

## Executive Presence: I Know I Need It. How Do I Get It?

By **Jessika M. Ferm**

Executive presence – we all know when we're around someone who has it. Executive presence is hard to define, but it encompasses a combination of physical, mental and emotional qualities that cause an individual to project a certain level of sophistication, charisma and energy. While a business presence is a highly personal matter and there is no "one size fits all" formula to developing one, there are some tips that can help you get started at differentiating yourself professionally.

**Improve Your Posture:** Research indicates that people with good posture who carry themselves erectly are perceived as having confidence. An important aspect of projecting executive presence is the ability to communicate positively through body language. The good news is that it doesn't matter if you are tall or short, you can easily maximize your executive presence by standing up straight, positioning your head with ears aligned with the shoulders, and relaxing the arms. It is a deceptively simple exercise and for many it takes years to correct the hunched-over position we have become accustomed to after years of working in front of computers. Posture is so important that actors and celebrities are now hiring posture coaches to help them exude confidence and increased presence in order to get noticed.

**Communicate Strategically:** Some clients who come to us for executive presence coaching realize that they aren't being noticed by key decision-makers and are often passed over for promotional opportunities or challenging assignments. It isn't that they aren't good performers or great team players, they just seem to get lost in the crowd. One strategy to get noticed without being abrasive is to start asking meaningful questions in meetings or sharing information that others may find valuable. Leaders with a high executive presence quotient are inquisitive and curious. They come across as caring and engaged without self-importance or bravado. This strategy works for introverts and extroverts alike. If you tend to dominate meetings with your comments and feedback, practicing asking questions instead of making statements shows a heightened sense of self-awareness and it

invites others to join the conversation.

**Manage Your Body Language:** We all send non-verbal signals about how we feel, think or perceive a situation. If we are impatient, we may tap our feet or hands or we may be prone to interrupting others. One of my clients said, "I'm tapping my fingers to send a message that the person needs to speed up what they are saying." My response to this type of statement is always, "Does it make that person speed up?" and the answer is always "No." Instead, we are sending an ineffective signal that we are impatient and that the other person's information or presentation isn't valuable. Instead of sending non-verbal signals, which are often confusing, consider tactfully asking the person to hit some key points or communicate with him or her after the presentation how they could have been more effective. Once you can master your non-verbal communication signals, you will come across as a person who is caring, considerate, and a great listener. These are all aspects of executive presence.

**Accept Your Flaws:** The first three tips offer you some tactical solutions for developing your executive presence right away. Accepting your flaws and developing increased self-awareness may take a lifetime. It is an ongoing process with no end in sight. The good news is that you can begin by coming across as more self-aware immediately. Get comfortable accepting your flaws or mistakes by admitting to them or acknowledging critical feedback. I know this isn't easy, but it will work wonders for your executive presence. For example, if you are told you made a mistake, practice responding with, "Thank you for pointing that out. What one action step can I take to avoid this mistake in the future?" or "I wasn't aware that I was doing that. Thank you for sharing your feedback. It allows me to improve." Most of us are defensive about our flaws and weaknesses and our natural response is to fight back or defend. People with high degrees of executive presence are non-judgmental of themselves and others and they are open to accepting information in a neutral manner because they understand that's how they learn and improve.

These four tips will help you get started in developing your executive presence. One good exercise is to evaluate yourself on a scale from 1-10 (1 being lowest and 10 being highest), and rate yourself on where you feel your executive presence is right now. Implement a few of these strategies and re-rate yourself in about six months. You may even want to ask a trusted friend or colleague to rate you pre- and post- to see if you are making significant steps forward.

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