



spare change

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My two-cents toward sparking transformation

Executive Presence: Do You Have “IT”?

Recently, John, a C-Suite leader I know, asked me to coach one of his direct reports. He described this coaching client as “bright, technically gifted, and a very hard worker. She has tons of potential with our organization, he said, but her lack of “executive presence” is holding her back.”

I hear the words “lack of executive presence” as a coachable issue a lot. It’s one of my most sought after [presentation topics](#) and it’s often a derailer of high potential leaders. It’s hard for my clients to describe “executive presence” but when pressed, I hear: *“I’m not sure what it is, **but I know it when I see it.**”*

What is “Executive Presence”?

Your “executive presence” is a unique combination of skills that you display in your everyday encounters. Are you calm under pressure? Courageous in your communication? Confident in your abilities?

You use these skills in a wide variety of circumstances: in meetings with your team, in presenting to a board, in developing new business or when dealing with conflict.

Ultimately, possessing executive presence allows you to have influence. It’s about creating in your followers a sense of confidence and comfort that they **should** follow you, or better yet, that they **want** to follow you. Executive presence is a key leadership quality.



How Do I Develop Executive Presence?

You can certainly improve your executive presence through external measures like enhancing the professionalism of your attire or your grooming. But external changes only get you so far.

Lasting and impactful executive presence comes from the inside, specifically, targeted skill sets included in your emotional intelligence. What I'm saying is that what you display on the outside comes from the core of your emotions on the inside.

When it comes to garnering positive power and influence, what my experience shows is that there are seven key emotional intelligence skills that you can focus on in developing your executive presence. So my coaching clients experience two benefits: improved emotional intelligence **and** a stronger, authentic executive presence as well.

As you consider each skill, assess yourself and how the skill (or lack thereof) may be impacting your own executive presence.

1. **Self Regard:** Self regard is your inner feeling of unconditional acceptance and respect for yourself. You can imagine that it's difficult to have influence with others when you lack confidence in your own abilities. Why should anyone follow you when your own "reputation with yourself" is lacking?

Lack of confidence can undermine your executive presence by limiting your participation and input in meetings. It can also lead you to use qualifying language like "this may not be a good idea but..." versus communicating directly. Or you may find yourself displaying a timid demeanor. These behaviors definitely impact your ability to have influence.

2. **Self Awareness:** Self awareness is your ability to recognize your feelings and describe them, and to know the "why" behind them. Individuals with good self awareness realize the links between their feelings and what they think, do and say. Being in tune with yourself, your compass, allows you to make decisions for yourself in real time, say to speak up on an issue, or not. Knowing how you are feeling, and why, allows you to better evaluate complex situations and act accordingly.

A lack of self awareness can show up in a leader who displays a "win at all cost" attitude or a relentless driver who is totally self absorbed and oblivious to the impact of their behavior on



others. “Clueless” leaders are not leaders who inspire followers. And they do not possess executive presence.

3. **Empathy:** Empathy is the third EQ skill that is a cornerstone for executive presence. Empathy represents the foundational skill for all the social competencies required for work. These include understanding others, recognizing and meeting other’s needs, developing others and political awareness, as in reading the political and social currents in an organization. You can imagine why empathy is a powerful predictor of someone’s executive presence.

Empathy describes your ability to look at a situation through another’s eyes. And empathy is crucial for wielding influence. Just think, it’s difficult to have a positive impact on others without first sensing how others feel and understanding their position. It is fundamental to building rapport which is integral to influencing others.

4. **Assertiveness:** Assertiveness is being able to ask for what you want, stand your ground and defend a position in a way that does not diminish others. Assertiveness commands respect for others as well as respect for yourself.

Leadership demands toughness at times. Being either consistently passive or consistently aggressive can undermine your executive presence. The art of leadership involves knowing when to be assertive, for example confronting someone directly about their performance lapses, and when to be collegial and use less direct ways to guide or influence.

5. **Self actualization:** Self actualization is about engaging and developing both your passions and talents. From an executive presence perspective, when you are motivated and passionate about your work and life, you present yourself in a way that can motivate and influence others too.
6. **Reality testing:** Reality testing is about having the ability to see things as they actually are, rather than the way you wish they were or fear they might be. Reality Testing involves taking steps to see past our emotional hopes, fears, and biases so that you can recognize situations for what they really are.

When you have good reality testing skills, you are able to get data to either substantiate or disprove the stories you tell yourself. With poor reality testing skills, you look at the world with rose colored glasses or alternatively, like a classic “Debby Downer.” Individuals with a strong



executive presence are able to look at the world as it is and support their actions and behaviors with a realistic view of the facts.

7. **Stress tolerance:** Have you ever seen an effective leader run around “like a chicken with their head cut off?” I doubt it. Building stress tolerance is learning how to face difficulties, even a mountain of them, calmly, without falling apart or seriously fearing that you will.

We can fall apart emotionally in a variety of ways, such as feeling highly anxious, intensely irritable, worried, flustered, hopeless, demoralized, and apathetic. These words describe behaviors that represent the opposite of someone with executive presence.

How did you fare in evaluating yourself on these 7 eq skills? Do you think you possess “executive presence?” Although it’s a quality that’s hard to describe, executive presence is a quality that commands respect and ultimately leads to influence.

Building these seven EQ skills will send you on your way to creating the kind of influence and impact that delivers results. The [EQi 2.0 Assessment](#) is an outstanding, statistically validated tool to help you assess your EQ skills in these 7 facets. Contact [me](#) if you’d like to learn more.

Sure you can buy a more professional business suit or change other external appearances, but the most powerful, longer lasting impact comes from building your executive presence from the inside out.

About the Author: **Mary C. Werner, CPA, MOD** is the founder of *Werner Coaching and Consulting, Inc.*, a firm that builds on her more than 25 years of accounting, business and financial consulting experience. Mary is a certified executive coach and provides coaching to individuals and teams as well as organizational development consulting to facilitate individual and organizational change efforts. For more information, visit www.wernercoaching.com or contact Mary directly at Mary@wernercoaching.com