Executive Presence: The Critical Success Factor
~by Dee Elliott

Whether you call it charisma, confidence or compelling leadership, executive presence is the new corporate “it” factor.

We’re talking about more than making a great first impression. Presence is multifaceted, builds over time, and is reflected in everything you say, feel and do.

In today’s competitive business environment, executive presence can make or break your ability to influence others during periods of uncertainty and change. It encourages people to seek you out and opens doors.

The concept of presence is nebulous for most people, but we all have it to a degree and we know it when we see it in others. But most of us are unsure of how to increase our presence and develop it in others. Many people assume it’s about showmanship, charm, unabashed confidence and smooth speaking skills, but this only scratches the surface.

The New Success Factor

Corporations are feverishly seeking individuals with presence whose potential can be developed, partly because of the heightened responsibilities of self-managed teams and work groups. People are being evaluated for presence in numerous routine business situations, including hiring, promotions, performance reviews and compensation bonuses.

Organizations are retaining coaches to help people cultivate it. Presence has become a key differentiator and critical success factor for today’s professionals.

Fortunately, a spate of new books do a good job of covering the topic. Three of the best ones are:


Each book provides valuable information on the essential components, along with practical exercises to help you build your own personal brand of presence.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett, founder and CEO of the Center for Talent Innovation, surveyed 4,000 college-educated professionals (including 268 senior executives) to find out what coworkers and bosses look for when evaluating executive presence.

Three criteria proved critical:
1. How you act (gravitas): 67%
2. How you speak (communication): 28%
3. How you look (appearance): 5%

Gravitas signals intellectual expertise, but also confidence and credibility. Senior executives picked *projecting confidence and grace under fire* as presence’s most important qualities.

You communicate authority through your *speaking skills* and *ability to command a room*, the top presence picks by senior leaders. Eye contact matters enormously, according to executives surveyed, as do voice, bearing and body language.

The 5% importance attributed to appearance is misleading. Standards of appearance for leaders matter, but those being judged for executive presence already meet entry-level requirements. After that, polish and grooming contribute somewhat.

Research from Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital suggests that colleagues size up your competence, likability and trustworthiness in 250 milliseconds, based simply on looks.

First impressions matter, of course, but after that, it’s up to you to fill in the rest of the story by exuding executive presence.

**An Inside Job**

Presence comes from within. Your mindset creates the platform from which you speak, act and express emotions. Effective leaders must be confident, energetic, empathic, inspirational, credible and authentic.

Begin by paying attention to how you “show up” and go about your day. How do you:

- Connect with people?
- Express your feelings?
- Listen?
- Behave?
- Inspire others?

Every move you make on the corporate stage merges to form your leadership impact.

To develop presence, start by clarifying your intentions. Ask yourself:

- Which core values and guiding purpose truly matter (for you, for the company)?
- Who do I intend to be (as an individual, as a member of the company)?
- How do I intend to contribute?
- What will I do now? What will I do next?
Intention, Connection, Inspiration

At the core of leadership is connection with others. The relationship you have with your subordinates determines how effectively you’ll influence them toward desired outcomes.

If you foster trust and empathy in your relationships, you’ll no doubt build higher-quality connections. But authentic connections can be tricky: Access to others is granted, and not automatically. A leadership position may ensure obedience (if you’re lucky), but it doesn’t guarantee trusted connections.

Winning over hearts and minds requires a nuanced approach to each individual. There are no timesaving ways to accomplish this, nor should you do it simply because “it’s good for business.” Making individual connections is the only way to have a finger on the pulse of corporate culture and keep communication lines open.

Leaders who foster connection and approachability encourage people to speak truth to power. If you come across as super-confident and über-competent, you may intimidate people. There’s no room for idea-sharing when all of the power clearly resides with the leader. You must show some vulnerability and humanity to facilitate connection.

Of course, too much vulnerability can be read as weakness. There needs to be a balance. When you show competency and your humanity, others begin to trust and connect. What makes a leader or colleague memorable to us is this sense of connection.

Presence starts deep within you: with intentions, self-knowledge and self-confidence. Connect with your people to find common goals and mutual benefits. Use empathy, trust and connection to motivate and inspire others.

Presence is most effective when it’s ingrained in your muscle/brain memory and put into practice automatically.

The PRES Model of Leadership Presence

The three previously mentioned books offer different models for developing presence, albeit with some overlap.

Lubar and Halpern developed the “PRES” model in Leadership Presence:

- **P = Presence**: the ability to be completely in the moment and flexible enough to handle the unexpected
- **R = Reaching Out**: the ability to build relationships with others through empathy, listening and authentic connection
- **E = Expressiveness**: the ability to express feelings and emotions appropriately by using all available means (words, voice, body, face) to deliver one congruent message
- **S = Self-Knowing**: the ability to accept yourself, be authentic and reflect your values in your decisions and actions
These elements build upon each other and contribute to establishing overall presence. There are interior and exterior aspects for each component. Presence starts with mindset and radiates outward towards others.

Also important is what the PRES model is not:

- **Being Present**—not pretentious
- **Reaching Out**—not looking down
- **Being Expressive**—not impressive
- **Being Self-Knowing**—not self-absorbed

Self-knowledge separates leadership presence from self-centered charisma. You must understand your values and ensure your actions conform to them (words and deeds). Only then can you inspire others to act similarly.

Few leaders talk openly about their core values and guiding purpose. Your executive presence depends on how you communicate your intentions and purpose, as well as how you spend your energy and enthusiasm.

Most of us need to step out of our comfort zones and be more expressive about our intentions, feelings, passions and values. Perhaps we fear appearing too vulnerable.

Finding the right balance of competency and humanity, reaching out to others, building trust and expressing empathy lead to stronger executive presence.