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Examining Executive Presence

What the heck is it, why is it important, and how do you get it?

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By Karen Hough, founder and CEO, ImprovEdge

Organizations are concerned. Executives are worried. And HR representatives are freaking out. All because of executive presence. I've been working with C-level executives for well over a decade, but in the last 24 months, the issue has exploded. No matter what the industry, the question arises, "How can we create executive presence?" Let's talk about reasons behind this concern and tactical ways to address the issue.

What Is Executive Presence?

I often hear examples to define executive presence: "When he walks in the room, people notice." Or "She gives me a sense that everything is OK, and under control." Likewise, I've heard more humble examples, such as, "She doesn't say much, but when she *does* speak, everyone listens!"

Executive presence, really, is an authentic quality that builds trust in others. No matter what the leader's personal style, people want to listen, follow, and do great work for that person.

Why the Concern?

There are two major reasons executive presence has become such an issue.

1. **Succession:**As generational differences become apparent and long-time leaders age, they are looking over their shoulders and wondering, "Who is going to fill my shoes if I move up or on?" The U.S. is also one of the last nations to turn to diverse populations such as women and minorities for leadership, and organizations and individuals need to deal with their discomfort around a "different" kind of leader. Great leaders don't have to look or act like the leaders of the last century to be highly effective.
2. **Economic hardship:**When your organization was glutted with eager talent, and development budgets were huge, it was easy to assume that leaders would emerge or we would mold them out of many choices. Now teams are lean, resources are scarce, and we're expecting leaders to handle everyday work in addition to leadership. With less money and people to do more work, how deep is the bench?

Why Is It Important?

One word: trust. Those with executive presence tend to be trusted by their clients, colleagues, and reports. More than ever, we have to motivate and retain talent. We have to make our clients confident that they are in good hands. And as technology takes over, we yearn for human interaction that is authentic and competent. We are desperately looking for people we can trust.

For career advancement, it's critical to stand out in a way that allows people to imagine you as a leader, even if you don't have the title. Presence and reliability go a long way toward helping key stakeholders take notice of you.

Common Misconceptions

What about stereotypes? We mistakenly believe that people with executive presence are:

- Extroverts
- Tall
- Opinionated and outspoken
- Follow a command-and-control style of leadership

Although all of these qualities can support an impressive presence, there are other qualities that will support effective influence and build trust.

How Do You Get It?


- **Define It:** An organization or individual must define exactly what executive presence means for them. The behaviors that would be effective in a global media company are very different than those needed in a small accounting firm. Do your leaders need to influence multiple business units and give formal presentations? Do your leaders need to be personable one-on-one with clients? Define specific behaviors and attributes that create positive outcomes.
- **Gain Awareness of Yourself:** Once you define “It,” enlist help. You have to be ready to change, be uncomfortable, and be highly aware of how to manage your persona. Find people who will give you honest feedback. In my early days as an entrepreneur, I focused on pleasing my clients. However, an HR rep gave me a gift. After a meeting, he commented privately, “The only time you seemed like a CEO in there was when you said, ‘No.’ I knew we were asking for more than you could deliver, so when you stood up for your people and set boundaries, it was impressive.” He became an informal coach to me, so I could be more aware of others’ perceptions.
- **Lean on Your Strengths:** Are you the one who sees the big picture? Are you able to create great relationships? Are you a master at spreadsheets? Figure out where you shine, turn it up, and use it to benefit the business.
- **Expand Your Circle:** Great leaders know the expertise of their team, groom relationships in other industries, connect with clients regularly, and think about the good of all. As Peter Drucker said, “The leaders who work effectively never say ‘I.’ And that’s not because they have trained themselves not to say ‘I.’ They don’t think ‘I.’ They think ‘we’; they think ‘team.’ ...They accept responsibility...but ‘we’ gets the credit.... This is what creates trust.”
- **Listen, Then Speak Up:** You can’t be known if you’re not heard. Think about the topic at hand, and contribute positively. Every time.
- **Polish Your Persona:** Like it or not, we are judged on our appearance. When in doubt, be professional, be polished, and be well-groomed. Some scoff that dress standards are relaxing. But I cannot tell you how many managers have confided that they didn’t promote an employee, or didn’t take them on a client meeting, because their appearance was embarrassing.

The Biggest Secret: Calm in Chaos

Almost anybody can lead when times are good, but it is those who are calm, thoughtful, and action-oriented during crises who embody executive presence. Whether the copier is broken or you’re losing your biggest client, stay calm, think it through, and take action. People won’t forget it.


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