



Leadership presence is a vital ingredient for career success

Consider these nine tips for making a strong impression on others — to land a job or win a promotion, secure resources, close a deal, or inspire change.

By Raju Venkataraman, FCMA, CGMA

Imagine you are in a meeting where an important matter is being discussed. You say something pertinent, but it does not land. Minutes later someone else says pretty much the same thing. This time, eyes light up, heads nod in approval, and it becomes a catalyst for further discussions.

What is the reason for this difference in how the point was received? Why was your contribution overlooked and the other person listened to?

The answer, often, is leadership presence — the quality of making a strong impression on others.

What is leadership presence?

Leadership or executive presence creates impactful moments and experiences that enable you to quickly gain and sustain credibility, influence, and trust. To an extent it is about impressions, both first and those that develop over time.

This presence can be observed as the ability to inspire confidence in others. It may also be seen as possessing an image of confidence, competence, and trustworthiness. While having leadership presence does mean enjoying a positive perception by others, it is not a made-up, cultivated image but rather an authentically expressed persona.

Why is this presence important?

Sometime in 2001, my then boss at the Walt Disney Co. and I were on an audio conference call with senior colleagues from the Disney Asia-Pacific regional office in Hong Kong. Disagreeing with a point made by the folks on the other side of the phone, I tried to whisper to my boss on the sidelines. Exasperated, he pressed the mute button, told me sharply, “Raju, for heaven’s sake, SPEAK UP,” unmuted, and continued the call.

I was taken aback, but the lesson was not lost on me. While I had always been impactful in one-on-one situations, I tended to be less sure of myself in large group situations or when senior stakeholders were involved. Does that sound familiar? With my boss’s advice, I realised this could be a huge impediment in my career progress.

While capability and potential are the fundamental drivers of career progress, “presence” is a factor in being noticed, influencing others, and getting things done in the organisation. Your leadership presence determines the opportunities you get. And the opportunities you get drive your personal growth trajectory.

According to research by Tracom Group conducted mainly among HR, talent management, and learning and development practitioners, 51% of

respondents said that executive presence is an accelerator that propels a career forward by differentiating individuals from others. Further, 77% of respondents agreed that those with high levels of executive presence progress quickly in their careers.

You know it when you see it

In the Tracom Group study, 51% of respondents said executive presence is difficult to define, but only 19% said it is difficult to spot.

We’ve all heard the term “grace under pressure”. Easy to imagine, difficult to practise. Let me go back even further to the beginning of my career, when, like any excitable young executive, I was eager to exercise my managerial authority and issue instructions. My overzealousness would likely have landed me in trouble had it not been for the steadying hand of another boss, who taught me the basics of managing people and handling pressure. With other role models throughout my career, and through continuous practice, I went on to acquire the reputation of a tough-but-fair person.

I also had very limited sartorial tastes in the early part of my career, which aligned with my value system of “looks don’t matter”. My wife, and then a friend and colleague, opened my eyes to the fact



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that it is not about being good-looking or dressing in the latest fashion but about being presentable and appropriate — showing you care — and that it can boost your confidence and the impression you make on others. While I never became a full convert, I made substantial improvements to my physical appearance.

These instances from my career illustrate my learning that these three strands of personality — how you speak and communicate, how you act and inspire confidence, and how groomed you are — are crucial components of executive presence.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett, an economist and author of *Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success*, explains this as:

- **How one speaks:** Communication is how you interact with people, how

you present yourself to highlight your talent, knowledge, and skill. In a survey Hewlett conducted for the book, 28% of 268 senior executives considered communication crucial for executive presence.

- **How one acts:** Gravitas is signalling that you have the confidence and credibility (including technical competence) to get your point across and create buy-in, staying composed and in the moment. Sixty-seven per cent of the survey respondents suggested that gravitas was crucial for executive presence, Hewlett wrote in her book.
- **How one looks:** Appearance is how you present yourself physically, including your body language. Appearance is a combination of good posture, essential grooming, and appropriate dressing.

The core skill for executive presence is, of course, communication. Some years after my 2001 wake-up call referred to above, I was sponsored as a high-potential talent to attend a presentation skills programme at Disney's Burbank, California, headquarters, which ramped

up my communication with presentation and storytelling skills.

Building leadership presence

What can we do to cultivate this presence?

After that conference call incident in 2001, I initially despaired that I just did not have that secret sauce, but as I sought advice and read up, I learned that presence is not some innate quality that you either have or do not have. Instead, executive presence is a set of characteristics, attitudes, and behaviours that you can learn, as I did, which will enable you to command attention and inspire others.

As a leadership and career coach over the past six years, I have had the opportunity to help my clients grow their executive presence, create a favourable impact, and advance in their respective careers. From my own journey and my work with coaching clients, here are practical tips that you can use to develop your leadership presence:

Be intentional about what and how you communicate

Whether it's a conversation, a presentation, or a meeting, ask yourself two key questions before you start: Who is my audience? What is my purpose or goal?

To communicate effectively, you want to try to match your words, your tone, and your understanding with the needs, concerns, and expectations of your audience. You communicate differently with your assistant manager than you do with the audit committee of the board of directors.

Whether you're speaking to one person or a larger audience, consider the level of their knowledge or understanding on the subject matter. What is the posture your audience might be bringing to the presentation you are giving? What do you want them to take away from your presentation? What outcome do you want for them, for yourself, and for your relationship?

A simple trick of jotting down your answers to the above before you go into a meeting or conversation will help you feel more comfortable in front of a crowd and communicate more effectively.

Speak up in group meetings

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profitable. Do your homework and learn more about these fundamentals, and then do not hesitate to express your viewpoint. The leadership readiness of midlevel executives is measured in part by their willingness to speak up in meetings. Of course, there are times when it is better to convey certain points in one-on-one meetings rather than in a group meeting, so you need to be strategic about when you speak up in addition to what you say.

Learn to speak in an 'influential' voice

What does that mean?

- Whether writing or speaking, keep things simple, succinct, and to the point.
- Use short, crisp sentences when speaking. Be clear and concise. Avoid using filler words (easier said than done, but doable with practice and an accountability partner).
- Use voice modulation (volume, pacing, pitch, inflection, pausing, tone). For example, to emphasise something, change your tone; to draw attention, use a softer tone to draw people in.
- Be a good listener.

Commit to what you communicate and be trustworthy

Stand up, speak up, follow up. Even if others don't agree with your views, they expect to see consistency between what you say and what you do. People quickly see through inconsistent leaders who change to benefit their narrow self-interests and trample on others on their way to the top.

Display a sense of light-heartedness and some spontaneity

Allow yourself to laugh at things, and at yourself, and stay open to witticisms from others. Light-heartedness is the language of leadership and confidence.

Build a strong network and your expert power by helping people

It's not enough to be good at your job; make sure other people know it. One way of showing you are capable is to proactively help a colleague with an issue they're struggling with. Don't forget to follow up and stay in touch.

Project flexibility and capability

As the CFO, I would remind my finance team that we do not run the business, but

Leaders with presence demonstrate composure and quiet confidence when the stakes are high.

we do provide the advice and options to run the business. When faced with a difficult ask from your business counterparts, consider the various ways to get to "yes". Once they know you will do your best to find a way forward, they will approach you and be more amenable to listen to you, even if your ultimate answer is "no".

Practise to maintain poise under pressure. In a high-pressure situation, your team will be looking to you for emotional cues. When you're feeling pressured, it is easy to catastrophise your situation and imagine every possible horrible outcome that could possibly come from a failure right now. Tell yourself there are solutions for every problem and begin the process of thinking of what those could be, or even better, take a minute and jot down some thoughts. Identify whose help you can use, and consult with them as needed. It's very effective to take a few moments and just breathe slowly and deeply. Oxygen helps the brain process emotion. Leaders with presence demonstrate composure and quiet confidence when the stakes are high.

Dress for success

Research shows that visual appearance makes the first impression, which holds a lot of weight. Dressing for success does not always call for a suit, but dress yourself according to your role, the organisation's culture, and the position and reputation you aspire to.

Use powerful body language

Leadership presence is conveyed by two sets of nonverbal signals:

- Power posture, which means you display a powerful presence by standing or sitting tall with head straight and shoulders back. Own your space.
- Empathy cues such as a smile, positive eye contact, and open palm gestures convey likeability and

warmth. Leaders with presence are empathetic to others' situations. They show humility, grace, and kindness when necessary.

What is digital executive presence?

With the digital workplace here to stay, it has become essential to project digital executive presence. That means:

- If business casual attire is acceptable in your office, do not go more casual just because you are working virtually.
- Adequate lighting and a good microphone will ensure that your presence registers online.
- Unless it is a late night or an odd-hour call, turning your camera off (because you didn't take the time to dress properly) is not the sign of a great leader.
- Amplify your leadership presence with a powerful LinkedIn profile and use of online tools such as screen sharing, and video and presentation software.

Executive presence is an essential ingredient for success as a leader and needed to bag the job, win a promotion, secure the resources needed, close a deal, or inspire change. Building it is not a one-time exercise nor does it happen overnight. It takes concerted effort and practice sustained over time, along with a willingness to engage in self-reflection and self-improvement. ■

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