

Executive Presence: Getting It and Keeping It

Perspective on People:
By Karen Friedman

Executive Presence is the latest leadership buzzword. Like shovels to snow, apparently you can't conquer one without the other. Websites scream it. Search engines look for it. Coaching firms promise to teach you how to get it. So, what is it anyway? Articles and self-proclaimed experts categorize executive presence as 'gravitas', 'charisma', people who have 'it' and those who can 'command a room'.

They say you need to speak up, use big gestures, stand tall, have a strong handshake, dress well and make eye contact to acquire presence. While all of these traits contribute to presence, appearance and style will not define your leadership style. If acquiring presence was that easy, we'd all be basking in it.

I believe if you want to develop presence, the starting point is to be present. That means take your eyes away from your smartphone when someone is talking to you. When you walk down the hallways at work, make eye contact with people. And when you're conversing with someone on the phone,

give them your full attention which means no e-mailing, web surfing or texting.

Presence is about being in the moment. It's about broadening your current strengths, not trying to change who you are. So let's dispel a few myths. People are not born with presence. What works in one situation doesn't work in all situations. You don't have to change your personality to project presence. And just because you gain a few presence traits doesn't mean you get to keep them forever.

Presence is communicating your entire being. It's about learning how to connect with different listeners by adapting your tone and style to the moment. It's about appearing positive, decisive, confident, and deliberate in your actions. It's about acknowledging the opinions of others even if you disagree. It's about creating long lasting consistent impressions over time. In short, it's about perceptions.

So, how do you get it?



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You're on your way because you've just mastered step one which is understanding what presence is and what it is not. Step two is strengthening your communication skills. Then you can move to step three

which is the physical aspect of communicating both verbally and non-verbally.

Communication

A few years ago I worked with a man we'll call John. His boss said John was smart, dedicated, hardworking and a valued team player. But he also confided John was not leadership material. When I asked why, he said he couldn't put his finger on it but John lacked command and authority. He said he didn't have a strong presence.

He was right, but John didn't struggle with physical presence. He was a weak communicator. When asked a question, he backed into the answer. Instead of responding concisely and directly, he buried the lead. When asked his opinions on important matters, he sought approval with tag lines and inquiries at the end of sentences such as "don't you think" or "wouldn't you agree?"

While some may consider this polite or collaborative, it can also signal a lack of confidence. John would also use words such as "I think" or "I believe" rather than conveying more confidence by using assertive phrases such as "we are confident that" or "we expect" or "it is our position".

Instead of showing up as a leader, he came across as uncertain and lacking conviction. Eventually with practice and coaching, John conquered his challenges and now leads hundreds of people. But it took years of work and as he will attest, the journey to maintain presence will require lifelong practice.

John also learned how to frame what he wanted to say from someone else's perspective which is often a very difficult task. Instead of barreling through your own agenda which so many do, it's essential to use examples and help people understand what your vision or information means to them.

Physical Presence

Eye contact, posture, open gestures and facial expressions are hallmarks of being physically present. But so is passion. When you communicate your message with enthusiasm and passion, not only will your body language be more animated, but your voice will also reflect that tone. Instead of sounding flat or monotone, you will be more conversational and naturally project, take pauses and vary your pitch and tone. Even if you're not naturally charismatic, people who communicate in a way that makes others listen exude presence.

Strong leaders sharpen their skills on a daily basis. To them, developing leadership presence is far more than a buzz word. It's striving for authenticity and excellence which go hand in hand.

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