

# What is Executive Presence? The Leadership Quality No One Told You About

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Executive presence is not easy to define. It is often confused with generic leadership qualities. But, it is incorrect to classify it thus. Elusive as it is, if we are to understand ‘what is executive presence’, we must first ascertain how executive leadership is hired. Why does someone get hired as an executive? Is it because of their degrees? Does their experience count? Do they have a great network of recommendations? All of these matter, of course, but over and above this, there is an X-factor that companies look for in their senior executives. In the absence of a textbook definition, that X-factor is executive presence.

## What is Executive Presence?

The term ‘executive presence’ first appeared in Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s book, [The Sponsor Effect](#). Needless to say, it is a fairly recent concept that has evolved to meet the requirements of modern-day leadership. It partly explains why it is so hard to get a definitive answer to the question ‘what is executive presence’. It is a concept that has not been studied sufficiently or talked about in great detail.

Moreover, as a concept, executive presence is highly intuitive. It is neither easy nor fair to quantify it using absolute metrics. For instance, you can easily say whether a leader

has a good eye for numbers or great communication skills. But, you cannot know if a leader has executive presence without observing him/her over a period of time in different situations. Hence, when someone asks 'what is executive presence', most people find themselves searching for the right words.

[Forbes, in their article titled \*Executive Presence: What Is It, Why You Need It And How To It\*](#) describes executive presence as the following:

“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.”

## Why is a Strong Executive Presence Necessary?

Want to lead a big team to achieve a difficult target? Do you want to lead high-visibility projects that make a difference? Want to be in a boardroom when important decisions are taken? Want to be the leader that your juniors aspire to be? There you have it; you need to have an executive presence to achieve these goals.

From a personal point of view, you need an executive presence in order to get the opportunities that will take your career further. You need to have it in order to break into the leadership team in a company. Moreover, from a company’s perspective, executive presence is what they want their leadership team to have and cultivate so that goes top down to the teams. Either way, it is a skill that is deeply coveted and highly rewarded.

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## What are the Three Pillars of Executive Presence?

According to [Sylvia Ann Hewlett](#), economist, and author, there are three pillars and they are:

### 1. Gravitas

Do people take you seriously? Does your word hold value in your workplace or among peers? Would people think twice before cross-questioning your statements or second-guessing your decisions? If the answer to these questions is yes, then congratulations! You have gravitas. Essentially, gravitas is the sum of the weight of your personality and the confidence you exude in your demeanor. It is important to remember that gravitas is not inborn; it is a carefully cultivated skill. In fact, your CEO, with all her gravitas, might have been an awkward teenager and a happy-go-lucky 20-something. Who knows?

## 2. Communication Skills

When we are speaking of communication skills in the context of 'what is executive presence', it is important to define some ground rules. You do not have to speak with the eloquence of Mark Anthony and convince the Romans that Caesar was 'not an ambitious man'. You need to speak with confidence and in a concise manner. You always need to have data to back up what you say in a boardroom. You need to be able to convince your peers and seniors that your plan will work and is the best possible way forward.

Your team should be inspired by your confidence as you boost their morale and give them achievable goals. If you can do all this, you are an effective communicator, which takes you one step closer to having a great executive presence. And if you can speak as lyrically as Shakespeare intended, then that's an added bonus for you and your audience.

## 3. Appearance

No, we are not referring to your good looks or lack of it. Appearance is not beauty or glamor. It is also not your personality. Appearance is how you present yourself at the workplace. Most of the rules that govern appearance are unsaid; there is nothing set in stone. However, it is imperative to remember that a suit and a tie do not inspire confidence. How you wear your suit/ sweatshirt is the measure of your appearance. If you want the right appearance, know what works for you.

Also, the setting or culture of a workplace has a lot to do with how your appearance might have to change. You cannot turn up in a banking services organization in your denim or wear a black tie to a casual workplace. The trick is to know what to wear, when, and how to carry whatever you wear, like it was the designated dress code for the day!

Watch Sylvia Ann Hewlett speak about the pillar of executive presence here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpfZtk5kDSk>

## What are the "Don'ts" of Executive Presence?

Executive presence is one of those things that you take time to notice in someone. However, if someone doesn't have what it takes, you will notice immediately. Hence, before we talk about what is executive presence and how to develop it, let's get into what you must avoid:

- Never over-justify your hypothesis; you need to believe what you say before others do

- Don't overdo theory. Everyone knows the theory; your personal opinion counts more than theories
- Presentations are for reference only; use them sparingly
- Never interrupt others when they are speaking
- Do not get into lengthy monologues and lose the attention of your audience

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## How to Develop Executive Presence?

Interestingly, Forbes describes executive presence as a 'skill' and not a 'trait'. Executive presence, like leadership, is not a personality type; it is a skill that can be learned and has to be cultivated to become second nature. But how do you learn to have an executive presence? Here are some helpful steps:

### 1. Articulate Your Vision and Ideas Clearly

Most great ideas die a tragic death in the absence of clear articulation. You might have a great idea, but you need to convey it to your peers and team in the clearest possible way. Only then will your idea see the light of day. Let nothing be lost in translation.

### 2: Use Time as a Weapon

C-suite executives are always strapped for time. Hence, the brevity of thought is very important. At most high-level meetings, you get five minutes or less to convince the room that your idea is merit. How fast you convince people to see value in something is a big part of executive presence. Remember [the iconic elevator pitch by Guy Kawasaki](#).

### 3: Operate Effectively in High-Stress Situations

Many people can come up with a business plan when the market is favorable, and they have had plenty of time to do their research. But only people with great executive presence can come up with a great plan, even in crisis situations like recessions or pandemics. How effective you are in a stressful situation is a mark of your leadership presence.

### 4: Know Yourself and Your Leadership Style

There is no set way to be a leader. In fact, there are many different [leadership types](#). As a leader, you should know that you are unique and bring that novelty to the table as a bonus. Knowledge of your strengths and weaknesses is the first step to becoming an effective executive.

## 5: Be Aware of How You are Perceived

While self-knowledge will give you confidence, it is equally important to know how people see you. A leader who does not have his/her finger on the pulse of the team/company or is unaware of his/her reputation is disconnected from reality.

## 6: Use Your Body Language Like a Tool

Do you tap your fingers when you are stressed? Does the rhythm of your breathing change when you are over-committing? Your body language might reveal what you don't with your words. And be rest assured, people will notice these minute details about you in a highly visible role. Thus, tame your body and mind so that your body language bellies nothing but sheer calm.

## 7: Invest in Yourself

Most of us are not born to function calmly in a crisis or speak articulately when we wake up in the morning. These are skills that have to be learned. The preferred way to do this is to invest in yourself. Study to be a leader and build an executive presence. You can pick from a whole bunch of [leadership programs online](#). But, if you are looking for something specific, [Executive Presence and Influence: Persuasive Leadership Development by Wharton Executive Education](#) is a great place to find what you need.

Most leaders are lifelong learners. And that is what gives them the confidence they need to have a great executive presence. So, commit to lifelong learning if you aspire to achieve that confidence.