Tips for Helping Analysts Communicate with Executives
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April 2, 2012

Not a day goes by where an Analyst is required to communicate business findings with an Executive. And not a day goes by where somebody, an Analyst, an Executive, or both, are disappointed by with the outcome of communication.

Often, communication fails because the Analyst is not given context. In other words, Executives do not communicate what they really want/need to Analysts, leaving Analysts to listen to communication strategies crafted by other Analysts.

Today, I am going to share a series of tips, strategies that help you learn how to better communicate with Executives. I was an Analyst / Manager / Director for thirteen years. I was a Vice President at an eight billion dollar business for more than six years. And I've worked with CEOs for the past five years while running my own business. I know a little something about the Analyst / Executive relationship. That relationship is largely broken. It does not have to be broken.

Here we go.

Tip #1 = Know The Fiscal Calendar: Almost all companies operate on a fiscal year. In retail, the fiscal year is usually in the February 1 – January 31 timeframe, allowing returns from the Christmas season to trickle in. When you know the fiscal calendar, you know when things are likely to be important to an Executive. For instance, in November, the Executive cares about immediate sales increases, so you stay away from communicating grand ideas that you will implement in March. Conversely, in January, the Executive is ready to think about the new fiscal year, so communicating your grand idea makes more sense.

Tip #2 = Learn When Key Meetings Are Held: In 1994 at Lands' End, I learned that Executives were holding an important meeting on October 25. This meeting was about a topic I had been studying for three years. I was not invited to this meeting! So, I created an eighty page PowerPoint presentation, based on my research, and held a meeting with Managers that I thought could influence the Executives in the meeting the following day. The strategy worked. I was invited to the October 25 meeting. Analysts need to keep their ears to the ground! Learn when key meetings are going to be held, then time your presentations around those meetings.

Tip #3 = Learn How Executives Are Compensated: This is easier said than done. Regardless, Executive compensation drives what gets done. A typical Executive earns a salary (say $160,000 per year), and receives a bonus that varies between 0% and 100% of annual salary. Assume that the Executive earns a bonus based on company sales increases, company profit improvement, and something related to department improvement. At Nordstrom, a large part of my Executive bonus was based on comp store sales increases, another large part of my Executive bonus was based on Earnings Before Taxes increases (profit). Since I was compensated when profit increased, guess what I asked my team to focus on? No Executive is going to tell you what their bonus is based on, but many Executives will tell you what their goals are for the next year. Learn what the goals are, because the goals are likely to be linked to compensation.

Tip #4 = Compensation Drives Metrics: The metrics that are important to an Analyst are not the metrics that are important to an Executive. Always remember that Executives, while smart, are not smart in Analytics. Therefore, the Executive is always going to default to metrics that Analyst perceive to be "over-simplified". In Retail, the Executive cares about comp store sales increases, the Executive wants to know that your strategy will increase comp store sales by 3%. See, this is important, because the Executive might receive a large bonus if comp store sales are increased by 5%, meaning that the Analyst just figured out how to increase Executive compensation by maybe 60% of the Executive's annual salary … $160,000 * 0.60 = $96,000! Ok, I can already hear the complaints from Analysts … "*I help the Executive and the Executive gets $96,000 and I improve my annual salary increase from 3% to 4%? I help the Executive and the Executive gets $96,000 and I get $6,000? Not fair*!" Well, life isn't fair, is it? Here's what happens, though. You help your Executive make $96,000 one or two times, and you are quickly put in the queue for a promotion. You become a Manager, and then you become a Director, then you are bonused like the Executive is, and you are on your way. You do this by understanding compensation structure, and you learn that simple metrics (comp store sales increases, percent sales increase in e-commerce, profit dollar increase) are what matters to Executives.

Tip #5 = Saying "Yes": Oh, this is important. I used to craft presentations, and at the end of the presentation, the Executive would say something like "*so what*?". I would sit there, dumbfounded, I had just made an elegant argument that was guaranteed to increase sales and the Executive didn't care? Well, after making a couple dozen presentations like this over the years, my Director told me I was going to attend Dale Carnegie training. This was sales training. I was an Analyst. What did sales training have to do with Analyzing data? Well, it had everything to do with sales training!! The most important thing I learned was to get the audience to say the word "yes" three times. It turns out that this strategy works really, really well with Executives. Say you conducted some sort of optimization test on your website, and you learned how to improve conversion rate from five percent to six percent. First, you convert this one percent improvement to an annual sales number ($8,000,000). Second, you convert this sales number to an annual profit number ($2,700,000). Now, you craft your argument around the word "yes". You ask "will this strategy help us get closer to increasing annual sales by $8,000,000 this year"? You ask "will this strategy help us get closer to our company profit improvement goal of $4,000,000 this year"? You ask "Did we prove, using geeky math, that this strategy is likely to outperform our current strategy"? At this point, the Executive is likely to have answered "yes" three times. Now ask the Executive to implement the strategy. When you get pushback, remind the Executive that she just said yes three times. At worst case, you will learn what the real issue is that holds the company back from implementing something that is a slam-dunk to increase sales and profit. More often, you will be surprised to learn that Executives respond to strategies that grow sales, grow profit, and are aligned with Executive bonus structures. You'll learn that the biggest factor holding you back was … well, you!

Tip #6 = In Person: Executives barely read email, and who can blame them, they're getting a hundred email messages a day, they don't have time to read about geeky math. And Executives are in ten meetings a day, consuming eight or nine hours of time. In other words, it is hard to gain authentic mindshare with an Executive. I found that change can happen, and it is most likely to happen in person. More important, I tried to hold meetings with Executives early in the morning, usually between seven and eight in the morning, before the meeting onslaught began. Finally, try to hold one meeting a month. If you hold one meeting a week, you run the problem of not having enough fresh material to dazzle the Executive on a weekly basis.

Tip #7 = Geek Speak: Stop talking to Executives like they are Analysts. Most Executives don't care if the results are statistically significant at a ninety-five percent level on a one tail test. Always try to communicate like you are communicating to "Penny" on The Big Bang Theory, or try to communicate like you are speaking with your parents. I use the phrase "geeky math" to communicate an endless amount of technical content. If the Executive wants more details, I direct the Executive to an appendix, where all of the stuff the Analyst wants to share is outlined.

Tip #8 = Pie Charts: This one will anger Analysts. Executives don't care that pie charts are an immoral representation of data. Executives care that Analysts come up with ideas that help them achieve a larger bonus, and those bonuses are generated when profit dollars are increased, comp store sales are increased, or total sales are increased. The Executive doesn't care if data is presented in a pie chart, a heat map, a table, or a billboard on I-75. All the Executive cares about is that the analysis is backed up by customer facts, that the analysis is repeatable and reliable (meaning it is not something that happened just once and won't happen again), and that the analysis is scalable (will yield meaningful sales and profit increases). I have been in meetings where Analysts told me that the way I was presenting data (I was a Vice President) was wrong, and as a result, they were not likely to consider my view point. Well, good for the Analyst when it comes to principal, but bad for the Analyst when it comes to making a difference.

Tip #9 = Do What You Are Asked To Do: Executives run into this one all of the time. The Executive asks to have a specific task completed by the Analyst. A week later, the Analyst comes back with a glorified argument that has little to do with the original request, and has a lot more to do with the agenda the Analyst wants to promote. Now, the content that the Analyst is sharing may be important, it may cause a huge increase in sales and profit, it may even be what is best for the business. But it is not what the Executive asked for. Do this two or three times, and the Executive loses trust in the Analyst. That's not a situation an Analyst wants to be in. Just do what the Executive asks you to do. If you want to complement the analysis with additional insights, compile those insights in an appendix. When presenting your findings, share the appendix, but present what the Executive asked you to present.

Tip #10 = Don't Shoot For The Moon: Here's a mistake I made at Eddie Bauer, way back in 1998. I brought in folks from the Santa Fe Institute, on their dime, to share simulations on agent-based retail behavior (I know, that makes no sense, does it?). Can you imagine the blank stares on the faces of folks as they watched a computer monitor with simulated shoppers migrating around a simulated store? Oh, the math behind the simulation was as elegant as anything you'll ever see. But on a scale from one to ten, Eddie Bauer was at a three, and this analysis was at one-hundred! My credibility suffered for a period of time after the ridiculous presentation. I know, you want change the world, you want to hit a home run. Even folks who hit a home run still have to step on first base, they have to step on second base, they have to step on third base, and they have to step on home plate. Furthermore, the home run counts for more when there are runners on base. In other words, focus on getting to first base. Once you've had success, focus on hitting doubles, then triples, then home runs.

Tip #11 = Find An Ally: If you want to make a difference, find an Executive who can be your ally. At Nordstrom, the folks in the Finance Department were uber helpful. They understood just enough of the geeky math to support what I was doing. I was able to convert enough of my geeky math so that I could demonstrate the impact on annual comp store sales increases. Best of all, your Finance team can convert your geeky math to profit. Remember, most Executives are bonused on sales increases and profit increases. Finance focuses on sales and profit!

Tip #12 = Help A Merchant, Plant A Few Seeds: Of all the Executives at a company, the Chief Merchant is under the most pressure. This person gets fired when sales decrease, this person gets to keep her job when sales increase. Merchants don't get a lot of praise. If you are an aspiring Analyst, work on a few projects outside of your area of expertise, helping a Merchant understand his customer base. You'll find that when you have something important that you want to evangelize, you'll have a merchandising organization that is willing to support you. Plant seeds now, so that you have trees to support you later.

Tip #13 = Nobody Cares About Your Discipline: Outside of the Analytics community, nobody cares if you are a Web Analyst, a Business Intelligence Analyst, a Digital Analyst, or an Interplanetary Analyst. All Executives care about is if you can solve problems. Don't communicate your narrow niche to the Executive, instead, communicate how you solve problems using data. You want to be the go-to person for your Executive Team, not the one person they go to when they have a specific and tiny problem related to your niche. Communicate that what you can accomplish is greater than the limits of your job title.

Tip #14 = Choose Wisely When You Elect To Tick People Off: This is a lesson I learned when working at Lands' End in the early 1990s. I ticked off half of the Executive team! I was deluded by the notion that "*I Was Right*". Well, I may have been right (or not), but it doesn't matter if you are right if you anger so many Executives that they no longer choose to listen to you! If you can, hold off on making huge political stands until you have earned trust, until you have an issue that you truly care about that you'd be willing to put above your career. There aren't many cases where you'd be willing to put an issue above your career, are there?

Tip #15 = Say "I Don't Know": Here's something Analysts may not know. Executives are quick to quiz analysts, not necessarily to poke holes in an analysis, but to see how the Analyst responds to being quizzed. The Analyst makes the mistake of communicating insecurity, responding to questions by creating arguments that are increasingly disconnected from the data the Analyst originally presented. An Analyst is far better served by saying "*I don't know the answer to that question, but I can perform research to answer it if you would like*." Eight out of ten Executives respect that answer. The other two Executives are folks you don't want to be working for/with!!

Tip #16 = Other Things Are Happening: You don't get to know this, but Executives have a lot of other things going on, and they may not be entirely focused on what you are sharing. I once had a 9:00am meeting with my boss, the President of the Online Division. This person told me that he was going to fire me, he also told me that he was unhappy with the staff that I recently hired. Well, I left that meeting at 9:59pm, and guess what? I had to host a department meeting with my team at 10:00am, with the very people that my President was disappointed in. I can assure you that my team did not receive my full attention during our department meeting. Executives have between five and ten meetings a day, meeting filled with all sorts of calamities. After seven hours of calamities, the Executive might not fully embrace your data-driven argument at 3:00pm in the afternoon, due to sheer mental exhaustion. Be forgiving if an Executive is not fully engaged on an infrequent basis.

Tip #17 = Other Things Are Happening, Again? In 1995, I hosted a meeting between a Vice President, and one of my Analysts. About ten minutes into this presentation, the Executive tuned out. This was maybe the fifth time in the past few months that this individual tuned out. I could tell that my Analyst was clearly disappointed, heck, she only got two opportunities a year to present data to an Executive. When the meeting was over, I, a lowly Manager, closed the door to the Executive's office, and scolded the Executive. I asked the Executive to remember what it was like when he was an Analyst, and asked the Executive to at least have the courtesy to pay attention in the future. You have to pick and choose the times when you take a stand. If you observe that an Executive is repeatedly aloof, you can choose to ignore that Executive in the future, or you can choose to encourage this Executive to improve his performance, going forward. You can do the latter when you have a relationship with the Executive.

Tip #18 = Don't Wait The Executive Out: This one comes up, a lot, and Executives know that Analysts possess this attribute. I was in a meeting recently where I overheard one Analyst tell another Analyst, "*We'll just wait this guy out, he won't be here in a few months, and then we can do what we want to do*." Executives know that Analysts do this. I took over a team several years ago, and within a week, I heard that my team was telling other departments that they were going to wait me out. My team knew that I was the third Executive to lead them in four years, so they were simply not going to do what I wanted them to do. Be careful, dear Analysts, be careful. In a socially connected world, Executives talk to each other. If you disagree with Management, it might make more sense for you to find a new job than to wait for an Executive to find a new job. Remember, there are many more Analyst/Manager level jobs available than there are Executive level jobs, so Executives tend to try to hold on to their job like grim death, they are going to fight for their job. When you disagree with the direction Management is headed in, leave.

Tip #19 = Work Above Your Pay Grade: Executives pay close attention to Analysts/Managers, looking to see who possesses leadership traits. Analysts are in an open competition with other people at the Analyst level across the company. If you want the Executive to listen to your message, be sure to have a plan. I recall working at Eddie Bauer in 1998. I took over a team that had worked for a beloved leader for nearly a decade. This team did not want to change, at all, I inherited Analysts and Managers who were very comfortable with doing things like they always had been done. Well, after three months of intense frustration, I had two Managers speak with me. The first Manager crafted a plan for implementing my ideas. Now, I know this person largely disagreed with me, but this person still crafted a plan to implement my work, and this person communicated with others in and across departments to do what was best for the company. The other Manager, a very nice person, communicated that she loved working at the company because she got five weeks of vacation. Both meetings happened at a similar time. Which person do you think I, as a Director, respected more and consequently listened to more? The Manager who crafted a plan worked above his pay grade, actually acting like a Director. Analysts, where possible, should practice working above their pay grade. Executives notice this behavior, and are more likely to listen to Analysts as a result.

Tip #20 = Recommend Common Sense Solutions: I once managed an Analyst who wanted to implement a chocolate-based CRM program. This person wanted to have chocolates placed on pillows of great customers, as a way of saying “thank you”. Naturally, this Analyst was disappointed when I chose not to pursue this argument. Executives are not likely to go out on a limb to implement an idea with limited and uncertain payback. Focus on common sense solutions.

Tip #21 = Nobody Wants To Be Optimized: This is one of the most difficult lessons of my career. Analysts want to optimize things. Executives want to implement big ideas. Executives do not want to be put in a position where a computer or a handful of Analysts have control over everything. Think about it. Would you want to be responsible for creative, for the imagery on a website, and all day long some Analyst is telling you that what you do “doesn’t work”? How satisfying is that job? Executives know this. Executives sit in meetings where the creative team grumbles that they have no autonomy now that the Analytics folks tell them what to do and how to do it. As a result, the Executive is going to make gut decisions that appear to be contrary to data-driven possibilities. The Executive HAS to do this, or the creative folks will go work somewhere else. Now, all that being said, the Analyst can change this dynamic. Instead of telling Executives that various strategies “don’t work”, the Analyst tells the Executive “what works well”!! This is a fundamentally different style of communication, one that causes the Executive to want to praise creative folks for successes instead of punishing folks for failures. The Executive will want the Analyst to evaluate and optimize when the Analyst is praising co-workers. So avoid words like "optimization", stay far, far away from any term that tells decision makers that you are taking decision making out of their hands!

Tip #22 = Take Your Work On The Road: Lets go back to Nordstrom, in the summer of 2002. We had a split among employees, with old-school catalog employees feeling threatened by the hip e-commerce folks. One side didn't like younger, inexperienced employees taking credit for sales generated by the catalog, the other side didn't like old-school marketers telling them what to do and how to do it. I crafted a presentation based on actual customer behavior (catalogs push business to the website, the website pushes business to the stores, stores benefit and pay the bills that keep the catalog and website viable), and I took the presentation to every department in the catalog/online division. After two months of presentations, nobody was arguing about their role in the company anymore, employees shared a common goal (sales and profit). Now, I could have sent an email out to folks, and that might have worked. But presenting findings in person offers a certain level of credibility that cannot be matched via digital communications. Sure, I can hear you already, you're saying you are just an Analyst. Well, ask your VP if you can go present to other Analyst-level employees? It makes for great practice, and you just might change the world in the process. Or, you could be like me, back in 1997. I tried to take content on the road, and almost nobody showed up. That taught me that nobody really cared about what I was sharing. Forty-five days later, I was promoted to a different job outside of Analytics, and I had an opportunity to implement my ideas. But I learned that nobody really cared about my approach and information, and had I stayed in that position, I would have approached things differently. You can't learn that unless you go on the road with your content.

Tip #23 = Recognize Evil: This sounds harsh, but it is important. If you read what people say on Twitter, you'd think nine in ten Executives are evil. The opposite scenario is reality. Nine in ten Executives are genuinely good people, just trying to figure out how to get through the day without being fired. But like in every other aspect of life, people misbehave. Work hard to identify if an Executive misbehaves due to typical human frailties, or if the Executive misbehaves because the Executive is not a team player. When you figure out that an Executive isn't a team player, you obviously do what the Executive wants you to do, but you provide extra credit, extra effort, to the kind Executives who support you.

Tip #24 = Giving Credit: Here's a tough one. When an Analyst does a great job, the Executive has several options. She can praise the Analyst directly. She can praise her team. She can praise herself! Or she can say absolutely nothing. Most of the time, the Executive isn't going to say anything. For better or worse, the Analyst must derive pleasure from seeing her ideas implemented, and if credit is offered, it is frosting on the cake. I know, you'd like to receive public credit for your work. But no amount of communication with an Executive will get you the credit you deserve. The Analyst needs to derive pleasure from seeing her work implemented.

Tip #25 = Plan Ahead: When you know that you have a 2/1 – 1/31 fiscal year, then you start to plan your workload for the upcoming year in November or December. There is no rule saying that the Analyst can't go interview Executives and learn what might be important in the upcoming fiscal year. So do this … get out of your cubicle and visit with Executives. You only need 10 minutes per Executive, work with the Administrative Assistant to schedule a 10 minute meeting. In the meeting, be brief, and be confident. Just ask what the Executive is going to focus on in the upcoming fiscal year, and ask how you (the Analyst) can support the Executive. Ask the Executive what she would like to see from you. Then end the meeting. First, the Executive will be shocked that somebody cares about them. Second, the Executive will be shocked that the meeting only took ten minutes. Third, the Executive will keep you in mind in the next year, so you're going to have an advantage when a thorny question comes up.

Tip #26 = Business Experience: I recall standing in a hallway at Lands' End, accidently hearing the CEO tell my Manager that I didn't have enough business experience. Now, how the heck do you go about getting more "business experience"? Well, you could go get an advanced business degree, but that's not really feasible. What the CEO was actually saying was, "*Kevin is a geek*". When an Analyst is in this situation, the Analyst needs to change the style of communication she uses. Earlier in this discussion, I talked about the language of sales and profit, two key components that Executives are bonused on. The Analyst needs to shift focus, from optimization and statistics and confidence intervals and regression models and t-tests and conversion funnels and landing pages to sales and profit. Simple. Sales and profit. When I converted my A/B test writeups from focusing on the math to focusing on the action readers needed to take, people began to pay attention. Business experience may not mean business experience, it may mean "communication experience".

Tip #27 = Tell A Story: Let me give you an example. In March 2007, I gave a keynote address at the NEMOA conference. What a disaster! I explained an hour of math that left ninety percent of the audience bored, frustrated, and disappointed. Nobody talked to me after the lecture. It was as if years of research just went flying over the heads of four hundred Executives. In March 2012, I gave a keynote address at the NEMOA conference. I spoke of "Judy, Jennifer, and Jasmine", the three personas I use to explain where the future of direct marketing is heading. Three weeks after the presentation, I am still receiving emails and phone calls about the presentation. The audience of 450 Executives understood the message, and understood what action they needed to take to be successful. Now, allow me to let you in on a secret. The content I shared in 2012 was nearly the same as the content I shared in 2007. How I packaged the content, however, was 100% different. I told a story about each woman, and the audience was able to understand the story (email me if you would like a copy of the presentation). Here's what was interesting about the presentation. Afterward, as the masses thanked me for sharing the information, three Analysts stopped by to complain. All three felt that I "dumbed down" my content. All three asked for a more technical description of my work. All three asked why I did not include computer code in my presentation. This is the fundamental difference between an Analyst and an Executive. The Analyst cares about the technical aspects of the work, the Executive cares about the business implications of the work. If you are an aspiring Analyst, focus your efforts on telling a story that helps an Executive understand what he needs to do. The story isn't about the technical aspects of the work, the story is marketing-related, easily understood by Executives.

Tip #28 = Be Moral: It is perfectly fine to stand up to an Executive, and refuse to do something because it is illegal. Just communicate, clearly, why you believe the activity is illegal.

Tip #29 = Stop Making Mistakes: One of the best Analysts I ever worked with made a lot of mistakes, and I mean a lot of mistakes! This person "hit a ceiling", because Executives told me that they could not trust the work this person did. Oh, was this an exasperating experience for me (imagine what it was like for the Analyst). I tried everything to encourage this person to not make mistakes. These were easy problems to solve, too. For example, one time, all the Analyst had to do was compare his annual sales number to numbers published by Finance, but the Analyst would not do this. No matter what I tried to do to encourage the person to audit results, this person published recommendations with data errors. In fact, the Analyst was downright defiant! This Analyst challenged me to count the number of instances where the Analyst damaged the business! Well, the damage was done, Executives refused to believe in the work the Analyst performed. If an Analyst wants to communicate effectively with an Executive, then communicate numbers that are truthful, factual, and accurate. I know, you're reading this and you are saying, "I already do that, that's not me". Trust me, you aren't doing this often enough!!

Tip #30 = Context: Analysts are never given enough context when working on a project. I worked with a Search Analyst recently. I was very hard on this individual, and for good reason. This Analyst refused to do the work to accurately estimate what might happen if the Search budget were doubled in size. In other words, this Analyst refused to calculate the incremental profit the company would generate if the Search budget were doubled. The Search Analyst told me that profit was the wrong metric, the Search Analyst told me that you can never know what would happen in a hypothetical example, the Search Analyst basically refused to do the work. Now, I couldn't give the Search Analyst the context behind the argument. The context was this … a Consultant wanted to eliminate the Search budget altogether, and this would eliminate the job of the Search Analyst. The CMO wanted to know what would happen if the budget were eliminated, or what would happen if it were doubled, so that the CMO could make an educated guess as to which strategy to pursue. The Consultant, the CMO, and I were unable to provide context around the argument to the Search Analyst. Had we provided context, the Search Analyst would have responded differently, right? Well, I eventually coaxed the Search Analyst into doing the work, and the Search Analyst was able to prove the value of Search Marketing. The budget increased significantly, as did sales and profit. The Analyst must assume that there is context to the question, context that the Executive cannot share with the Analyst.

Tip #31 = Trust: Analyst constantly talk about creating a "data driven culture". My goodness! It takes a lot of hubris and inexperience to suggest that one tiny Analyst can change how an entire company behaves. That hubris and inexperience, however, is exactly what is needed today! One Analyst, just one Analyst, can change the trajectory of an entire company. But the Analyst must have earned one attribute, maybe the attribute that is hardest to earn. That attribute, my friends, is "trust". When the Analyst does good, humble, accurate, business altering work, then Executives begin to trust the analyst. When Executives trust an Analyst, they give increasingly important and more complicated projects to the Analyst. When the Analyst performs well on these projects, then Executives invite the Analyst to important meetings. Here, the Analyst gains context, she gets to hear what Executives are thinking, she gets to understand why certain questions are being asked the way they are being asked. This context greatly improves the quality of the work an Analyst does, causing the Analyst to be promoted to a Manager or Director position. In these positions, the Analyst works more closely with the Executive, earning more trust, gaining more context, doing better work. Instead of Executives forming opinions on the basis of gut instinct, Executives ask the Manager/Director to validate or disprove a hypothesis. Guess what? The culture has been changed! It takes a lot of work, dear Analysts, but it is achievable. You can change the culture of a company. Trust represents the most important attribute an Analyst must earn in order to change the culture of a company.

Ok, that's thirty-one tips. What are your tips? How about writing up your own tips and forwarding them to me? Maybe we can create an e-book or booklet that teaches Analysts how to be more effective in dealing with Executives?

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