Mastering Executive Status Reports

Idea In Short

Treat the executive status report as expectation management, not work reporting. Calendar it months ahead, pre-wire the summary with your client counterpart, plan for half the allotted time and lead with the executive summary. Decide how you want the executive to feel, then design backward.

Great Work Is Only Half the Job

Successful client service means doing great work and exceeding the client's expectations, together. If the client worries unnecessarily, gets surprised or loses track of the scope of work, the consultant has communicated poorly. Experienced principals hear this as a platitude, while junior consultants find it odd, because a consulting project is a whirlwind of emails, meetings, interviews, draft deliverables and conference calls. Where could surprise possibly hide? The answer sits in the gap between the two client audiences every project carries, and the different physics governing each.

The Project Lead: 90 Percent Work

Every project includes a client project lead at roughly the senior manager or director level whose job is to babysit the engagement: coordinate logistics, carve time from executive calendars, help consultants wayfind through the organization, escalate issues and troubleshoot generally. The job is somewhat thankless, with a clear quid pro quo, since leading the project means mingling with senior leadership and a shot at career advancement. Project leads vary in communication appetite, some wanting weekly updates and others wanting contact only when issues arise, and they all have day jobs beside the babysitting. Effective consultants premeditate the rhythm of communication for the whole project, because the lead sees you daily while the executive sponsor appears every few weeks or months.

The Executive Sponsor: 90 Percent Expectations

The sponsor meeting operates under harsher conditions. Often this is the first contact since the kickoff presentation. Often the executive has forgotten the project scope and the consultants' names, sometimes the firm's too. Often the meeting starts late, ends early or gets rescheduled because the executive reasonably ranks it low. Plan on 15 to 20 minutes, and design them working backward from the result you want, which is the classic design-thinking move.1 How do you want the executive to feel afterward: relieved, engaged, excited, curious, encouraged? That feeling is the deliverable. The agenda follows from it. Fifty megabytes of slides exist and self-editing is the skill. What questions does she hold about status and momentum? Any quick wins to report? Any issues that you and the project lead agree need executive attention? Any bad news, delivered straight? Any final recommendations worth quietly seeding now?

The Pro Moves

Field-tested advice saves grief across every format these report-outs take. Calendar the appointment two to three months in advance, which makes cancellation far less likely. Run the executive summary past your client counterpart two or three days before the meeting, because surprising or shaming your daily ally is unforgivable. Expect half the allotted time thanks to interruptions and tangents, so the first page must be the executive summary. Provide two or three minutes of context, covering what the project is about, its duration, where you stand in the journey and what remains, since large companies often run three to fifteen consulting firms concurrently and executives genuinely lose track. Structure the conversation with section headers, tables and graphs rather than essays of words. A 20-minute meeting deserves two or three slides at most, and some of the best meetings use none. Make those slides excellent, because this appetizer previews the final deliverable, and a bad amuse-bouche warns the diner about the entree.

A Template Worth Standardizing

Teams gain speed when the status report format never changes. A one-page standard works across most engagements: overall health stated in one sentence at the top, progress against the three commitments made last period, the three commitments for next period, decisions needed from the sponsor with dates attached and risks worth naming before they name themselves. Consistency trains the executive to find information in seconds, which is the entire point of a status rhythm. It also disciplines the team, because a recurring commitments section makes slippage visible to everyone, including the people slipping.

Send the page far enough ahead of the meeting for reading, and spend the meeting itself on the decisions rather than the recap.

Commitments, Questions and Relationships

Do not over-commit. Executives are action-oriented, so when she asks how much you will save in year one, never answer 2.2 million dollars unless bet-your-career certain. Think about assumptions, think about risks, answer in ranges like one to three million and think about your career. If the report is boring, meaning everything runs well with no surprises, convert the time into listening: ask good questions about other pain points, which is where add-on work is born. Involve the client project lead prominently, and best case have him report to his own boss, demonstrating cooperation, ownership and change management, because when your day-to-day counterpart is the star, you win.

Preparation closes the loop. Red-team the meeting by listing the five to ten most likely questions and testing your answers.2 Ask the five whys of your own analysis as a sanity check on rigor, since faking results to a client this early would poison everything after.3 Pre-wire the final recommendations, giving the executive an early look that converts into buy-in. And use the meeting to develop the relationship itself. A consultant who minds the project daily and never sold the work gets, in this room, the chance to level up into trusted-adviser territory. That status is built from competence, gravitas, results and executive presence, twenty minutes at a time.

- 1Design thinking
- 2Red team
- 3Five whys

Summary

Project leads live on work while executive sponsors live on expectations. Prepare the twenty minutes accordingly: pre-wired summaries, two or three quality slides, honest ranges instead of over-commitments, red-teamed questions and a starring role for your client counterpart. Trusted-adviser status is earned here.