

Executive Presence:

What it is — What it is not — and How to Develop “It”



By Michelle Braden

An  **MSBCOACH** Leadership Resource

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INTRODUCTION

Possibly, the most challenging statement a leader hears is from their boss, stakeholder or board member is “You need to work on your executive presence”. Unfortunately, this statement is elusive - leaders are left guessing what exactly needs improvement and/or creating their own conclusions.

Perhaps their boss isn’t sure how to articulate what they need to do in order to improve. Defining just what “IT” is can be like trying to nail Jell-O to the

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wall. Often people will say, “you just know when someone has it...” or “that person really has presence – they must be born with it...”.

Of course this kind of thinking doesn’t bode well for those that need to develop their Executive Presence (EP)! Without specificity, you will more than likely go down a path of working on the wrong competencies – resulting in wasted time and energy.

This leaves us with two questions:

- 1. How does a leader identify what to work on to develop or enhance their own executive presence?**
- 2. How does a leader identify specific and direct feedback for a subordinate to develop or enhance their EP?**

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DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

According to the leadership, body language and professional success writer Carol Kinsey Goman:

1. EP is not an attribute that is automatically assigned to you because of your business results.
2. EP is not necessarily reflective of your true qualities and potential.

Goman goes on to add, “Instead, it depends entirely on how other people in the workplace evaluate you. The first key to building leadership presence is to realize that it is all about impression management.”

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In addition, 4 other important myths regarding EP:

1. **You are either born with EP or you are not:** It is a relief to know leaders do not have to be born with EP (it can be developed).
2. **Once you arrive – you are done:** What a leader accomplishes in the work place does not give that leader a “free pass” to having executive presence. Leaders may achieve substantial success and still not have EP.
3. **Leaders have all the answers:** Leaders do not need to have all the answers to have EP (in fact, no leader has all the answers no matter what level they find themselves).
4. **EP is a one size fits all:** Your EP is rooted in your authentic self. As Suzy Monford, CEO Andronico’s, says: ‘You need to show up each day the way you want to be perceived – which is simple to say, but difficult to accomplish unless you do your homework and really know yourself.’”

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EXECUTIVE PRESENCE IS...

How others evaluate and perceive you – the impression you create through areas such as:

- ♦ Self-Confidence (self-awareness)
- ♦ Composure – including calm under pressure
- ♦ Charisma
- ♦ How well you communicate (verbally, non-verbally – including tone and inflection)
- ♦ Eye contact
- ♦ Body posture
- ♦ Trust building
- ♦ Connecting with and demonstrate warmth others
- ♦ Listening
- ♦ Voice tone
- ♦ Timing
- ♦ How you take care of yourself – including grooming, dress, weight and energy management



AUTHENTICITY

Your Executive Presence is about knowing your authentic self, then aligning this with how you want others to perceive you and acting accordingly.

“Authenticity is the alignment of the head, mouth, heart and feet, as well as thinking, saying, feeling and doing the same thing consistently.” -Lance Secretan

Does it pay to invest my time, energy and money to enhance my EP?

In a formal survey of almost 400 CEOs, C-level executives, corporate communications executives, and professional development managers:

- ◇ 89% of the respondents believe EP helps a leader to get ahead
- ◇ 100% of the respondents believe EP is a differentiator
- ◇ 78% of the respondents believe a lack of EP will hold a person back

YES — there is value in a leader’s investment and continued development of their own (or the leaders they lead) Executive Presence.

*Survey and analysis conducted by Sally Williamson & Associates

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HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

All leader's striving to develop their EP should work on the following 4 areas*:

1. **Look the part** – This is one of the easiest ways to quickly exude executive presence.
2. **Mind What and How You Speak** – How you say something is equally as important as what you say. Talk **with** people – not **at** people. Conversation should flow – avoid too many details even when you are the expert in an area.
3. **Use Emotional Intelligence** – It is not just about being competent – you need to be approachable and engaging– show both your intelligence (IQ) **and** your warmth (EQ).
4. **Get feedback** – Solicit feedback from all people you work with (team members, colleagues/peers, leadership, vendors, stakeholders, board members) as well as family and friends. This will help you identify areas to work on through training and coaching.



*Rosina Racioppi, President and CEO of Women Unlimited and contributor to the Forbes post, “4 Ways to Build Your Executive Presence”

14 Additional Tips to Enhance your Executive Presence :

- 1** **Communication** – Choose your words carefully, monitor your body language, posture. Vary your tone, inflection and pacing to match the situation and audience.
- 2** **Inner Beliefs** – Know your values and beliefs – watch how they show up in your leadership. Give space for others to hold to their own beliefs while you do the same.
- 3** **Take a Stance** – Work to fully understand the situation, issue or problem, and then, *be decisive!* Have confidence in your decision or position, but be ready to graciously concede if necessary.
- 4** **Make Allies, not Enemies**— You never know when you may need the support of someone,; practice savvy politics and try to build *-not burn-* bridges!
- 5** **Take Initiative** – Don't wait until you get negative feedback - be proactive in developing your EP. Don't forget to check in on progress by asking for continued feedback.
- 6** **Be Authentic** – EP is only effective if you know who you are and what you believe. Your words and actions should be in alignment with the values, and beliefs.
- 7** **Become a Good Storyteller**— A story has the power to capture attention, influence feelings and stimulate the attention of your audience. *Use it!*
- 8** **Be Approachable**— Be aware of your reactions to others as you pass in the hall or when they come to your desk. Are you warm and engaging? Or hurried or bored?
- 9** **Moderate emotions**— While genuine emotion is fine to express... be careful in overwhelming people around you with overexcitement, anger or anxiety.
- 10** **Be Accountable**— Your actions and your decisions are your own. Keep your promises and own up to your mistakes.
- 11** **Demonstrate Humility**— No one appreciates bragging or overstating accomplishments or contributions. Let your actions speak for themselves!
- 12** **One Chance to Make a First Impression**— Make it a positive and memorable one! It's your opportunity to practice many of your EP traits!
- 13** **Know Your Audience**— Be wary of their background knowledge and opinions. Be sure make adjustments accordingly—in your word choice, tone, pacing, etc.
- 14** **Demonstrate Poise Under Pressure**— In stressful situations, people look to leaders for guidance in what to do and how to act. Your words, emotions, body language and actions all inform if they can trust your lead.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

At MSBCOACH we often work with leaders on developing their Executive Presence. One of our go to books we recommend is, “Own the Room” by Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins:

“The authors of ‘Own the Room’ are executive coaches who help their clients find their signature voice, in order to build their leadership presence. A signature voice is their key idea – and it is an important one. They describe signature voice as ‘a unique leadership presence that is confident, authentic, and effective.’

The authors define leadership presence as ‘the ability to consistently and clearly articulate your value proposition while influencing and connecting with others.’ The authors take a holistic approach to developing a leaders signature voice by having you focus on three key things: assumptions, communication strategies and energy – or ACE conditioning, as they call it.

According to the authors, the 3 critical assumptions that every leader should examine are:

- Confidence – what you bring to the table
- Perspective – what hat you wear
- Clarity – what your values are

Other points to remember to achieve the best communication strategy:

- Frame the discussion
- Practice advocacy
- Connect and engage your audience

The authors discuss a leader’s energy stating; actions speak louder than words. Energy is all about conditioning your physicality to help strengthen the delivery of your message. This relates to managing how your body language and mood affect others. People can get all sorts of cues from your non-verbal behavior and it is important for you to make sure that you are sending the right ones.

Lastly, the author’s say, you should:

- Know your physical cues.
- Set the tone for your organization with your energy.
- Make your presence known – identify key members who need face time.”*

Ultimately, “Own the Room” identifies the goal for leaders developing their EP is to learn to balance their voice for self and voice for others in order to create their own signature voice.

* Book summary by Forbes, July 17, 2014 , “4 Ways to Build Your Executive Presence”



One thing is certain, developing your Executive Presence is a journey full of continuous learning, successes and failures.... Then waking up and doing it all over again.

Don't be afraid to make mistakes.... Every encounter is an opportunity to get out there and show the world the leader you are.

"The phoenix must burn to emerge." – Janet Fitch.

If you are looking for an executive coaching partner through your EP journey, we would welcome the opportunity to talk with you and see if we are the right fit. We have developed the MSBCoach Leadership Maturity Model that helps leaders to identify the competencies they (or those who work with them) should have developed at each level. You can check that out [on our website](#).

 Leadership Maturity Model™

Leadership Levels & Competencies				
Ground Level Essentials	Base Camp Essentials	Alpine Essentials	Summit Approach Essentials	Summit Essentials
◊ Integrity	◊ Basic Management	◊ Basic Leadership	◊ Business Acumen	◊ Authentic Leadership
◊ Learner	◊ Relationship Management	◊ Advanced People Skills	◊ Adaptive Leadership	◊ People Champion
◊ Emotional Intelligence	◊ Customer Focus	◊ Critical Thinking	◊ Change Champion	◊ Idea Champion
◊ Communication	◊ Organizational Commitment	◊ Change Agent	◊ Executive Presence	◊ Visionary Leadership
◊ Ownership	◊ Confidence		◊ Community Focus	

No matter how you choose to go through this journey, remember the simple words of to great leaders:

"I follow 3 rules: do the right thing, do the best you can, and always show people you care" – Lou Holt

"You have to learn the rules of the game. And then you have to play better than anyone else" – Albert Einstein



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Michelle has coached and trained leaders and teams for over 20 years. She is the founder of the Authentic Leadership Summit, the Emerging Executive Leadership Program and has served as a panelist for the World Coaching Conference. Michelle is a certified coach with ACC credentials from the International Coaching Federation and the author of three leadership books: ***Stand Out, Dare to Make a Difference***, and ***Bottom Line***. She is also a long-term thought-leadership contributor to several blogs/publications including: Thought Leaders, Lead Change and Leadership Courseware.

Michelle is committed to partnering with leaders to identify their motivators, drivers, values and principles that increase their awareness of who they are and how they want to be known as a leader. She works with leaders to uncover both productive and challenging behaviors that may be enhancing their leadership or holding them back from being the leaders they want to be. Ultimately, leaders are motivated to set and achieve their highest goals.



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