

So What Is Executive Presence Again ... and How Do I Get It?

by Paul Aldo, Ph.D.

There's a new term in business. It's *executive presence*. Writers, forward thinking executives, and HR professionals are using it to describe your potential for getting into – or staying in – the executive suite. While this is good news, as it recognizes the importance of interpersonal factors in business success, it can also be confusing. That's because there's not much clarity or consistency in how the term, executive presence, is used. Some see it as leadership, others as presentation skills, still others as having natural people sense.

The purpose of this article is to clear away the confusion – to help you understand what executive presence is all about, and what you can do to create a more powerful expression of it.

Recognizing Executive Presence

The best place to start is with how you recognize executive presence. Have you ever been in a meeting or discussion where one of the participants just seemed to stand out; where there was a level of personal engagement and clarity of thought and expression that said “this person is exceptional?” If you have, you were likely witnessing executive presence in action.

But why did that person stand out? What did the person say or do that made you take note? Based on personal observation and hundreds of interviews, I have identified a list of nine expressive dimensions that consistently characterize the very best executive presence. They are themes of interpersonal engagement that, when taken together, define what executive presence is all about.

The Nine Expressive Dimensions of Executive Presence

People who have excellent executive presence are very good at *consistently projecting* nine dimensions of expression to their audiences. Three of these dimensions are seen by audience members as personal qualities of character, internal to the person being evaluated; three are seen as qualities of communication, interpreted as a person's ability to be honest, think clearly, and be open to ideas; and three are seen as relational qualities, understood as a person's capacity for caring about others and having an interest in them. Let's look at each of them.

About us... The Personal Dimensions

- **Passion:** The expression of motivation, drive, and engagement that convinces others you are committed to what you are saying and doing.
- **Poise:** A look of sophistication and unflappability that creates the impression you are comfortable in your surroundings and able to handle adversity.
- **Self-Confidence:** An air of optimism and assurance that convinces others you have the required strength, resources, and resolve to initiate and to lead.

About our messages... The Communications Dimensions

- **Candor:** The appearance of being interested in truth and honesty, with a willingness to accept and engage the world as it is, not as you would like it to be.
- **Clarity:** The ability to create your story and tell it in an intuitively clear and compelling way.
- **Openness:** The willingness to consider other points of view without prejudging them.

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About our audiences... The Relational Dimensions

- **Thoughtfulness:** The projection of thoughtfulness when dealing with others that conveys an interest in them and the relationship.
- **Sincerity:** The conviction of believing in and meaning what you say.
- **Warmth:** The appearance of being accessible to others, physically and emotionally.

Notice that these qualities have nothing to do with the content of the message. Instead, they are about how you package the content and tell your story. They are about how you engage with others. *That's because over 80% of most communication is non-verbal!* Your audience, whether it's an audience of one or one thousand, is relying on things you do outside the content of your message to make important decisions about the message and about you. Unfortunately, if you're like most people, you don't spend much time working on these non-content things, even though your audience spends most of its time evaluating them.

This disconnect is why many people are perceived as not having much executive presence, or even executive potential. They don't exhibit the behaviors that cause others to decide they have executive potential. If you want to have executive presence, remember this: the non-content elements of your message – the packaging, if you will (although it is really much more than that) – are critical to how you engage with your audience and how they perceive both you and the message you are trying to deliver. You need to understand these non-content elements and work on them at least as much as you do on message content, regardless of your delivery venue or the number of people involved. If you don't, it is unlikely you will ever project much of an executive persona.

Creating a More Powerful Executive Presence

Now that you know how executive presence is expressed and recognized, the next question is, how is it created? What can you do to project the nine qualities associated with excellent executive presence? Where do you start in creating a more powerful executive persona?

This is not as difficult as it may seem, *if* you pay close attention to two things. The first are the expressive tools that project executive presence. The second is connecting your natural self with how you use those tools. When you get both of them right, the result is an authentic executive persona.

Your Expressive Tools

There are only six tools available to you to project the nine qualities of executive presence – your eyes, face, body, voice, conversational pace, and message architecture. There is nothing more. These tools, however, represent the richest of expressive possibilities.

Think for a moment about what you can see in a person's eyes. The range of emotions they show is almost limitless. Flashes of surprise, concern, fear, and anger are easily read. The same is true of facial expressions beyond the eyes. The warmth of a smile is recognized everywhere, as are the messages from frowns, sneers, and clenched jaws. Your audience is constantly examining your use of these expressions in evaluating you and what you are saying.

If you face others with tightly crossed legs, arms folded over your chest, and a blank expression on your face, you will come across as being inaccessible and not open to their ideas. It doesn't matter what you are thinking or what you say. Similarly, if you speak in a monotone and at a steady pace, with no vocal inflection, punctuation, or rhythmic variety, you will be perceived as having no

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passion for what you are talking about, even though you really do. If your messages aren't crafted clearly and cleanly, you will be seen as a muddled thinker, even though you may have great ideas. If you speak with an edge to your voice and in a forceful declarative way, you will not elicit full and honest input from others, regardless of how much you want it.

The bottom line? If you want to be perceived as having executive potential, you must use your expressive tools in ways that cause your audiences to perceive you as an executive. You must learn to use them to *project* the nine qualities of executive presence. If you don't, how will your audiences ever know you have those qualities?

Exploiting our expressive tools is called *impression management*, and it's a big part of executive success. Impression management determines how we come across to others and engage with them. It's about giving them a more complete context for evaluating who we are. Can we be trusted and relied upon? Have we thought through options and fairly evaluated them? Have we done our homework and are we prepared? Do we care about what they think? Our audiences want to know the answers to these questions and look to signs outside the content of our messages to find them. But there's an important caveat: *If you want to create impressions that make false messages appear sincere, or to project qualities that aren't there, you are almost sure to fail.* That's because it's extremely difficult to do, even for professional actors who work in very controlled settings. There are simply too many things that give us away. Plus, our audiences, from small meetings to company-wide gatherings, are terrific at recognizing phonies.

You should now see that real executive presence is more than an event. It is repetitive behavior that creates a picture of who we are in the minds of others over time. That's why the nine qualities of executive presence and the expressive tools used to create them must be connected with the real you. This almost always requires replacing some older behaviors with newer ones more appropriate to the executive suite, while at the same time linking those replacements with our underlying patterns of thought and emotional expression.

What You Can Do Today

My first recommendation is that you sign-up for an executive presence workshop or executive presence coaching. It's one of the best investments you can make in both yourself and your career. If that's not a viable option for you now, do the following:

1. **Video yourself.** Capture yourself in conversation, participating in a meeting (or mock meeting), and giving a presentation. If you don't have a video camera, borrow one. You need to start the executive presence development process by getting a realistic look at how you come across to others.
2. **Review the video.** Look for how you project yourself with the nine expressive qualities of executive presence and how you use your expressive tools. Take some time with this. You want to get down to the specifics of what you are doing well, what you could improve upon, and what you need to do to improve.
3. **Make a list of improvement needs.** From your review of the video, write down exactly what you need to work on and how you will use your expressive tools to improve. Start with just a few targeted improvements. Changing behavior is hard, and you need to focus first on those few things that will make the biggest difference. Don't forget to evaluate message clarity. It is extremely important.

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4. **Get a professional evaluation of yourself.** If you use assessment instruments for this, make sure they provide you with specific, actionable information that helps you improve. Knowing how you naturally think and act provides the basis for authentically using your expressive tools.
5. **Enlist others.** Pick a few people whose judgment you trust and tell them what you are doing. Ask them to give you feedback on your performance. Your friends at work are especially important, since they see you engage with others in a variety of settings. Another way of enlisting the help of others is by watching how they express themselves. When you see something that really works, try it out and see if it works for you. By doing this, you have all kinds of models available to help you every day.
6. **Practice.** Get in front of a mirror and practice. Practice in front of others as well. You should also video yourself periodically to see how you've changed and what still needs further work and tuning.

Be Authentic

By now you should have a pretty good idea of what executive presence is and how it's created. As you embark on developing your own executive presence, remember to always be true to yourself. Use your expressive tools – your eyes, face, body, voice, vocal pacing, and message architecture – to engage more fully and productively with your audiences, regardless of how formal, informal, large, or small they are. Remember that your expressive tools are extensions of you. Good executive presence simply means you are using these tools in the best possible ways.

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At Executive Presence, our mission is to make you more effective through authentic and sustainable behavior change. We help you capitalize on your natural strengths and better manage the vulnerabilities that are holding you back.

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