

The Essence of Presence and How It Enhances a Leader's Value

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Presence. The word itself is powerful, and the concept is even more so. Known also as executive presence, this concept can make a difference in being a successful leader.

ence emerged. The easiest way to remember them is to think A, B, C—appearance, behavior (gravitas), and communication. Readily, we could agree each of those elements is critical. However, the synthesis of these elements combined with being genuine and having intentionality create presence (*Figure 1*).

THE ESSENCE OF PRESENCE

“Creating an impression on others” is how Hedges³ described the core of presence. As a result, everything we do and say creates a view of who we are for others. Leaders, by virtue of our positions, are watched by other people. This is true for informal leaders, too. Responding in a flippant manner to a question, for example, may be seen as humorous in a meeting, but when presented out of context, may seem offensive. In other words, we are quoted (and misquoted), watched, and evaluated. Sometimes that is done with malicious intent. Other times, it is done to capitalize on Kouzes and Posner’s⁴ point about leadership when they describe how leaders model the way. That means that people who want to be more influential watch those in positions of influence in order to emulate “what leadership looks like here.” Thus, they attend to the appearance, behavior, and communication leaders exhibit and learn from watching those ABCs.

APPEARANCE

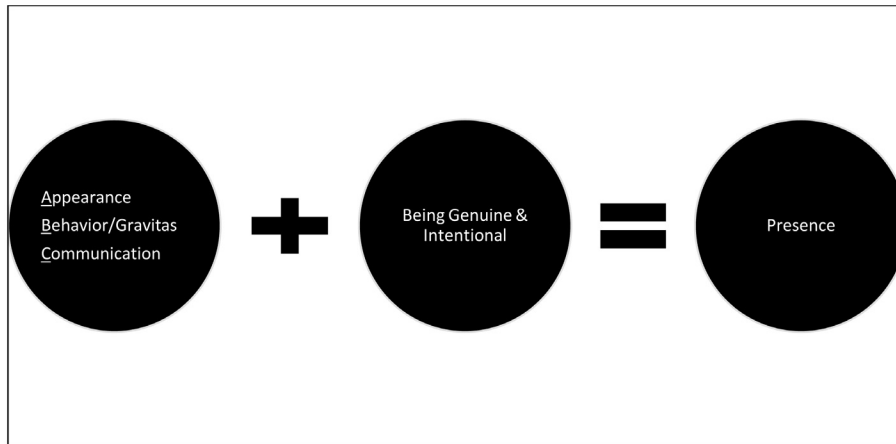
The good news about appearance is that Hewlett² found it accounted for only 5% of the factors contributing to someone being seen as a leadership candidate. However, she thought that even though the percentage of influence was small, appearance is likely to act as a preliminary filter.² If our appearance is too discordant with an organization’s culture, we are not likely to be seen as having presence and thus not seen as a good fit.

When we think of appearance, we may think about the numerous examples of “make overs” where one’s wardrobe is transformed from jeans to suits or one is given a total makeover. Most organizations address the issue of appearance

Presence is a complex concept. The third definition of this word in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary is “someone or something that is seen or noticed in a particular place, area, etc.”¹ As Hewlett² suggested, it involves confidence, poise, authenticity, communication, and social awareness. “Executive presence is all about inspiring trust and confidence in others,”² and who of us does not wish to do that? Presence is evidenced when someone enters a room and heads turn or the din of conversation diminishes. It isn’t about fame or fashion; yet notoriety and appearance contribute to one’s presence.

From research Hewlett² conducted involving a national survey and numerous focus groups, 3 core elements of pres-

Figure 1. A Formula for Creating Presence.



with a dress code policy that tends to include general guidelines as opposed to prescriptive ones—until a major violation of the intent of the policy occurs and then details appear. Thus, in general, each of us has to use a scan of the environment to get a sense of what appears to be the expected and accepted, and then exercise common sense in how we determine that on a personal basis.

Hewlett’s² research, however, found that the practicalities of appearance were the most influential. In other words, appearance was not judged by beauty, height, or shape, or by the brand of clothing worn. It was judged primarily as “polished and groomed.”² No matter our financial resources or our fashion sense, we can all meet the expectation of being clean, neat, polished, and groomed. Hedges³ offered that we can cultivate presence by dressing for the position we would like to hold. Because appearance often determines whether we engage with someone else, and to what extent, “looking like” is an important consideration in creating presence.

BEHAVIOR/GRAVITAS

Hedges³ described behavior from 2 perspectives. The first is the one we commonly consider—body language, facial expression, and proximity to another are examples. Hedges called that behavior *microactions*. Each of those elements conveys a message about presence. Someone who sits in a slouchy manner is not seen as powerful, as an example.

The macroactions are even more important, however.³ They consist of such elements as how we spend time and our consistency. If we say we value input of nurses in direct care and examine our schedules only to find no meetings with anyone in that category or little time devoted to rounds at the unit level, the message is mixed. Macroactions help others see that the words we say have real meaning because we have evidence of how we have carried out our stated belief. Another example of identifying the core values of nursing in an organization highlights the significance of macroactions. We would likely agree that the value “caring” would be translated to the interactions with patients. Yet, from a personnel perspective, we might not see that value lived based on policies that seem to diminish the worth of a group of (or all) employees.

Table 1. Importance of Behavior on Presence by Sex of Participants²

Behavior	Women	Men
<i>Confidence/grace under fire</i>	79%	76%
<i>Decisiveness</i>	70%	70%
<i>Integrity</i>	64%	63%
<i>Emotional intelligence</i>	61%	58%

The combination of microactions and macroactions needs to be consistent to create a sense of gravitas.³ Although only some people know the details of how someone spends his/her time, everyone with whom a person comes in contact experiences the microactions.

Hewlett² found this factor (behavior/gravitas) to be the most prominent influence on seeing someone as having presence. In fact, 67% of respondents in a survey of 268 executives said this element was important.² The most descriptive terms used appear in Table 1.

How we respond when hit with an unexpected comment or question is a test of the idea of grace under fire. And, in today’s environment, many people are frequently under fire. Being able to look calm, remaining attentive to comments, and responding without defensiveness or anger are examples of exhibiting this self-security. It doesn’t mean that we aren’t anxious, we are. We choose not to share that anxiety with others to protect those we are responsible to lead.

Being decisive, in Hewlett’s² study, didn’t necessarily refer to the need to be in charge. Rather, it referred to someone’s ability to make a decision effectively and then stick with it. Integrity related to being honest; and emotional intelligence was reflective of how appropriate we are in interacting with people in a manner suited to their needs.

COMMUNICATION

Whenever something goes wrong, someone cites communication as a part, if not the source, of the problem. So, it is no

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