about how you function in a team situation and do not take all the credit for results. Being honest and credible engenders trust which is one of the most valued qualities in a hire at this level.