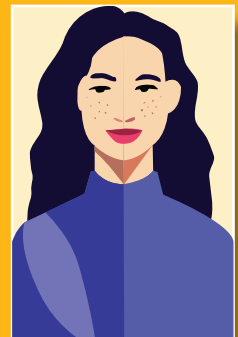
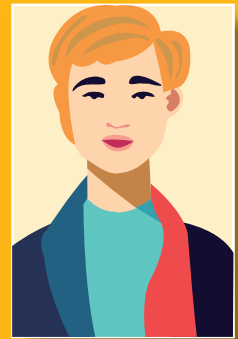


Leverage C-Suite Personas to Gain Buy-In

Esther Jackson



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In a legal context, a *jury* refers to a group of individuals that a court summons and swears in to use evidence to decide whether a defendant is guilty in a criminal case or is liable in a civil case.

Ahead of impaneling the jurors, lawyers examine potential juror behavior. Through examination, attorneys can identify biases and preconceived notions. They pose questions that help them gain valuable information about individual jurors and enable them to anticipate the jury's group dynamics that may shape decision making during deliberations.

Similar to a jury, a boardroom of C-suite executives must often make crucial decisions about the organization's strategies and vision. And, like lawyers, talent development professionals try to understand C-suite leaders' behaviors and past experiences to gauge their motivations, inclinations, and tendencies. Knowing the way leaders think and how they make decisions can augment TD's approach and enhance the function's influence in the boardroom.

In this guide, I will:

- Introduce leader personas.
- Explain how they differ from learner personas.
- Describe the primary executive decision-making styles.
- Detail the benefits of understanding personas for TD.
- Outline ways to support leader development using C-suite leader personas.
- Fuse artificial intelligence and personas to enhance TD outcomes.

Personas vs. Profiles

A rising trend in L&D calls for more individualized learning experiences. A *learner persona* is a fictitious profile that represents a target learner for a training event. The concept of *personas* has Latin roots, originally referring to the mask or character portrayed by a theatre actor. TD practitioners create personas from their research on the target audience to identify demographics, training goals, motivations, challenges, educational backgrounds, skill levels, and professional responsibilities.

Don't confuse personas with profiles, however. Both profiles and personas help TD practitioners understand

the needs, preferences, and behaviors of a target audience. But profiles provide a foundation for personalized learning experiences using real-life representations with actual learner data, whereas, personas are hypothetical representations. In addition, personas are general and conceptual, reflecting common learner types.

Although you can use the power of learner personas to go beyond viewing participants as names on a roster and design a personalized experience with the uniqueness of every learner in mind, this guide focuses on the C-suite. Such personas include common characteristics, experience, values, priorities, decision-making styles, pain points, and communication preferences.

C-suite personas can strengthen individual learning and growth, influence leaders, foster healthy teams, enable change at the senior leader level, and optimize strategy. They are versatile tools to support the TD practitioner in navigating a wide range of interactions with senior leaders. We engage senior leaders to request a budget increase, a new product launch, strategic plan approval, team restructuring, a learning management system implementation, or a learning policy change. Use personas to prepare for those scenarios.

Figure 1. C-Suite Personas vs. Traditional Learner Personas

	Advantages	Disadvantages
C-Suite Personas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalize learning experiences for the highest leadership levels. • Affect leadership at the team level and the organizational level. • Align goals with the organization's strategy. • Cover multiple departments. • Influence company culture and promote learning. • Drive company growth through better decision-making skills. • Fuel the leadership talent pipeline. • Address skills gaps with organizational impact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use fictitious information. • May include inherent biases. • Target senior leader roles rather than learners. • May miss specific senior leader details. • Require time for researching persona details. • May not represent every senior leader.
Traditional Learner Personas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a deeper level of insight. • Help make better design and technology decisions. • Provide consistency for the entire team. • Ensure empathetic content delivery. • Integrate with an existing instructional design framework. • Enable personalized learning experiences. • Encourage the talent function to target marketing efforts. • Include an adaptable course design. • Foster improved communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use fictitious information. • May use stereotypes or have inherent biases. • Emphasize unimportant details. • Use fake quotes. • Align with the learning situation rather than a role. • Do not represent all learners in the target population.

C-Suite Situations

Apply personas to a variety of L&D strategic concerns.

Let's say the time has come for you to present your learning proposal or budget to senior leadership for approval. The first step is to identify the senior leaders to target for your presentation and, thus, your personas. Often, that means the senior executives and managers of an organization who hold titles such as chief operating officer (COO), chief information officer, chief financial officer, and chief experience officer (CXO). Other titles include president, managing director, and executive vice president. Make sure to account for all relevant titles and stakeholders.

For example, you must present the business case for purchasing a new LMS to a group of senior leaders with different priorities. Understanding each leader's area of focus, pain points, preferences, and some characteristics is essential to achieving your goal and getting their buy-in.

Use the power of learner personas to go beyond viewing participants as names on a roster.

In another situation, a learning team is rebranding its program offerings. You schedule separate meetings with the chief marketing officer and the chief learning officer to more easily ask follow-up questions and gain a better understanding of their priorities. You can focus the presentation on a specific senior leader's area of expertise and anticipate their concerns. In addition, it is less likely that the conversation will digress individually as it would in a group setting. Applying personas enables you to determine critical content for each presentation based on given characteristics and preferences as well as refine your messaging to capture the leader's attention and influence their decisions.

Leadership development (including coaching) is another area where leader personas can be beneficial. Gallup indicates that managers influence 70 percent of a team's engagement. Furthermore, research by Metrix Global reveals that executive coaching delivers

a 788 percent return on investment due to increased productivity and greater employee retention. Using personas in executive coaching—either with an executive coach or the executive receiving the coaching—can help identify areas of personal capability oversight and strengthen growth areas. In that way, personas create a personalized road map for fostering skill building.

Decision-Making Styles

Humans make decisions constantly—but how much thought do we give to our decision-making style and whether we can enhance it? For L&D professionals, it's rote to decide between using Articulate's Storyline or Rise for an e-learning course or whether to redesign a conflict resolution course. But for C-suite or executive leaders who must make high-stakes decisions that affect the whole organization, such considerations are a more complicated undertaking.

As shared in McKinsey's podcast episode, "To Unlock Better Decision Making, Plan Better Meetings," executives devote approximately 40 percent of their time to making decisions. That doesn't mean the process is a productive use of their time, however. Other research, according to McKinsey's "Three Keys to Faster, Better Decisions," shows that leadership decisions are often ineffective, leading to a loss equivalent to \$250 million in annual wages for Fortune 500 companies alone.

In a rush to get to a decision, it can be easy for individuals to use mental shortcuts to save time and energy. According to the NeuroLeadership Institute, those shortcuts are biases that all human beings have. The problem is that biases negatively affect decision making. A senior leader who is familiar with their decision-making style can use specific strategies to counteract potential biases (see Figure 2).

Each decision-making style (visionary, guardian, motivator, flexible, catalyst) comes with its own set of strengths and potential biases that leaders must actively manage to ensure optimal outcomes. For example, because visionary individuals are not always ready to listen to dissenting opinions or ideas in opposition to theirs, a senior leader with that decision-making style could be intentional about seeking input from others or