



## CLARITYES1 PODCAST #9: THE MYTH OF C-SUITE SELLING

Welcome back to the ClarityES1 podcast series. I'm your host, Chris Deren and after a couple of decades of helping field teams develop into their full potential, I can say that we've learned a lot, especially about strategic account management and how to get it right.

One of the longest running storylines in the world of B2B enterprise selling and account management is that c-suite executives simply have no interest in meeting directly with commercial teams. And if you've been on that side of the effort, blocked by the proverbial "gatekeeper" or bits of process designed to shield the most senior executives from sales pitches, you no doubt have a plenty of evidence to substantiate this belief.

But what if it's just that.... A belief? What if the impossibility of meeting with a C-level executive is more MYTH than reality?

Obviously, some eventually break through the barricades and are proud to boast about the time that they got an audience with the CEO, COO, CFO or CTO.

Of course, it would be instructive to ask if those interactions yielded anything beyond an initial conversation or if they could get return access if they really needed to but still..... getting on a call with a c-suite stakeholder or even better, getting into their physical inner sanctum feels like a victory nonetheless.

Therein lies a related issue that I think it's important to bring up..... The "WHY" behind accessing the c-suite.

Assuming it's more than just for bragging rights, why do account salespeople feel like it's so important to call on the most senior officers in a company?

In the old days, there was a training program called "VITO" or "Very Important Top Officer." It promoted the idea of accessing a c-suite executive knowing ahead of time that you would likely be delegated down through the organization and that was ok since it was essentially an internal referral from the top.

I understand why folks might have liked this strategy but that was way back then and this is now. Things have changed and there are a number of reasons why this approach would not be received well today.

If on the other hand, there's a genuine belief that the solution you represent matches well to a problem or challenge the CXO is directly dealing with, and it's one that requires their level of

executive sponsorship to bring it to fruition, now at least, you're getting closer to a justified need and a successful strategy to penetrate the most senior levels of the account.

But there's still something going on up there that you need to know about..... a dynamic that plays out for CXO's that explains why we called this podcast "The MYTH of c-suite selling." And it has to do with the alternatives they have.

I once interviewed the CTO and division president of one of the top 3 telecom companies in the US about his dealings with salespeople and account executives. I was especially interested in knowing if any of the hundreds of attempts to get in to see him were successful and if some were, why he granted access.

First off, he did confirm that with the exception of a few meetings he agreed to out of courtesy and at the request of an internal colleague or industry peer, he met with a relatively small number of salespeople and account managers over the years. But the number was not zero. And that's what I wanted to learn more about.

He said that in years prior, he would agree to meet with someone who demonstrated above average industry and product knowledge but over time, as he took on more senior roles, more responsibility and had larger staffs, it was longer enough to say that one person stood out and had a better chance of access because they had "done their homework" around industry and product knowledge. He could duplicate most of that knowledge from within. Knowing that

someone had taken the time to understand his company and the challenges of the environment he was working with in *was* key differentiator for a while but eventually, even that wasn't enough for him to make room on his calendar.

Still there were those that got past the gatekeeper and were able to meet with him.

Now he really had my attention.

Here's what he went on to explain.....

Especially with the most senior executives with large organizations and support staffs, he said the tendency is to become more insular as those around you step in and double down on the effort to protect your time.

What people don't realize he continued, is that "if we've been dealing with a problem or challenge for 9 months, a year, or longer, there's a pretty good chance that the solution to that issue is not coming from within for whatever reason. Sometimes it's the insular thing and sometimes it's that we suspect that those around us have a vested interest in saying "yes" to us a lot and not challenging our way of thinking."

"So eventually, you start to realize that you can't close the door to outsiders completely and you almost become curious to see who's not only done their homework, but has taken it a step

further to develop a hypothesis around a potential solution to my problem that others haven't thought of, especially internally." "Those are the folks I would take the time to meet with if they presented themselves and communicated that way."

I hadn't had it explained to me that way before but what he said made so much sense. And I think for those in account selling roles who make assumptions about what the c-suite is not open too, it's an opportunity to look at it from a new perspective..... Namely **theirs**.

Sure, accessing and selling to the c-suite can seem intimidating, but perhaps the difference between failure and success in doing so may come down to the ability to translate the value of what you represent into a differentiated solution mapped to a time-sensitive priority of theirs'. If what this executive shared with me mirrors the perspectives of other c-suite executives you may be thinking of calling on, the longer they live with a problem that isn't getting solved internally for one reason or another, the more likely it is that the door may be opening for you.

Thanks for listening to the ClarityES1 podcast series. Until next time....