



Executive Presence: What It Is and How to Get It

Executive Presence complements and sits above Leadership Effectiveness and is essential for Senior Leaders with C-Suite ambitions.

By virtue of the role, most senior leaders have “presence” but some have more “presence” than others.

Most of us can think of a senior leader who stood out for all the right reasons. They consistently attracted intense, positive attention, people gravitated towards them, credibility and trust was established at will and business connections happened with ease.

Leaders with Executive Presence somehow appear more calm and composed, responsive and resilient, alert and agile, polished and poised. They exhibit a unique ability to instill confidence while firing the hearts of others.

The cultivation of a strong Executive Presence, and the attendant mindset and practice, is a continuous and intentional process and is a key part of any ambitious professional's Leadership and Career Development. Research and experience shows that leaders who display higher levels of Executive Presence tend to give and get more, from their careers. A senior leader who exhibits a strong Executive Presence is better placed to:

1. Achieve the leadership and career success, balance and legacy they crave for themselves.
2. Build a powerful personal brand that says “trust me, follow me, promote me, reward me.”
3. Enhance their sphere of influence and power-base, building valuable, high-trust, sustainable and win-win relationships, alliances and networks.
4. Deliver business success through and with others.

Let's take a closer look at what Executive Presence is (and firstly, what it is not) and all the while ask ourselves what we can do to get and exploit higher degrees of Executive Presence.

What Executive Presence Is *Not*

It's Not Only About What You Deliver

Executive Presence is more than just getting the job done and delivering performance and results; at the Executive level, this is a “given” and everybody should be doing that.

It's Not Only About How You Look

“Looking the part” – elegant, confident, energetic and alert – is important. Business attire, body language and office decoration count but ultimately character and competence trumps cosmetics.

It's Not Only About How You Sound

Delivering high-impact presentations is a key part of Executive Presence but a fuller set of communication competencies – including inquiry, listening, facilitation, and conflict and issue resolution – are critical.

It's Not Only About Image And Reputation Management

Image and reputation management are only necessary when the brand is consistent, compelling and integritous.

Brands Break! They Don't Bounce!



Leadership Effectiveness is the *Springboard to Executive Presence*



Consider the 2x2 matrix (Figure 1) and consider when you have seen a senior leader combine leadership effectiveness with advanced Executive Presence and where there has been a shortfall that in some way debilitated the leader's personal

Figure 1.

What *Executive Presence* Is

Executive Presence is difficult to define but as the photographs below illustrate you definitely know it when you see it – and when you don't.

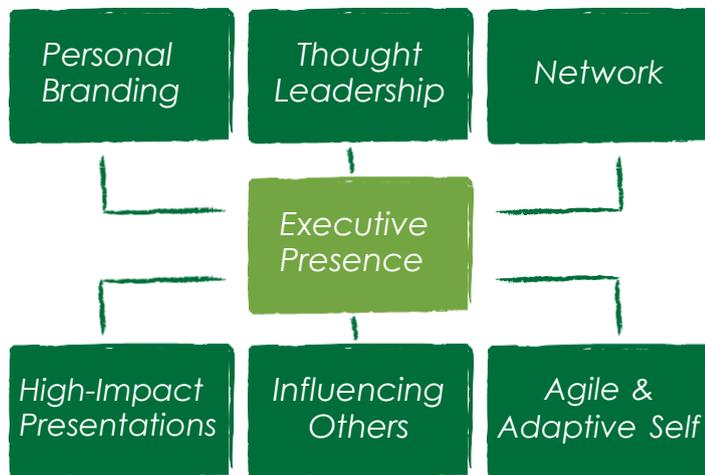
Definitions abound – “light up a room,” “the IT factor” or the French “*je ne sais quoi*” (literally meaning, “I do not know what?”) – but often lack specificity, observability, scalability and measurability.



Most commentators would agree that Executive Presence is a mindset (attitude, assumptions, values and motivations) and a set of learned skills, behaviors and habits that when they come together enliven the leader's desired personal brand and send all the right signals.

Most research throws up capabilities like an ability to project gravitas and establish immediate rapport, the capacity to stay calm yet decisive under pressure, the ability to “own the room,” and the ability to establish credibility and command respect.

We *Define* Executive Presence as:



The *mindset* and *capability* of a leader that enables them to project a strong and differentiated personal and professional brand, inspiring confidence that they will continuously, effectively and elegantly fulfill the mandates and imperatives of the Executive role.

While Executive Presence sits within a wider leadership character and competency-set, our research and coaching work has revealed six key areas that have been seen to enliven the “Executive brand” – these are outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Six Drivers of Executive Presence

| Competency Area | Descriptor |
|---------------------------|--|
| Personal Branding | An ability to build a powerful, credible and magnetic “personal brand” around authentic “brand values” that realizes personal visions and goals and “grips” other, critical stakeholders. |
| Thought Leadership | Intellectually-sound, business savvy and creative, the leader is a recognized authority, skilled at providing unique, innovative and prognostic content that challenges and shapes industry knowledge and norms. |
| Networking | Advanced competencies in proactively building relationships, networks and strategic alliances sufficient to create current and future value. |
| High-Impact Presentations | An ability to deliver confident, compelling and engaging presentations that inspire others, stimulate positive action and augment the personal and organizational brand. |
| Influencing Others | Acute ability to engage and influence those stakeholders most critical to personal, team and organizational success – inside and outside the organization. |
| Agile and Adaptive Self | An ongoing ability to intentionally and elegantly adapt to changing circumstances, contexts, cultures and people. |

Figure 3: Descriptors of Executive Presence



How Do You *Build* Executive Presence?

Executive Presence is not an innate or ethereal construct nor does it happen by accident, rather it is an on-going and conscious leadership development process whereby the leader seeks continuous improvement and personal brand enhancement. There are four main steps involved in the process of developing powerful Executive Presence:

Step 1: Envision the *Realistic* and *Authentic* Executive Presence That *You* Would Like to Exude.

Reflect upon a leader that you thought exuded Executive Presence and isolate and explore the character and competency-sets, values and behaviors that you found so compelling.

Picture yourself as a truly confident and influential executive; what attitudes, values and principles would be important for you? What would you look like and sound like? How would you think, feel and act?

Be true to your personality and preferred behavioral style, values and motivations when doing this exercise but stretch yourself and imagine how success would look and feel and what you could do for yourself and others with a more influential presence and a stronger power base.

(See Figure 2: The Six Drivers of Executive Presence for guidance)

Case Study:

The Curious Case of Adam

Adam couldn't quite get it. Equipped with an Ivy League MBA and a highly specialized Masters degree in Financial Engineering, he had delivered three years of "Exceeds Objectives" ratings and was widely considered to be the most robust, conceptually-sound Thought Leader at the Bank.

As Adam hunched over his desk, deep in thought, he fingered his "uniform" grey suit and weeded through the mountain of papers on his desk. That morning Adam had delivered a presentation to the management committee and as always he was well-prepared, objective and balanced. However, he intuitively knew he'd gotten a little defensive when challenged and had gone a little over the top with his statistics and rationale. It always irked him, during these presentations when Ali looked at his watch and Vijay toyed with his BlackBerry.

As was often the case, his presentation was cut-off with no resolution in place. They just didn't get him and in his opinion they lacked the patience to holistically consider all of the issues.

He was intrigued by Sara, a marketing professional who had just gotten the promotion he was after, who presented before him. The Office rumor-mill had her pegged as future CEO and it was her face and voice that Bloomberg featured when the Bank's opinion was sought on contentious issues.

During the presentation, she had appeared less structured than him but somehow seemed to have an intuitive sense of how the top team thought and acted and for what they wanted hear. She was an energetic presenter but sharp and to the point. Unlike him, when the questions came, she remained calm and composed. She had been respectful but stood firm on her recommendation.

Like most people, Adam couldn't help but like and respect Sara's intellect, pragmatism and good grace - the bosses and her direct reports certainly did, but it was easy to think she was all bluster and hubris. Adam suppressed his frustration and reassured himself that his performance and results would speak for him in the final succession shake-out.



Step 2: Establish the *Baseline*

Reflect on past performance – successes and failures – and aggregate the feedback that you have had on your “*Leadership Presence*” from your stakeholders – direct reports, bosses, peers and external constituencies. Objectively and accurately establish your Executive Presence Quotient – where are the leverage-able strengths? And, where are the gaps? Assess the quantity and quality of your relationships and networks and the opportunities and platforms you have in-place to promote your personal brand (see Figure 4: the 6 Cs model for a high-level analysis).

Step 3: Ruthlessly *Enliven* Your Desired Executive Presence

Based on the Executive Presence you desire, proactively and meticulously work towards these objectives:

- Identify the values, behaviors, skills and habits that will extend you the biggest impact and make small but positive changes – perhaps working on the type of conversations you have with senior colleagues, more positive and confident body language, writing a blog or other “*Thought Leadership*” piece. Cement and exploit quick wins to build your confidence and competence and orientate critical stakeholders to the “Executive” you
- Audit your dress, body posture and energy levels to ensure that the “*aesthetic*” you is sending all of the right signals
- Enlist the help of a coach or trusted advisor who can help you effectively and elegantly swim in the executive waters
- Take a formal course in Emotional and Social Intelligence working on both your intra-personal and inter-personal effectiveness
- Seek opportunities to promote your personal brand values and your ideas
- Exploit opportunities to position yourself as a Thought Leader and develop an in-person and on-line personal brand
- Force yourself to present, even in high visibility and high pressure situations – consider videotaping these sessions and watching them back, perhaps with a coach or trusted advisor, to identify improvement ideas

Step 4: *Review, Refine* and *Update*

With the help of trusted others, take a step back at targeted points and review the progress you are making in communicating your Executive Presence and your personal brand. Hard measures such as promotions, rewards, increased invitations to networks, and conferences will provide solid clues on how you are doing. More intuitive and qualitative measures, often deeply personal, like how confident you feel in challenging circumstances, audience reactions to your presentations and sustained energy levels will orientate you to progress made and your next Gen Executive Presence.



Conclusion

Executive Presence is something that happens over and above just being a capable leader who gets the job done in the right way. Executive Presence is about standing out in ways that suggests an added-edge of confidence, character, competence, composure, courage and charisma – a differentiated and advanced capacity to fulfill the Executive role.

The noted author and poet, Dr. Maya Angelou, is credited with saying:

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Ultimately Executive Presence is about making self and others feel the desire to aspire, achieve and advance.

Executive Presence works best when it is thought of as a vehicle to make a wider contribution. Authentic leadership with purpose. Ultimately a leader’s legacy will be enlivened and sustained by the people that he or she developed and the mark that they left on the world. Dr. Martin Luther King’s words resonate as much today as they ever did:

“Every human must decide whether they will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness. Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, “What am I doing for others?”

Executive Presence augments personal brands and bolsters careers but it also enables leaders to impel oneself and compel others to make a wider contribution in pursuit of a better world.



A Note For Communications, HR and Talent Professionals

If the Executive role is a privileged one then the role of advisor to the C-suite is one of the most exciting. Sitting at the right-hand of power is intoxicating but requires a level head, steady hands and a whole lot of skill and backbone. There is no substitute for expertly designed and flawlessly executed Assessment and Development processes. A firm grasp of what Executive Presence is and how it sits with and then above the character and competency set required for Leadership Effectiveness is essential. As a guide, review the 6 Cs model of Executive Presence below and Ask, "how do your Executives fair against this model?"

How Do Your Organization's Executives Fair Against The 6 Cs Of Executive Presence?

| | |
|------------|---|
| Character | An ability to exhibit an authentic presence based on deep self-awareness and a solid value system that seeks excellence and ethicality in each and every situation. |
| Competence | A proven and sustained ability to learn, grow, adapt and to get the job done. |
| Confidence | High degrees of self-assuredness that motivates self and inspires others. |
| Composure | An ability to project a balanced, calm and composed posture and take decisive action even at the most complex and/or stressful of times. |
| Courage | An ability to do the right thing, each and every time balancing confidence and humility and playing the strengths of self and others. |
| Charisma | An inherent ability to radiate, energize and inspire and in a way that draws excellence out of self and others. |

Figure 4: The 6 Cs of Executive Presence

This article was written by Dr. Brendan McCann of OLE Consulting.

OLE Consulting is a boutique Executive Leadership Development consultancy based in the Middle East. We help senior leaders gain the degree of competence, confidence and presence required for success in their roles.

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