

The importance of executive presence

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

PAULA IS EXCITED when her health system announces the position of chief nursing informatics officer. With her strong informatics background and years of leadership experience as her hospital's lead informatics nurse, she believes she's a perfect fit for this new executive position. When she isn't chosen for the final round of candidate interviews, she's crestfallen.

She decides to reach out to a trusted executive team member who mentored her during a leadership development program. He agrees she did seem to be the ideal candidate—but shares his opinion on what might have gone wrong. For officers at the top level of an organization, he points out, executive presence is a critical attribute. In several recent situations, Paula's requests for equipment upgrades were turned down and she became very emotional. Executives, he says, are expected to demonstrate grace under fire. Losing her composure at high-stakes meetings could have contributed to the perception that she isn't ready for the executive suite.



Paula learned the hard way that performance, hard work, and leadership potential may not be enough to propel you to the top. Marshall Goldsmith, executive coach and author of the international bestseller *What*

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Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful, advises leaders that the skills and habits that helped them reach a certain level might not be the right ones to take them further. At an organization's executive level, positions go to individuals who not only have the right skillset but who act, speak, and look the part.

This intangible leadership quality is executive presence, sometimes described as the X factor. Like Paula, some leaders focus on the "hard" factors of their performance, such as operational effectiveness and ability to manage a budget. But to develop executive presence, you need to recognize the importance of "soft" performance factors, such as communication skills, emotional intelligence, and ability to influence others.

What is executive presence?

The definition of executive presence is somewhat elusive. Sylvia Hewitt, author of *Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success*, used research to take the mystery out of this trait. Her findings indicate that executive presence rests on three pillars:

- **How you act:** Sometimes called gravitas, demeanor is the single most important component of executive presence. Two-thirds of leaders Hewitt surveyed said gravitas is what really matters. Leaders who display it have a deep breadth of knowledge in their areas of responsibility. Decisive and confident, they demonstrate grace under fire, especially in times of crisis.
- **How you speak:** The ability to communicate with the authority of a leader, using both verbal and nonverbal (body) language, is essential. Leaders with executive presence can capture and hold the attention of audiences through brief, straightforward communication. They can "read" a room successfully, maintain eye contact, and hit just the right tone to keep people engaged.
- **How you look:** Your manner of dress, appearance, and grooming is a critical filter through which others evaluate your ability to lead. While only 5% of lead-

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ers Hewitt surveyed identified appearance as important to executive presence, she points out that flash judgments are made quickly, and once they're made they tend to stick. Every organization has different expectations about dress, appearance, and grooming. Avoiding blunders is the key.

Strategies to develop your executive presence

The good news for leaders like Paula is that executive presence can be learned. Your own authenticity, personal power, and awareness of those around you are important building blocks. Your goal is to convey not only that you are in a leadership role, but also that you deserve to be there.

Getting the right feedback to improve your executive presence can be challenging. Here are five strategic areas you need to work on to develop it.

Dress the part and work on your physical appearance.

While appearance isn't the major component of executive presence, it does matter. Nurse leaders may not spend much time on their clothes, hair, or nails—but at the executive level, a well-polished appearance is important. Looking unkempt detracts from your gravitas. If you want an executive role, dress like you have one even before you seek the position.

Keep in mind that body language is part of your physical appearance. Distracting habits, poor posture, and failure to maintain eye contact when speaking detract from your executive presence.

Become more influential.

Over time, people with executive presence can learn to exude a “wow factor” that helps them influence others. They speak in clear, strong language and communicate with passion and energy, conveying the impression that others should listen to them.

Ultimately, influence is built on trusting relationships and the ability to express empathy in an authentic way. To be influential, you must have a point of view and be willing to express it. You also need draw others to you by staying present and focusing solely on them.

Develop a high level of emotional intelligence.

As Paula learned, emotional intelligence plays a critical part in establishing executive presence. Leaders need to control their emotions tightly and keep their composure even in challenging situations. This ability begins with self-awareness and learning to say the right thing at the right time—while leaving unsaid the wrong thing

at an emotional moment. Your ability to read an audience or situation accurately and respond with the right approach contributes to perceived executive presence.

Exude confidence in your abilities and knowledge.

Executives with presence are consummate professionals and can be relied on for their expertise. To be

taken seriously, you need to believe in your own abilities, use an authoritative tone, and display positive body language by standing tall, shaking hands, and making eye contact. Communicate with confidence and pay close attention not only to what you say but also to how you say it. Work hard to eliminate “filler” words (such as “um,” “uh,” and “so”) when speaking. Speak clearly and err on the side of brevity to help ensure others understand what you're saying. Leaders with executive presence aren't verbose because they know how easily they can lose an audience with too many words.

Be a trusted collaborator.

Executives rarely work alone. Being seen as a team member who can be trusted is crucial. Leaders with executive presence are willing to “speak truth to power” when it matters—even if it's politically unfavorable.

Getting it right

Executive presence is somewhat like wisdom, in that leaders develop it along the way. You can jump-start your journey through intentional practice. If you want to strengthen a behavior or develop a new one, first try it out. As Paula found, accurately evaluating your own executive presence and how others perceive you can be challenging. Most of us have blind spots about ourselves. Only through others' eyes can we get a clearer picture.

Paula was fortunate that her mentor could give her specific guidance on aspects of her behavior that didn't convey an executive presence. This is a good place to begin. To increase your own executive presence, ask a trusted advisor for honest feedback so you can take steps to manage others' perceptions of you. Remember—we follow leaders because of how they make us feel. Executive presence is about influence. It's a powerful tool in any leader's toolkit. ★

Visit www.AmericanNurseToday.com/?p=19954 for a list of selected references.

Rose Sherman is a professor of nursing and director of the Nursing Leadership Institute at the Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. You can read her blog at www.emergingnleader.com.