

Tips for developing your executive presence

September 19th, 2016 By Jennifer V. Miller

Executive presence (EP) is a trait that all aspiring executives know they need, but its definition is murky at best. Is it charisma? Is it grace under pressure? Will those in charge of your career path agree that you have “it”? If you’re deemed lacking in executive presence, you might miss out on a promotion or other work opportunities. Rather than leave things to chance and hope that you have what it takes, it’s smart for you to take proactive steps to build this important leadership element. Here’s what you need to know to help you get started.

Crack the code on executive presence

Experts agree that executive presence is a combination of personal traits and outward behaviors that create an image of leadership competence and trustworthiness. Sylvia Ann Hewlett, the founder and CEO of the Center for Talent Innovation and author of *Executive Presence*, [defines](#) executive presence as how one acts (gravitas), speaks (communication) and looks (appearance). Executive coach [Scott Eblin](#), author of *The Next Level: What Insiders Know about Executive Success*, organizes leadership presence (as he calls it) into three categories: behaviors that impact a leader’s immediate self, team and the overall organization. No matter how you (or your organization) define executive presence, keep in mind that it’s a group of traits and behaviors that starts with you and emanates outward to create a perception of your ability to lead under any circumstance.

EP tip: Look for leaders who display executive presence. Joel Garfinkle, author of *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level*, advises that you closely watch respected leaders, noting how they dress, behave and talk. “What qualities and characteristics do they exhibit?” he writes. “How do they conduct meetings? How do they interact with those above them, with their peers and with their staff?”

Cultivate a foundation of quiet confidence

At its core, executive presence is about confidence, yet “the more confidence the better” isn’t necessarily the case. Harvard business school professor Amy Cuddy’s talk on presence is the second-most watched TED Talk of all time. In her book *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges*, she writes that a quiet confidence is best. “Presence is confidence without arrogance,” she explains. “Sadly, confidence is often confused with cockiness,” she continues. But the truly “present” executive is one who doesn’t need to trumpet his achievements. Instead, he or she has an internal resolve driven by what Cuddy describes as “a solid sense of self-worth [that demonstrates] healthy, effective ways of dealing with challenges and relationships.”

EP tip: Eblin suggests that leaders think in terms of behaviors to “pick up” and “let go”. For example, if you want to build your confidence in a certain situation, frame it in terms of, “I’m going to ‘pick up’ my confidence and ‘let go’ of my doubt about this situation.”

Presence is also about your mindset

In addition to outward behaviors, your mindset also helps you cultivate presence. A large part of how you come across to others is driven by your personal belief in your abilities. Speaking at the [WorkHuman](#) conference, Cuddy told the audience, “Presence reveals itself when you believe your story,” likening a lack of belief to “trying to sell something you don’t believe in”. Yet, it’s not about “faking” your abilities. Rather, as Cuddy says, it’s about “believing in and revealing the abilities you truly have . . . and shedding whatever is blocking you from expressing who you are.” Belief in yourself leads to more confidence, which in turn gives you presence.

EP tip: [Dana Theus](#) is an executive coach who works with high-achievers. She finds that even highly confident individuals sometimes experience a temporary faltering of belief in their abilities. Theus suggests that you “co-opt your inner critic and make it a trusted advisor”. Have a conversation with your inner voice of fear to discover the negative truth it's harping on such as, “I don't have the educational degree that qualifies me for this”. Then ask your inner voice to give you an equally true statement that is positive such as, “I have more than enough experience to do this”. Share your positive truth out loud with a trusted mentor or colleague to practice what Theus calls “believing it out loud”.

“Our logical left brain understands things abstractly, but our emotional right brain won't fully believe the positive story until we practice hearing ourselves say it and receiving feedback from those we trust,” Theus offers.

To increase your chances of leadership success, actively cultivate your executive presence. Belief in your abilities leads to confidence. This in turn creates the positive energy you need to speak and act in a way that builds others' trust in your competence. Taken together, these elements will help you demonstrate that you are ready to take on new challenges and lead yourself and others to achieve great things.

--

Jennifer V. Miller is a freelance writer covering leadership in the workplace. She writes the award-winning blog [The People Equation](#).