

## **Executive Presence: How to define, assess and cultivate it**

**By Suzanne Bates**

Executive presence is essential as the pace of business quickens, companies expand globally, markets grow more competitive, and change continues to dominate our lives. Leaders with strong executive presence will be the ones best prepared to guide their organizations through dauntingly rapid movement and complexity.

The so-called “soft side” of leadership presence is often dismissed, but research shows it is hard-wired to exceptional business results. It’s what allows leaders to align performance, drive change, and inspire above-and-beyond effort.

However, the murky, intangible notion of executive presence leaves many companies with a leadership blind spot. Most people say, “I know it when I see it!” Yet when pressed, they are unable to pin down *exactly* what “it” is!

### **The challenge: Defining executive presence**

After many years of working in the field of executive presence and influence, my firm and I set out to close this gap and define executive presence. If we could define it we could talk about it with clarity, measure it with accuracy, and guide leaders to some real “aha” moments.

We undertook extensive research, diving into relevant theory and empirical studies in management, communications, psychology and social action theory, written by authorities in these fields across the globe. From our research we mapped out 3 dimensions – character, substance and style – that leaders need to mobilize an organization and sustain goal-oriented action. Within these dimensions are 15 distinct facets that are proven to drive engagement, alignment and performance.

#### **Character**

- *Authenticity* (being real, being transparent)
- *Integrity* (fidelity to one’s values)
- *Concern* (considerate, caring for/about)
- *Restraint* (moderation, reasonableness)
- *Humility* (openness to learning)

#### **Substance**

- *Practical wisdom* (practical insight and judgment)
- *Confidence* (self-possessed, decisiveness)
- *Composure* (calm, steadiness in a crisis)
- *Resonance* (attunement to others)
- *Vision* (strategic thinking, inspiring)

#### **Style**

- *Appearance* (looks the part, belongs)
- *Intentionality* (sustaining focus)

- *Inclusiveness* (welcoming of diverse points of view)
- *Interactivity* (listening and stimulating dialogue)
- *Assertiveness* (addressing issues)

### **Cultivating executive presence**

It's important to note that these qualities above are not immutable; you aren't a "type." Through feedback and coaching you can learn to strengthen and amplify these qualities.

In other words, you can *learn* to be a highly communicative, influential leader, one who inspires others to give their best effort, overcome difficult challenges and rally around a common purpose. Here are a few tips:

- Reflect on a quality you admire in someone, one that you would like to develop.
- Think of a specific time when that individual demonstrated the quality.
- Tell a friend, out loud, exactly what happened, why, and what enabled a positive interaction.
- Reflect on a situation that you'd like to approach differently.
- Try out a new way of doing it and see how it feels
- Ask for candid, specific feedback from people you trust

### **Learning from feedback**

Let's say people who know you well say that you're the real deal ("authenticity"). If asked, they'd tell others "What you see is what you get." However, you're new in a role, and after six months, lots of people have heard "rumors" about you but haven't had a chance to get to know you. They're viewing you as distant or hard to get to know. That's a valuable insight. You can now arrange your time to be present, to communicate more intentionally through virtual and in-person meetings, and to make it a point to reveal more about yourself in these communications.

As another example, if a leader's peers appreciate the way she solicits their opinions, but her direct reports say she seems too busy to stop, listen and hear them out ("concern") that could explain why they aren't bothering to brainstorm good ideas and share them with her. If the team admires a manager for making even daunting goals seem possible ("vision") but his boss doesn't see that fire in his belly, it could explain why he hasn't received funding for an innovative project.

We all have strengths, and sometimes we're not even aware that people view us as confident, visionary or resonant with others. Use feedback to leverage your strengths to develop in new areas. Don't just go to what needs to be *fixed*.

Developing your executive presence can be challenging, but it can be mastered with time, effort and coaching. The reward of this (sometimes formidable) journey is becoming that leader who others admire.

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