



Executive Presence: What It Is & How to Get It

Do you have executive presence? Here's how to tell.

By Stephen Long

“When executives with presence walk into the room, people think, ‘Now something good is going to happen,’” says Mark Sickles, an advisor to boards and teams. “These leaders are respected for the job they’re doing, not just the job they’re in.”

Executive presence has less to do with titles and hierarchy than with the competency that enables high performance to occur. Leaders with executive presence not only set strategy, they lead others to help them implement the plan. They think *and* do. They have the *judgment* to determine the right course of action and the *fortitude* to drive the implementation process to completion.

David Zumwalt, executive director of the University of the Virgin Islands Research and Technology Park Corporation (RTPark) says, “Executive presence arises from a multifaceted set of skills. The leader must exude authenticity (which includes confidence), competence, and the ability to engage emotionally as well.”

Can a leader acquire executive presence? The answer is yes. Follow these steps to develop it yourself.

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Build a Foundation

Experience and a successful track record are a good start. Without a strong performance background you’ll never acquire executive presence. Cultivating such a presence, though, involves more than just putting in time and delivering the numbers. Executive presence develops organically over time. Like the sun coming out from behind the clouds, executive presence will emerge gradually throughout your career.

Establish Trust

Rick Turner, president of Greenbrier Rail Services-Wheel Division, believes that trust is the cornerstone of the leader-follower relationship. Turner says, “Trust is based in degrees in the beginning of the relationship, then is eventually measured in black and white terms.” Again, performance is the primary driver.

In the beginning of the relation-

ship, most employees give the leader the benefit of the doubt. If the executive delivers, trust grows stronger, while if failure is experienced, trust withers. Both trust and distrust are developed by the rule of three—one instance is an aberration, two’s a trend, and three’s a law. After time and more evidence, trust is either firmly established or permanently lost based on whether people have seen consistent success or consistent failure.

Manage Yourself

Until executives can lead and manage themselves, they can’t manage and lead others. Self-management has two primary skill sets, one for the head—intellectual skills—and one for the heart—emotional skills. Leaders with executive presence have both a high IQ and a high level of emotional intelligence, often referred to as EQ.

It’s been proven that emotional skills such as confidence, discipline, and frustration tolerance are learn-

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A Recipe for Building Executive Presence

Every day, practice using your mind, heart, and hands. For your mind, learn something new each day. For your heart, list the things you're grateful for. For your hands, do something to help someone more vulnerable than you.

Leaders without self-management skills make decisions reflexively rather than reflectively.

able and that learning them makes a big difference in performance. Decisions based on fear and frustration rarely translate into productive actions.

John Fitzpatrick, president and CEO of Woodcraft Industries, studies his executives' level of self-awareness. "Insecure people are revealed under pressure. They fail to address their weakness because they fail to admit their weaknesses to themselves," says Fitzpatrick. And it affects their work. "Insecure people fail to prepare because they rely too heavily on their inherent talent rather than applying the fundamental need for hard work."

According to Fitzpatrick, leaders who lack self-management skills also lack skills in risk analysis. "They fail to consider the consequences of their decisions, positive and negative, and they're unable to predict what will happen next. They also lack decision-making discipline. They make decisions reflexively rather than reflectively," he says.

Manage Relationships

Empathy is an under-valued leadership skill. It's more than seeing things from another's viewpoint. It's recognizing people's strengths and weaknesses so you can foresee the roadblocks they'll face. Empathy is vital to seeing a situation's entirety.

Relationship management is the foundation for establishing a belief system within the organization, which cements organizational culture. High performers look for strong leaders who'll provide opportunities

to experience excellence.

Just as with self-management, relationship management is a matter of the heart and the head. Leaders set the direction with their heads and then engage others with their hearts. They digest abstract concepts and turn them into practical action. *This is where we're going and this is how we're going to get there.*

Do the Right Thing—Effectively and Authentically

Leaders with executive presence have the ability to align their personal ambitions to the organization's needs. They recognize their own talents and use them in a productive manner. They're passionate not only about their work but about continually learning and improving themselves in their off-hours, understanding that their personal behavior affects their reputation and ability to persuade people.

Great leaders strive to find solutions without cutting corners. "People won't go all-in if they don't trust the top guy," says Fitzpatrick. "Without trust, employees resort to 'survivalism,' paying more attention to their personal agendas than the organizational mission."

"Judgment and wisdom, character and courage—these are the things that effective leaders convey consistently," says Sickles. They use the head and the heart, together, in equal measure. Using the wisdom they gain from experience and continual learning, they know unerringly the right thing to do, and they do it. ■

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Your Resource Bank

For more on developing an executive presence, see these *Non-profit World* articles at www.snpo.org/members:

- **How Power Leaders Achieve the Impossible** (Vol. 27, No. 4)
- **12 Heuristics that Will Raise Your EQ** (Vol. 26, No. 4)
- **Zen and the Art of Team Building** (Vol. 20, No. 1)
- **How to Build a Framework for Strategic Alliances: It's All about Trust** (Vol. 26, No. 6)
- **Not Taught in Business Schools: How to Cultivate Creative Leading** (Vol. 24, No. 5)
- **Performance-Based Management Builds Funding & Support** (Vol. 23, No. 6)
- **Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow** (Vol. 23, No. 5)
- **12 Self-Renewal Steps for Executive Directors** (Vol. 15, No. 3)