

# The Evolving Landscape of Executive Presence

The path to the C-suite has long been paved with a specific set of expectations – gravitas, communication skills and a polished appearance. But the leadership landscape is undergoing a seismic shift. Factors like economic turmoil, social movements and technological advancements have redefined what it means to be an effective leader.

From 2012 to 2022, Sylvia Ann Hewlett surveyed hundreds of executives and asked them to rank the importance of various leadership traits (Harvard Business Review, 2024). While core attributes like confidence and decisiveness remained crucial over the years, a new dimension of leadership qualities also emerged.

## **Inclusivity: The Cornerstone of Modern Leadership**

The days of the “old guard” CEO – typically a white male – are fading. Leaders today must be inclusive, actively fostering diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) within their organizations. This goes beyond simply hiring a diverse workforce. It requires cultivating a culture where everyone feels valued, respected and empowered to contribute.

## **Gravitas Redefined**

The concept of gravitas, traditionally associated with a commanding presence, now encompasses inclusivity and respect. Inclusive leaders actively seek to understand the experiences of those from different backgrounds. This not only fosters a positive work environment but can also yield valuable insights that benefit the entire organization.

## **Communication: Mastering the Virtual Realm**

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to virtual communication. Leading effectively online – through platforms like Zoom and Teams – is now a critical aspect of executive presence. But effective virtual communication goes beyond technical proficiency. Leaders who excel at this skill prioritize active listening and learn from others before making decisions.

## **Authenticity: The New Power Suit**

Appearance, once a major factor in executive presence, has undergone a significant transformation. Gone are the days of emulating a stereotypical CEO image. Today, authenticity reigns supreme. Leaders are expected to be genuine, showcasing their true selves rather than conforming to outdated expectations.

## **Leading On and Offline**

The ability to connect and inspire, both in person and online, is a hallmark of successful leadership in the 21st century. Leaders who master this duality are well-positioned to navigate the complex and interconnected world we live in.

## **The Learnable Art of Executive Presence**

Executive presence is a skill that can be cultivated. By understanding the most valued leadership traits in your industry, seeking guidance from mentors & sponsors and actively embodying those qualities, you can develop the presence that sets you apart. Remember, there's no need to be perfect. Focus on honing your authentic strengths and excelling at a few key traits in each category – inclusivity, gravitas, communication and appearance. The most important thing is to demonstrate progress in at least one area of growing importance.

By embracing these evolving expectations, leaders can build the skills and presence necessary to thrive in today's dynamic business environment.

*[To view results of the full research study, please refer to Harvard Business Review's article, "The New Rules of Executive Presence", [linked here](#).]*