

# Build CEO Rapport: Top 3 Actions for CPOs

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Initiatives: [Procurement Functional Design and Leadership](#); [Sourcing and Procurement](#)

Chief procurement officers struggle to influence business decisions due to a lack of strong relationships with key leaders and weak alignment to organizational objectives. This research provides three key actions that CPOs can take to build rapport with the CEO.

## Overview

### Key Findings

- Chief procurement officers (CPOs) strive to influence business decisions and gain the CEO's trust. New procurement executives find it difficult to shift the CEO's perception of their role from tactical to strategic.
- CPOs often struggle to align procurement strategies with the CEO's strategic vision and personal values, which can hinder trust-building and influence within the C-suite.
- CPOs often face challenges in demonstrating their expertise and strategic value to the CEO, as they may focus primarily on stated expectations rather than driving more impactful business impact.

### Recommendations

- Partner with purpose by proactively engaging the CEO in a transparent, confident and trustworthy way. Communicate at the appropriate altitude, demonstrating active listening and fostering healthy debate.
- Align with CEO values and priorities by understanding the CEO's personal value system and decision-making style, developing empathy for their emotional motivations and delivering value-based solutions in areas important to them.
- Lead with vision by delivering solutions that propel the CEO's vision forward. Be an outcome-driven leader focused on overall business value, acting as a forward-thinking confidant and advisor.

## Analysis

For CPOs, building relationships and demonstrating leadership through thoughtful and strategic engagement are critical to success. Forty-two percent of C-suite executives say that influence within the executive leadership team depends, at least in part, on the individual's relationship with the CEO. <sup>1</sup>

Due to affinity bias, CEOs naturally gravitate toward executives who empathize with their challenges and contribute to their strategic goals. CPOs limit their impact by focusing solely on stated expectations for their role, such as delivering cost savings. Success requires that CPOs do things that nobody expects from them — and that they do them well.

This research focuses on how CPOs can build rapport with the CEO to gain influence as a trusted ally in the executive team.

To achieve this, CPOs should build rapport with their CEO and, by extension, other C-suite colleagues by partnering with purpose, not passivity, aligning to CEO values and priorities, and leading with vision (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Three Actions to Build Rapport With the CEO**

### Three Actions to Build Rapport With the CEO



Source: Gartner  
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### Partner With Purpose, Not Passivity

CPOs should prioritize collaboration from the outset to establish themselves as sought-after partners with their CEO. They should begin by proactively engaging the CEO and key peers — such as the CFO — with purpose.

CEOs appreciate when executives come to conversations with a clear point of view and are able to effectively fill the functional gaps in knowledge that they may be experiencing. Unlocking a stronger partnership with their CEO requires CPOs to influence them with something they didn't know, about something they care about deeply. The CPO is the procurement expert in the room; they should bring deep insights to the table and do so with purpose and confidence.

Take these four actions to become a more collaborative partner:

1. **Transparently discuss problems and provide constructive feedback.** The ability of the CEO to hold each executive leadership team member appropriately accountable is crucial to high performance. <sup>1</sup> CPOs may sometimes be wary of approaching their CEO with bad news. This is risky, as it could call into question the CPO's transparency. The CPO should feel comfortable delivering challenging news and should do so with confidence. CPOs should lead with empathy and emphasize their investment in the CEO's success, articulating the impact of the bad news in terms of its impact to the CEO's objectives and values.
2. **Serve as a confidant and sounding board:** CPOs should make time and cultivate a conducive environment to discuss important issues privately and candidly with their CEO. This can sometimes be difficult based on the pace of the organization and leadership style of the CEO. You may have regularly scheduled meetings, or it might be up to you to find time for meaningful connections. Regardless, build and maintain trust through appropriate self-disclosure and show the utmost discretion and objectivity during difficult discussions.
3. **Take an active approach and be mindful of time:** Whenever you can address the CEO's needs or save them time, you will show respect for their limited availability and that you are worthy of trust. Plan conversations around the cadence of their workload when possible. For example, the CEO will find it difficult to make an informed decision about major changes during busier times of the year. However, they will be more inclined to respond favorably if the overall plan was aligned with them earlier in a calmer period.
4. **Act with urgency to fix trust breaches:** If the trust between the CPO and CEO has been compromised, address the breach through two-way dialogue with the CEO. More importantly, the CPO should listen. Active listening involves validation, gathering more facts and paraphrasing. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1: Steps to Be a Collaborative Partner**

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Action items	How
Transparently discuss problems and feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Deliver challenging information in a timely manner, with confidence and transparency.</li> <li>■ Take positions that leverage procurement's unique perspective but drive overall value.</li> <li>■ Articulate the impact of bad news in terms of its impact on the CEO's objectives and values.</li> </ul>
Serve as a confidant and sounding board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Create time and space for candid discussions.</li> <li>■ Initiate trust through appropriate self-disclosure.</li> <li>■ Maintain objectivity when discussing sensitive issues.</li> <li>■ Gain further trust by demonstrating thought leadership and discretion.</li> </ul>
Take an active approach with the CEO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Be mindful of time constraints and align your plans ahead of critical decision moments.</li> <li>■ Plan procurement conversations around their workload patterns.</li> <li>■ Come prepared with concise, relevant information.</li> </ul>
Act swiftly to address trust breaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Open dialogue and active listening.</li> <li>■ Address issues directly rather than avoiding them.</li> <li>■ Generate trust through informal discussions about procurement challenges.</li> </ul>

Source: Gartner

## Align With CEO Values and Priorities





CEOs expect C-level leaders to align with their strategic vision. For CPOs, this alignment is crucial to building trust and influence. CPOs need to understand and communicate the overall company strategy and business model from the CEO's perspective rather than a purely procurement one.

CPOs can take the following approaches to understand the CEO's priorities:

- **Understand the CEO value system:** CPOs should learn about their CEO's personal values and motivations. Understanding things such as agility, speed of innovation, risk tolerance, precision; their previous experiences will provide insight into how the CEO approaches tough decisions and can prepare CPOs to support the CEO through strategic initiatives. This perspective can also help CPOs advocate for their own functional priorities by positioning them as aligned with the CEO's core values. CPOs should prioritize developing the emotional dexterity to help expand their understanding of the CEO's personal traits (see [How CPOs Can Develop Social Competencies for Better Executive Engagement](#)).
- **Develop empathy and a deep understanding of personal and emotional motivations:** Our research also shows that the personality and decision style of the CEO have a dominant impact on the dynamics of the executive team, <sup>1</sup> which makes it essential for CPOs to learn from what the CEO says and does. CEOs can be reticent about sharing emotional vulnerabilities, but emotions like anxiety, insecurity, disappointment, embarrassment, etc., can affect their professional relationships and influence their decisions. Conversely, positive emotions, such as empathy, caring, compassion and pride, can also influence decisions. CPOs can develop and use their skills and strengths to anticipate how emotions, personality and personal style may inform a CEO's decisions and shed light on their personal traits.

- **Partner with CEOs on top strategic priorities:** CEOs' top business priority right now is enterprise growth. To achieve this, they are focused on building sales revenue, expanding geographically and creating enterprise scale in that order. <sup>2</sup> However, procurement's priorities do not always match those strategic priorities set by CEOs. In fact, today the CPO's largest value proposition is cost savings, and by 2030, it will be supporting innovation. <sup>3</sup> The CPO must support CEO-level priorities through a strong cascade of CEO priorities to procurement strategies, activities and metrics.
- CPOs can deliver value-based synergy for CEOs by:
  - Aligning with the CEO by prioritizing initiatives that focus on the CEO's strategic priorities. Using the previous example of growth, CPOs can support this by identifying core capabilities of key suppliers that the organization is not utilizing. This will ensure reliable supply of product via robust risk mitigation strategies and aligning their team to maximize the value of new product development.
  - Planning scenarios and determining their business outcomes to generate a roadmap that makes the right investments at the right time to deliver maximum business value while supporting the strategic agenda.
  - Building skills and fostering interdependencies with the CEO and other executive leaders to broaden the core role for CPOs. Strive to contribute significantly to the core enablers to enhance the value of procurement's work in the broader organization.
- **Embrace trust compass to operationalize your behaviors and values:** With the following four components in Table 2 forming a "Trust Compass," CPOs can make progress on their trust-building journey with the CEO. Each competence, authenticity, reliability, empathy (C.A.R.E.) element of the Trust Compass is foundational to trust. The CEO will evaluate CPO trustworthiness based on how they deliver these elements.

Table 2: C.A.R.E. Trust Compass

 <b>Competence</b>	<p>Competence represents the knowledge, skills and ability of an individual or organization to perform effectively. It ensures one can deliver on promises and responsibilities.</p>
 <b>Authenticity</b>	<p>Authenticity is a key element of trust. It signifies honesty, transparency and being true to one's principles and values. An authentic person or organization is seen as genuine and trustworthy.</p>
 <b>Reliability</b>	<p>Reliability represents the consistency and dependability of actions and behavior. Trust is built when individuals or organizations consistently meet their commitments and expectations.</p>
 <b>Empathy</b>	<p>Empathy reflects the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. It involves active listening and showing care and concern for the needs and emotions of those you interact with.</p>

Source: Gartner

To effectively align procurement strategies with executive leadership, it is essential for CPOs to integrate their actions with the CEO's priorities. Table 3 outlines actionable steps that CPOs can take to ensure their initiatives resonate with the CEO's strategic vision and organizational goals.

**Table 3: Steps to Act on Your CEO's Priorities**

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Action items	How
Understand the CEO's value system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Position procurement priorities as compatible with core leadership values.</li> <li>■ Assess their expectations for agility, risk tolerance and speed of innovation.</li> <li>■ Prioritize developing the emotional dexterity to understand the CEO's personal traits.</li> </ul>
Develop empathy for the CEO's personal motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Recognize how anxiety and stress affect decision making.</li> <li>■ Adapt communication style to their emotional state.</li> </ul>
Prioritize collaborative engagement on the CEO's focus areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Identify and align procurement with the CEO's top strategic priorities.</li> <li>■ Proactively offer procurement solutions that advance key business initiatives.</li> </ul>
Operationalize the Trust Compass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Demonstrate procurement expertise while delivering on commitments.</li> <li>■ Present information with honesty that aligns with organizational values.</li> <li>■ Maintain consistent processes that stakeholders can depend on.</li> </ul>

Source: Gartner

## Lead With Vision, Support With Expertise

Ultimately, the CEO wants to know they can trust the CPO to make the best business decisions for the organization. Early on, CPOs should support the CEO's vision through their procurement expertise by making and communicating outcome-driven decisions that add impactful business value, not just procurement value.

To demonstrate their vision and expertise, CPOs can:



- **Become a strategic, outcome-driven leader:** To excel as strategic contributors, CPOs must first become outcome-driven leaders. By establishing clear, outcome-based principles to guide their actions, they can align procurement with broader business goals, ensuring their efforts deliver measurable impact. The quality and strength of their partnerships play a critical role in driving these targeted outcomes, too. This focus on results sets the stage for CPOs to elevate their influence within the organization.
- Engage with CFOs early to understand the financial challenges of the organization and how they can become top-line enablers and contributors. For instance, CPOs can build better rapport with the CFO and CEO by identifying how procurement can help capture supplier innovation to support expansion into new markets. This will also help shift the perception of the procurement organization from a back-office, cost-cutting engine to a strategic growth enabler. The leadership team will feel confident that the CPO understands how to enable the overall business strategy and goals beyond execution and operational aspects of procurement.
- **Become intentional futurists:** CPOs who can look to the future, reimagine the procurement function and prepare for potential roadblocks are highly valuable. CEOs have to focus on immediate issues, e.g., quarterly earnings calls. CPOs can serve a vital role by looking to the future, preparing scenarios for potential supply chain disruptions behind the scenes or supporting opportunities, seeking new data and insights, and quickly identifying and proposing future solutions. If a CPO can execute this effectively, the CEO will develop greater trust in their strategic abilities.
- **Normalize pushback:** Sometimes, demonstrating expertise involves offering an alternative perspective or solution that remains aligned with CEO objectives — something that requires and ultimately cultivates trust. Normalize providing pushback by first challenging the CEO when you have high confidence in your recommendation. Then, propose more radical changes once the CEO has seen your track record of providing solid advice.
- **Support your recommendations with the right data:** CPOs possess critical insights into the supply base and market conditions that CEOs need for effective decision making. To provide the right data, CPOs should anticipate the CEO's informational needs, focusing on how procurement drives enterprise priorities and ensuring alignment with other C-suite peers. Present concise, jargon-free insights tailored to the audience, maintaining objectivity while offering informed opinions drawn from experience and instinct. (See Table 4.)

**Table 4: Steps to Demonstrate Your Expertise**

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Action items	How
Become a strategic outcome-driven leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Establish clear, outcome-based principles aligned with business goals.</li> <li>■ Position procurement as a strategic growth enabler, not just a cost-cutting function.</li> </ul>
Become an intentional futurist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Look beyond immediate issues to anticipate supply chain roadblocks.</li> <li>■ Prepare scenarios and estimate the outcome of potential risks while the CEO focuses on short-term priorities.</li> <li>■ Identify future business solutions with new data and insights proactively.</li> </ul>
Normalize pushback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Start by challenging the CEO only when highly confident in the recommendations.</li> <li>■ Build a track record of solid advice before proposing more radical changes.</li> <li>■ Demonstrate expertise through thoughtful, strategic challenges.</li> </ul>
Support with the right data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Present concise, jargon-free data focused on enterprise priorities.</li> <li>■ Balance objectivity with informed opinions drawn from experience.</li> </ul>

Source: Gartner

## Evidence

### <sup>1</sup> 2023 Gartner Executive Leadership Team Dynamics — Win As An Executive Team

**Survey:** This survey was conducted from 5 May through 28 June 2023, to discover how executive leadership dynamics affect business value. Qualified respondents were CEOs or direct reports to CEOs and came from companies with at least \$1 billion in annual revenue. In all, 140 executive committee members from North America (n = 69), Europe (n = 41) and Asia (n = 30) participated. Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiment of the respondents and companies surveyed.

<sup>2</sup> **2025 Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey.** This survey was conducted to examine CEO and senior business executive views on current business issues, as well as some areas of technology agenda impact. The survey was conducted from June 2024 through November 2024, with questions about the period from 2024 through 2026. One-quarter of the survey sample was collected from June through July 2024, and three-quarters was collected from October through November 2023. In total, 456 actively employed CEOs and other senior executive business leaders qualified and participated. The research was collected via 421 online surveys and 35 telephone interviews. The sample mix by role was CEOs (n = 303); CFOs (n = 95); COOs or other C-level executives (n = 39); and chairs, presidents or board directors (n = 19). The sample mix by location was North America (n = 194), Europe (n = 118), Asia/Pacific (n = 91), Latin America (n = 35), the Middle East (n = 15) and South Africa (n = 2). The sample mix by size was \$50 million to less than \$250 million (n = 32), \$250 million to less than \$1 billion (n = 122), \$1 billion to less than \$10 billion (n = 200) and \$10 billion or more (n = 102). Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

<sup>3</sup> **2024 Gartner Chief Procurement Officer Survey.** This survey aimed to explore where and how organizations need to invest to advance their procurement functions. The survey was conducted online from 26 June through 29 July 2024 among 258 respondents from North America (n = 126), Western Europe (n = 80), and Asia/Pacific (n = 52). Respondents were from organizations with enterprisewide annual revenue of \$250 million or more in 2023. The industries surveyed included communications and media, education, government, healthcare providers, insurance, manufacturing, natural resources, retail, services, transportation and logistics, utilities, and wholesale trade. Qualifying respondents held job roles tied to the sourcing and procurement function and were involved in decision making regarding sourcing and procurement, either leading or being part of the leadership team. Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

## Document Revision History

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**Table 1: Steps to Be a Collaborative Partner**





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- Open dialogue and active listening.
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Table 4: Steps to Demonstrate Your Expertise

Action items	How
Become a strategic outcome-driven leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Establish clear, outcome-based principles aligned with business goals.</li><li>■ Position procurement as a strategic growth enabler, not just a cost-cutting function.</li></ul>
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