

Demonstrating Value > Communicating Value >

The Multi-Year Security Narrative: From Baseline to Capability to Impact

How CSOs evolve the security narrative as credibility and program maturity grow

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Most Chief Security Officers know they owe senior leadership an annual update. Far fewer feel confident that the story they tell truly resonates. Too often, the annual security narrative becomes a familiar exercise: an updated org chart, a list of activities, a recap of incidents—repackaged year after year with a new date on the cover.

The issue isn't effort, it's framing

An effective security story is not static. It should evolve deliberately as the program matures, the business changes, and leadership expectations increase. When told well, the annual narrative reinforces credibility, demonstrates relevance, and earns continued investment. When told poorly, it fades into background noise—regardless of how hard the team worked.

Know your audience

An effective annual security story is also shaped by who is listening. Senior leaders rarely need operational detail; they need clarity on risk, priorities, and business implications. Boards tend to focus on oversight, enterprise risk exposure, and assurance that critical

protections are in place. Business leaders, meanwhile, want to understand how security supports operations and enables growth.

The narrative should therefore be calibrated to the audience. Frame security in terms of risk, resilience, and business outcomes rather than internal processes or technical activity.

Why annual security stories stall

Many CSOs default to what is easiest to explain: structure and activity. While necessary, these elements rarely answer the questions executives care most about:

- How does security help manage enterprise risk?
- Where does security influence decisions that matter?
- What changed this year because this program exists?

If the annual update doesn't address those questions, leadership disengages, not because security lacks value, but because the story hasn't evolved.

The year-over-year narrative journey

Strong security programs tend to follow a consistent storytelling arc.

Year 1: Establish "where we are"

Early in a CSO's tenure, the goal is credibility. This year's story should focus on the operating environment, enterprise risks, constraints, and gaps. The intent is not justification, it is alignment. Leaders need a shared understanding of the reality the program is managing.

Year 2: Clarify "what we do"

Once the baseline is understood, the narrative should shift from structure to services. This is where CSOs translate security into a business-facing service model: how the organization engages security, what decisions security influences, and how value is delivered, without drowning leadership in operational detail.

Year 3: Demonstrate "the impact we have"

By year three, the narrative must pivot to outcomes. Activity metrics give way to impact: risks reduced, losses avoided, resilience strengthened, and business initiatives enabled. This is where security earns continued investment by showing what changed because the program exists.

Year 4 and beyond: Sharpen the focus

Mature programs narrow the story rather than expand it. Fewer themes, stronger measures, and clearer tradeoffs signal confidence. Each year builds on the last, turning the narrative into a cumulative journey rather than a reset.

Make the story cumulative

Strong CSOs treat annual storytelling as refinement, not reinvention. Prior themes don't disappear; they mature. Governance becomes decision velocity. New services become measurable outcomes. When leaders see continuity, progress feels real and credible.

Show value, don't just describe it

Dashboards show activity; scorecards show impact. Annual storytelling demands the latter. A strong security scorecard includes a small number of enterprise-recognized risks, clear ownership and influence points, and outcome-based measures aligned to business priorities.

What to stop doing

If your annual update still leads with organizational charts year after year, you're explaining what you are and not why you matter. Most executives don't fund structure; they fund outcomes.

The CSO takeaway

Annual security storytelling is a leadership discipline, not a reporting obligation. The most effective CSOs treat it as a multi-year journey, from baseline, to capability, to impact and then sharpen the message as credibility grows. When done well, the annual narrative doesn't just inform leadership; it shapes how the business understands the value of security.

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