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# Executive Presence

## Still Don't Know What Executive Presence Means? We Have You Covered

BY ROB SALAFIA

**E**xecutive presence is an element of leadership that is easy to recognize but difficult to develop. In fact, in a recent study by the Center for Talent Innovation, it was found that feedback on executive presence is often contradictory and confusing, and that 81% of those who are instructed to improve their executive presence are unclear on how to act on it.

For instance, can you relate to any of the situations below?

- You have been passed up for an executive level promotion—even though your record demonstrates that you are smart enough and capable enough. No one can put a finger on exactly what the issue is, but it is enough to hold you back.
- Your boss or someone higher in the food chain has mentioned to you that, “you might consider improving your executive presence.” You walk away thinking to yourself, *ok, now what?*
- You are a manager with a team member who you know has the capability to shine but is struggling to find their voice. How do you help them?

Having spent the last 20 years helping executives develop executive presence, I have found the process to be something that people (regardless of gender, industry, country, and culture) struggle to understand and develop.

# As anyone who has started this journey will tell you, 'knowing thyself' is no small undertaking

## Why is developing executive presence important?

It's simple. Within organizations we are evaluated by how well we show up and navigate the work environment and culture. Those in charge of making promotion decisions need to confidently answer questions such as "Do we see this person as promotable?", "Do others listen to his or her ideas?", and "Will this person be a good fit on the team and be able to influence the decision-making process?"

Essentially, executive presence is "the impact that we have on others within the specific environment that we have chosen to operate". Executive presence is the differentiator between "I trust you to do your job exceptionally" and "I trust you to lead others to carry out a vision exceptionally." The first one focuses on the capability of the individual contributor or expert. The second is an assessment of someone's capability to think beyond their task and step into leading others and the organization. The question is: do we have an accurate picture of ourselves? Do we perceive and experience ourselves in the same way that others perceive and experience us?

I have been coaching a mid-career woman who has been working for a growing consulting firm for almost 20 years. Not so long ago she had a conversation with her boss about moving from her role as the company's director of business administration to that of a managing director. This was a big jump and one that she felt she deserved. However, a couple of months later she was notified that she would not be getting a promotion and that she had essentially reached the top of her career track within the organization.



In the moment she was furious! She expressed this frustration to her boss who explained that it was out of his hands. He suggested that she bring it up directly with the senior partners. Of course, she would need to do this on her own.

When speaking with me, she explained that she “does it all” in the office. In addition to her normal duties, she would clean the staff

room, take charge of special events, and even deliver the bosses’ shirts to the dry cleaner.

In her mind Julie believed that the more she “did” for the company the more value she had. This appeared to be a belief she carried without external validation: her boss, flummoxed, had even commented, “Julie, you should not be doing these things, leave those to the admin staff.” But she could not see the issue.

## **Executive Presence has both internal and external components**

### ***Internal Self-Awareness***

We have all heard of the Delphic maxim, ‘Know thyself’. But as anyone who has started this journey will tell you, knowing thyself is no small undertaking. At its essence self-knowledge or ‘selfhood’ is not a static

state, but a process of becoming. In some cases, a person may need to experience a critical setback in order to 'wake up' to what they truly want, what is in the way, and make the transformational shift necessary to get there.

This is what was happening for Julie. Her boss had been sending her signals that she needed to show up as a director. She needed to begin to think and act like someone who could influence the senior leaders of the organization. She needed to demonstrate executive presence.

It was not until she took a step back that Julie recognized the pattern in her behaviour. She was only doing what she had always been taught growing up: ***Do more! Keep busy! Make yourself useful!*** She was a hard worker, but since she appeared to invest a lot of time into performing day-to-day activities and staying busy rather than seeing the big picture, the powers that be could not comfortably promote her to a leadership role.

Now, to her credit, she had assembled an excellent admin team. She took a keen interest in recognizing the gifts and talents of each person on the team and helped them to grow and develop. She just needed to pay a bit more attention to what she truly wanted (to be promoted to a more influential role) and figure out how to get there.

Together we activated in her a growth mindset, where she was actively exploring, experimenting and experiencing a greater sense of authenticity and genuineness in her daily work life. Sometimes, this means taking a hard look at ourselves.

To achieve a sense of selfhood, we must engage in a discovery process of understanding who we have been, who we are, and who we want or aspire to be. It begins with an exploration of our values, strengths/weaknesses, motivations, and passions based on our prior behaviour and experiences.



Another important step in the process of enhancing our executive presence is to become aware of how reactive or responsive we are in specific situations. We need to reflect upon these experiences objectively and build an awareness of what we were observing, thinking, feeling and wanting in these situations. We improve our behaviour and gain a larger sense of

ourselves by developing the skills of emotional self-awareness and self-regulation.

With Julie, we examined her reaction to being told that she had reached the career ceiling in her firm. Where was this rooted and how could she channel her frustration and anger into her own development? I encouraged her to shift from an internal dialogue of “why is this happening to me?”, to a more objective one that asks, “what is happening?” and “what needs to happen?”

When we make this shift, we start to move forward and grow. In Julie’s case, she was finally ready to leave behind a self-concept that no longer served her and began to embrace a larger view of herself. One imbued with executive presence.

One more area of internal self-awareness is self-efficacy or confidence. Psychologist Albert Bandura has defined self-efficacy as a belief in one's ability to succeed in a specific situation or accomplish a task.

I worked with another senior executive in a program who repeatedly said that he was not a good storyteller. While sitting in the circle he kept telling the group that in his culture they did not tell stories, and thus he was not going to be good at it. He was blocking the process. I then asked him a couple of questions to help him recall a personal experience when he challenged his boundaries. He quickly came up with a story but was still sceptical about his ability to share it. While working with a peer coach in a storytelling exercise, he received specific and positive feedback and had a breakthrough. He realized that he had been holding himself back.

He told a story to the group of a time when he was detained at an airport. He walked us through his experience one moment at a time. As he spoke you could see him open-up and be fully expressive. His voice, body and emotions were fully engaged. And we were with him every step of the way.

All told, the balance of authenticity, emotional self-regulation and self-confidence are at the heart of developing a powerful executive presence.

## **External Self-Awareness**

Executive presence can be best understood in how we show up in relation to others. As we develop and expand our presence, we notice the impact that it has. When we put our attention to this impact, we develop empathy and learn to expand into the experience of others. Our growth as a leader and effective communicator arises out of this awareness.

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## Layers of Experience

Our practice of developing our executive presence can grow if we think of it as layers of experience. Consider the following, executive presence is:

- How others experience us
- How others experience themselves when they are with us
- The story they tell about us when we are gone

### ***How exactly do others experience us?***

It happens on many levels. All levels are interconnected, but we tend to have one that is more dominant in the way others experience us.

As you read through the list think about how you experience someone that you know well.

- **Energetically.** Some of us are nervous nellys, while others cool cucumbers
- **Physically.** Some of us project an overbearing presence based on their physique, others are like wisps in the wind
- **Emotionally.** Some of us wear our emotions on our sleeves, while others wear a poker face
- **Vocally.** Some of us have a deep and resonant voices, while others struggle to project their voices across a table
- **Intellectually.** Some of us might have a need to be the smartest person in the room, while others understand that leadership is about drawing out the best in others.

The most authentic and powerful presence is one where others experience you as both confident and approachable.

### ***How do we experience ourselves in someone else's presence?***

This is a powerful concept to reflect upon. It depends on many factors like context, hierarchy, and power. Let's look at it on a basic level. Think about someone senior in your organization that you interact with on a regular basis. How do they make you feel? Engaged, encouraged and empowered, or, discouraged, fearful, and marginalized?

Where do you think this is rooted? Is it something in you that needs to be addressed, or is it something that originates in them? Or, a combination of both?

### ***Are you aware of the story that others tell about you when you are gone?***

In the end, our executive presence becomes our personal brand. It is what we become known for.

### **Where do you start?**

Below are a few exercises that will help you to build a more compelling and authentic executive presence:

**LEADERS WHO EXHIBIT EXECUTIVE PRESENCE ARE:**

- *Fully present and engaged* – eye contact, focus
- *Composed under stress* – calm and poised
- *Comfortable in their own skin* – puts others at ease
- *Confident and approachable* – balanced
- *Authentic and self-aware* – values based
- *Relatable and connecting* – empathetic and caring
- *Strategic and inspiring* – they are great communicators
- *Decisive and empathetic* – take into consideration the impact on others when making hard decisions

***Breathing exercises cultivate patience and manage anxiety***

*Try out my three-word phrase: Breathe-Connect-Land™*

- Take a deep breath in and count to 4
- Connect with your balance
- Breathe out and count to 4 and land inside of yourself
- Do this several times and then pause. Do you feel more relaxed?

***Why would we do this?***

- Our days are packed with meetings. Often, we carry negative or unresolved feelings from one interaction into our next one. This is not to your advantage. Learn to take a moment to let go of what you are thinking and feeling, find a pause point, then choose how you would like to - need to show up in the next. Success will follow.

***Develop a vocal cadence***

- Clear and powerful vocal presence is based on a foundation of breath.
- Learn how to breathe in and speak out.
- Try using the same 3-word phrase: Breathe-Connect-Land™
- Take a breath in, turn and give someone your eyes and connect with them, then land your point.
- It takes effort and practice to overcome ineffective habits (such as speaking too quickly or softly), but doing so will pay big dividends in how people experience you and remember your messages.



### ***Physical presence – what message do you send without saying a word?***

- One of my clients in a global consulting firm had a habit of folding his arms and holding a stern expression on his face. Internally, he was focused on high execution. Externally, others were experiencing him as overbearing and intellectually superior.
- He put into practice a simple way of showing up: Be Present and Open.
- This involves letting your arms hang at your sides. Then turn your palms out, open your shoulders and allow a smile to emerge.
- Try it out in private first, then put it into practice for yourself. See what happens.

It is important to note that in our effort to demonstrate confidence, we may inadvertently begin to become over-bearing. This can show up as dominating the conversation, giving all the instructions and not allowing others to speak. Leaders who are aware of the impact of their presence on others balance confidence, engagement, and inspiring elements with a sense of approachability, self-awareness and relatability.



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