

Ring of confidence

'Executive presence' is a sought-after leadership quality. And it can be learnt.



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When I worked as a BBC News reporter in London, I interviewed a range of leaders, from prime ministers to captains of industry. The most successful shared one attribute: executive presence. Without it, it's unlikely they would have scaled the summit of leadership.

Research by Stephenson Mansell Group (SMG) shows that executive presence is one of the most sought-after qualities of senior leaders.

At a broad level, executive presence is the ability to consciously demonstrate a controlled and confident state in a way that naturally elicits admiration. It is part art, part science and, with practice and time, it can be learnt. Here are five steps you can take.

1. Reflect on the source of your confidence

It's hard to instil confidence in others if your own is being sapped by self-doubt. The adage "fake it until you make it" doesn't hold true here because a lack of confidence shows up in body language, which is the biggest determinant of how people perceive us.

Erosion of confidence can come from leaders' need to prove their knowledge or expertise. It's what Stanford professor Carol Dweck describes as a "fixed mindset". Dweck's "growth mindset" approach encourages a fundamental shift away from "I need to prove what I'm capable of" to "I need to improve what I'm capable of". That means developing the ability to frame any situation, regardless of the stakes, as an opportunity to learn and grow.

2. Think differently

When presenting to a large group, leaders with strong executive presence tend to shift their focus



from "What does my audience think of me?" to "What do I want my audience to think and feel?" Feelings of self-consciousness make way for a purposeful intention and attention to how they are communicating.

If we want our audience to feel inspired, chances are we will focus on being inspiring. A White House speech writer once told me he began his process by mapping the emotional journey he wanted his audience to follow. The words came afterwards.

This "emotion-first" approach also builds a sense of authenticity and empathy.

3. Analyse how you show up

Studies have shown that only 7 per cent of the impact in communication comes from what we say. The rest comes from how we say it. This includes eye contact, posture, voice, gestures, movement, facial warmth and attire.

Holding eye contact with others (in the right measure) can convey confidence, authority, poise, balance, understanding and certainty.

Voice is another mechanism to shape perceptions. One way former US president Barack Obama created a sense of gravitas was his use of pauses. The ability to stand in front of an audience and hold a pause to punctuate a presentation, underscore a point, or simply for effect creates impact because it exudes self-assuredness.

4. Train, practise and prepare

Here's a paradox: leaders who seem to effortlessly demonstrate executive presence actually plan for situations so they come across as authentic yet spontaneous. They rehearse what they are going to say and how they are going to say it.

SMG's executive presence coach Peter Kingston, a former head of directing at NIDA, approaches lessons through a lens of performance: "Developing executive presence involves the application of skills and techniques which, over time, become habits."

Executive presence requires a continuous improvement mindset. That means regularly seeking out unvarnished feedback then knowing what to do with it, or using a trained coach to help address shortcomings and call out natural strengths.

If you're rehearsing, the amount of time should be proportional to the importance of the situation. For a board presentation, aim for a minimum of an hour. When time is scarce, rehearse your opening and closing. The opening creates the first impression. The closing is the impression you leave.

5. Engage with energy

When we ask people to describe strong executive presence, one word that consistently comes up is "energy", which shows up typically as a strong, steady, confident and engaging first impression.

Harvard professor Amy Cuddy's TED talk on the subject has had more than 53 million views. In her talk, and subsequent book *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges*, Cuddy describes how to overcome impostor syndrome, the biggest inhibitor of executive presence.

Her studies suggest that our body language and emotions are connected. For example, holding a "power pose" for as little as two minutes increases the natural confidence-boosting hormones dopamine and oxytocin. Power poses include standing with arms outstretched and feet firmly anchored to the ground, or the "Wonder Woman" pose, with clenched fists resting on the hips.

Remember, power poses need to be performed before the situation – if done during an event, they can come across as arrogant.

Executive presence alone won't guarantee success, but its absence could be career-limiting.