
The Proposition

THE PLAYBOOK

Selling to the **C-** *level*. Think, write, edit.

The webinar playbook. How to land the room
when the buyer sits at the top.

BY

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*The story
that connects.*

The C-suite buys differently. They don't want a demo. They don't want a deck. They don't want your roadmap. They want to know whether you understand the problem they are paid to solve and whether you can take risk off their plate.

This is the playbook from the webinar. Selling to the C-suite. It is the same playbook we use with the IBMs, Googles, Ciscos and Cognizants of this world when they go after deals worth eight or nine figures and a "no" would have a real cost.

The principles are simple. Most teams know them. Very few teams actually use them.

01 The mistake everyone makes.

The mistake everyone makes is showing up with their product. The C-suite did not call the meeting because they wanted to know about your product. They called it because something is broken, expensive or strategic, and they are looking for someone to make it less so.

The first ten minutes of every C-suite meeting decide whether the next ninety happen. In those ten minutes, the buyer is asking themselves one question. Does this person understand my world?

If the answer is yes, the meeting continues. If the answer is no, the meeting continues anyway because they are polite, but the deal is dead and no one has told you.

FIRST PRINCIPLE

Lead with their problem, not your product. Always. Without exception.

02 What the C-suite is actually buying.

They are not buying software. They are not buying services. They are not buying you. They are buying one of three things. Sometimes two. Almost never all three.

- **Growth.** Revenue. Market share. Margin. Share price.
- **Risk reduction.** Continuity. Compliance. Cost certainty. Reputation.
- **Time.** Speed to outcome. Speed to revenue. Speed to insight.

Every deal you have ever lost was a deal where the buyer thought they were buying one of those three and your story told them you were selling something else.

03 The CRG framework.

Different buyers in the C-suite buy for different reasons. The same product. The same price. The same proposal. Three different stories.

- **CFO. Buys for Cost.** Show them the saving. The payback. The avoidance of a worse number. Lead with the financial outcome. The product comes second.
- **COO. Buys for Risk.** Show them continuity. Resilience. What breaks today and what stops breaking when you arrive. Lead with the operational outcome.
- **CEO. Buys for Growth.** Show them what they can do that their competitor can't. Lead with the market outcome.

The first slide. The first sentence. The first line of the proposal. All three of them should change depending on who is in the room. Most sales teams send the same deck to all three. That is why they lose.

04 The four-part C-suite story.

Every story that lands in the C-suite has the same four parts. In this order.

1. **The world they live in.** The shift. The pressure. The thing that has changed in their market or their company. Two sentences. No more. They will trust you the moment they hear you name something they recognise.
2. **The cost of doing nothing.** What happens if they stay where they are. In numbers. With a timeframe. This is where most teams flinch. Don't.
3. **The shape of the answer.** Not your product. The shape of the answer. What the world looks like once the problem is solved. Make it concrete. Make it credible.
4. **Why you.** Three sentences. Proof. Pattern. Person. What you have done. How you do it. Who specifically will run it.

Everything else is detail. Detail is for the deal team, not the meeting. The meeting is for the story.

05 What you can never say.

The C-suite has heard everything. They have been pitched at by the best in the world. There are seven phrases that, when they hear them, turn the meeting into a transaction. And transactions go to procurement.

- "We're a partner, not a vendor." If you have to say it, you're not.
- "We're best in class." Says who?
- "End to end." Means nothing.
- "Trusted advisor." Same. Self-applied honorifics never work.
- "World class." Stop.
- "Cutting edge." Stop.
- "Solution." Replace with the actual outcome.

Strip these from your pitch. Replace them with specifics. Numbers. Names. Examples. The C-suite buys evidence, not adjectives.

06 The proof rule.

One concrete proof point beats five abstract ones. Always.

Weak: "We've helped many leading financial institutions transform their customer engagement."

Strong: "We ran the same project for a FTSE 100 bank last year. Their conversion rate went from 1.4% to 3.9% in nine months. The COO who hired us will take your call."

The second one closes the room. The first one is wallpaper.

THE PROOF TEST

For every claim in your deck, ask: "If they push back on this, what specific evidence am I going to put on the table?" If you can't answer, take the claim out.

07 The pre-meeting brief.

Before you walk in, write down five things on a single sheet of paper. Do not bring the sheet. Memorise it. Burn it.

1. **Their three priorities this year.** From their last earnings call, last investor day, last analyst report. In their words.
2. **The one number that matters to them.** The KPI on their bonus. The market they're entering. The cost they're under pressure to cut.
3. **The shift in their market.** The thing that changed in the last 12 months. The thing that puts them on the back foot or the front foot.
4. **Your one-line proposition for this meeting.** One sentence. What you are offering them and why now. Practice it out loud.
5. **The question you will ask in the first five minutes.** A real question. Not "what keeps you up at night." Something specific. Something that tells them you read.

If you walk in without these five things, you are guessing. The C-suite can smell guessing in ninety seconds.

08 The opening line.

The opening line of a C-suite meeting is the single most leveraged thing in your sales cycle. Not the deck. Not the demo. The first sentence out of your mouth.

Bad openings.

- "Thanks so much for taking the time."
- "Let me tell you a bit about us."
- "I'll just share my screen."

Good openings.

- "I read your Q3 transcript. The line about Germany. Can we start there?"
- "You are the only Tier 1 in your sector without integrated customer data. Is that deliberate or a problem?"
- "We've delivered this exact project for three of your competitors. Two of them did it well. One didn't. Which would you like to hear about first?"

The opening line earns you the next 25 minutes. Without it, you are presenting to a polite room with their phone face-up on the table.

09 The close.

The C-suite close is not a close. It is a next step. If you have done the rest right, the close is the easiest part of the meeting. You agree what happens next, who owns it and when it happens. You name a date.

"I'll send you the proposal by Thursday. You'll have it before your offsite. Can we agree to meet for 20 minutes the following Monday to walk through the numbers?"

Specific. Time-bound. Mutual. Three things. That's it.

10 If you only do five things.

1. Lead with their problem, not your product.
2. Match your story to whether they buy for cost, risk or growth.
3. Use the four-part structure. World. Cost of inaction. Shape of the answer. Why you.
4. One concrete proof point per claim. Numbers. Names. Examples.
5. Earn the meeting with your opening sentence. End it with a named next step.

11 What next.

If you'd like us to coach your team on a live deal, get in touch. We run pitch sprints for individual deals, sales-org transformations for whole teams, and CEO storytelling for the founder who has to carry it all.

Most of our work is referred. Most of it pays back in the first quarter. All of it starts with a 30-minute call.

Book one when you're ready.

Dan

WORK WITH DAN



Dan *Ilett.*

Dan was a national technology and business news journalist (Financial Times, Economist Group, Daily Telegraph), before becoming a CEO himself — and then an advisor on storytelling and growth.

He edits The Executive Summary and works with a small number of companies on growth, performance, AI and story.

Want to work together?

Send a line. The Executive Summary lands one email a week. The work is small-volume and considered.

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