Executive Presence

Idea In Short

Executive Presence is a term that is often shrouded in mystery. Career and personality development coaches treat it as though this were something magical. Consultants that engage with senior executives in their client organizations often struggle to understand it. Consultants should endeavour to cultivate an executive presence for career success. It is a skill, not a trait that consultants can cultivate and build.

Few consultants can take command of a room when they walk in. But, the people who are best at this don't draw attention to themselves in a flashy or dramatic way. The best consultants I have worked with are not even aware of their ability to command attention. But, what is executive presence? The answer is often a maddening:

> I can't define it, but I know it when I see it

Not exactly helpful for consultants trying to grow professionally in their careers.

What is Executive Presence?

In its simplest terms, executive presence is about your ability to inspire confidence — inspiring confidence in your subordinates that you're the leader they want to follow, inspiring confidence among peers that you're capable and reliable and, most importantly, inspiring confidence among senior leaders that you have the potential for great achievements. In her book, Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success, leading researcher Sylvia Ann Hewlett says that executive presence is:

> an amalgam of qualities that telegraphs that you are in charge or deserve to be

Your executive presence determines whether you gain access to opportunity.

Why develop an Executive Presence?

In a survey of CIOs, conducted by Gartner, Executive Presence was 2nd on the list of the top 20 leadership traits that make a difference. There's a saying in leadership:

> All the important decisions about you will be made when you're not in the room

Whether it's a decision about an important engagement, a promotion to a critical role or an assignment to a high-visibility project, you won't be in the room. The opportunities you gain access to depend on the confidence you've inspired in both, your firm and among the client decision makers. The more significant the opportunity, the more important executive presence becomes.

How to develop an Executive Presence?

As with any other skill, some people are naturally more gifted at executive presence than others. However, everyone can improve their executive presence with focus and practice. And, perhaps most importantly, the more senior you become, the more executive presence is required, so everyone needs to continually focus on improving his or her executive presence. In essence, a consultant with executive presence are excellent communicators that have mastered the critical "C's" of leadership:

1. Credibility
2. Confidence
3. Charisma
4. Composure
5. Communication skills
6. Clarity

Credibility

When people see you as credible, you can influence them to become more receptive to your ideas. But, building up your credibility takes time. Early career professionals need to rely on

expertise in their roles to communicate such authority. When you speak, do you sound like an expert on the subject at hand? Professor Brooke Vuckovic of the Kellogg School of Management says:

> Especially early on in your career, intellectual horsepower is essential

You can boost your credibility with preparation and by showing integrity, she adds. Not only is your content important, but the language you choose to deliver it will impact your credibility. Filler language such as um, uh, and so immediately detract from presence. As do minimizers, such as just, actually, sort of, and this may not be a good idea but... When someone with strong presence speaks, others take note, and there is no doubt of the conviction behind their words.

Confidence

You won't convey credibility if you don't display confidence. When someone with strong executive presence speaks, others take note. You never doubt the conviction behind their words. They project a certain gravitas that automatically commands the respect of everyone in the room. Body language is vital when it comes to how others perceive you. So, make sure to maintain good posture and eye contact. Former Harvard Business School professor Amy Cuddy's well-known TED Talk explains how holding a two-minute power pose before a job interview can positively affect the interviewer's perception of you1. Likewise, anyone suffering from Impostor Syndrome will benefit from Cuddy's confidence-boosting advice. However, do not confuse confidence with having an out-sized ego. With executive presence, Professor Vuckovic opines:

> what we're looking for is true confidence and true humility

In the words of C.S. Lewis:

> Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less

One key aspect of executive presence is to communicate confidence both in what you say and how you say it. To appear confident, good posture is essential. Next, eye focus is

critical. Ensure you only speak when making eye contact and manage your eye focus appropriately when communicating with more than one person — one thought per person. Ensure your facial expression matches your message and that your voice has good pitch, volume, and pace. And of course, you must look the part. Choose your wardrobe and accessories carefully.

Charisma

People who embody executive presence have the ability to draw others to them. This is often achieved through strong listening skills and an ability to stay in the moment. As a result, the people with whom you are communicating know that you are solely focused on them, and not distracted by the many other things you could be doing at that moment. They matter to you

Composure

Being able to control your emotions and recognize emotions in others is a crucial component of executive presence. Great leaders remain cool and composed under pressure. Self-awareness is paramount. No one wants a boss with a hot temper or who falls apart when things go sideways. Professor Vuckovic recommends:

> Make sure you are eating and sleeping well, have social support, and make time for movement in your day. These things will help build your capacity for resilience under stress

When you stay calm and focused on the crisis at hand, others will take note. Teams you manage will trust your ability to handle any situation, making them less anxious and more productive. If you struggle with maintaining composure, try out some of these tips on managing stress at work from the Harvard Health Blog. People with good executive presence present themselves as calm, even-keeled, composed, well-prepared and in control at all times. That inspires the confidence that they're ready to take on even more. Thich Nhat Hanh has a story about small, crowded boats that cross the Gulf of Siam in Vietnam regularly, and the powerful impact one calm person can have on a group of people holds a beautiful lesson:

> When the crowded refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked,

> all would be lost. But if even one person stayed calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive

Communication skills

People who radiate executive presence have top-notch communication skills. They can concisely articulate their thoughts and use tone and word choices that strengthen their message. They've also mastered the power of the three-second pause, so their words have more impact. Communicating with humor is also a huge plus. And none other than Warren Buffett considers public speaking the most valuable skill anyone can build.

Clarity

For you to exude presence, the ability to clearly communicate is fundamental. If your point is unclear, any hope of commanding attention is lost. Ask yourself:

> What is my message in 10 words or fewer?

If you can't articulate it to yourself you are not ready to communicate it to others. Verbosity kills presence. Just as it is critical to know what you want to communicate, you must be able to do it concisely. Once you've delivered your message and validated it briefly, reverse back to others by asking:

> What else can I share with you about this idea?

This way you stay on point and only expand on a topic with the content that your listener needs. When you have executive presence, you speak with confidence, gain respect, and influence others to achieve a common goal. In the end, no level of executive presence can compensate for lack of ability, Vuckovic warns.

> These elements of presence are particularly important when you are interacting with someone for the first time or on a superficial level or you just see them quarterly for client meetings," she explains. On the other hand, "those people around you will have a much more complete picture and, ultimately, are going to judge you by the

quality of your work and contributions.

Summary

As a consultant, the presence you bring to any given situation, team, event, or client, needs to match the culture and context of the environment. Your presence determines the quality of your relationships and what you can get done with and through other people. From CEOs to team leaders, entrepreneurs, teachers and parents, we all have our own sphere of influence where our presence makes a difference. As consultants, executive presence is within your reach. Consciously working to enhance your presence will make you a more effective consultant and leader that your clients trust.