

## Why Executive Presence is a Key Component of Leadership Success

When executives at companies like Danone North America gather to discuss succession planning, they consider more than just the potential leader's qualifications, experience and performance. It's ultimately the candidate's executive presence that has the power to make or break a promotion, according to Paul Robbertz, Senior Director of Environmental Health and Safety. "Executive presence isn't about pounding your chest and raising your voice to get people's attention; it's about being calm, concise, and positive so folks understand what you want to do...whether that audience is other executives, folks on the shop, your peers, or people in the local community," he said. According to those who have committed their time to developing these skills, executive presence requires a focus on personal mannerisms, routine behaviors, communication skills and mental attitude. "Although we don't use an exact definition, everyone in the room seems to agree when someone has, or needs to work on, executive presence," explained Megan Lum, Director of Environmental Management for Gas and Electric Transmissions at Pacific Gas and Electric Co. In her words, people with executive presence "come into a room with an aura of confidence, knowing they can guide the conversation, take charge of the situation, and make a decision if needed." Because so much of an EHS professional's role involves influencing others, executive presence is a key skill aspiring leaders need to master, as well as a career catalyst for those who seek new opportunities.

### What is executive presence?

What exact behaviors, attitudes, and actions add up to executive presence? The seminal research on the topic was published in 2013 by the New York City-based Center for Talent Innovation (CTI).

Based on a survey of nearly 4,000 professionals in large corporations, CTI determined that executive presence accounts for 26% of a promotion-related decision. Drilling down further, CTI identified three core components of executive presence—also known as the "aura of authority" that sets effective leaders apart:

## Gravitas

Cited by two of every three executives (67%) surveyed by CTI, this component encompasses behaviors such as exhibiting grace under pressure, acting decisively, showing integrity, projecting vision, and demonstrating emotional intelligence.

## Communication

In addition to excellent public speaking skills, this component includes the abilities to read an audience and command a room.

## Appearance

According to CTI's research, good grooming contributes significantly to looking like a leader. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of survey respondents said unkempt attire detracts from a person's executive presence.

“At first executive presence may seem somewhat superficial, such as having good posture and meaning business when you speak,” said Amy Tez of Radical Collective, who is a London-based executive coach. “In truth, it’s more akin to an emotional strength, one that enables you to withstand the self-doubt that comes whenever you have to present something or convince someone. No matter how straight you stand, executive presence isn’t believable unless you have that strength in the moment. That inner strength comes from a self-confidence that no one is born with but can develop,” added Tez. When coaching executives who wish to have a greater impact in their workplaces, for example, she often begins by asking questions that encourage the executives to know themselves better: What are your strengths? What current weaknesses would you like to improve upon? What are you capable of doing? Where in the workplace can you add value? “To have other people take you seriously,” Tez emphasized, “you have to add your own self-belief that your voice matters.”

## Strategies to Increase Your Executive Presence

Operating on the assumption that executive presence is a set of behaviors and mindsets that can be learned, here are seven steps to take you down that path.

Rock-solid technical skills and stellar on-the-job performance will get you noticed in the workplace, but you'll need that something extra—executive presence—for your name to come up in conversations about potential leaders and possible promotions. Here are several tips to cultivate it.



## Understand your organization

Tim Murphy, Vice President of Environmental Performance for Walker Industries, said a good share of self-confidence comes from knowing a lot about your company and the people who lead it. He advocated reading the annual report and the sustainability report, reviewing financials, and staying up to date with the trade press to know what trends and topics are influencing corporate decisions and directions.

"It's easy for us in the EHS world to get siloed and not have perspective, which can leave us wondering why we can't get the resources to support our plan," observed Murphy. "A broader and better understanding of the company's interests and the issues it's dealing with will give you valuable context and enable you to go forward with a more thoughtful and focused executive presence."



## Learn from role models

Who comes to mind as exhibiting executive presence? It might be a colleague, a supervisor, a mentor or coach, a public speaker, a politician, a celebrity, or even a YouTube personality who demonstrates that coveted calmness and confidence. Become a student of how those role models dress, hold themselves, present information, handle questions, and react to challenges—not so you can become a cookie-cutter version of them, but as a means of motivation and inspiration.



## Develop a brand statement

If you're just getting started, a good first step is to articulate your personal brand. Think about who you are, what you want to achieve, and what you'd like people to say about you as a leader if you weren't in the room, such as being trustworthy, dependable, inspiring, thorough, empathetic, passionate, purposeful, poised and well-spoken. "Putting your brand statement in writing helps you visualize it, live it, and breathe it," observed Janet Evans, Manager of Process Safety at CF Industries. "That way, whether you're talking to leadership or front-line personnel, everyone will have a consistent experience with you."

"Who you are, the way you work, and the quality of your executive presence all make up your brand. Just make sure your brand is natural and genuine and that you're not managing it to be or do something you're not," advised Paul Robbertz. As an example, he said telling jokes when making a presentation doesn't come naturally to him; to remain true to his personal brand, he prefers telling stories.

### **Personal Brand**

1. What value you provide (What problem do you solve?)
2. How you do it uniquely (What is your unique value proposition?)
3. For whom you provide value (Who is your target audience?)