

# Understanding Executive Presence

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## Introduction

Talk to any Chief Learning Officer in the Indian IT Services industry. One development need which keeps coming up frequently is Executive Presence. What exactly is Executive Presence? And how do we develop Executive presence?

## Executive presence in action

Imagine waiting in a conference room for a meeting to start. All of us are busy as usual, trying to locate a network cable. The few of us who are successful in this endeavor, start pounding away on the key board to clear the back log of pending emails. We don't even realize who the person is sitting next to us! We are not present!

Suddenly, someone say Ram, enters the room. The moment Ram enters, the atmosphere in the room is transformed. Ram walks in with a broad smile on his face. He starts walking around, shaking hands with people and enquiring how they have been. People in the room take their eyes off the laptop screen and start smiling. They suddenly realize some new energy is flowing through them and the burden of the pending emails is gone!

When Ram speaks, he gets our attention almost effortlessly. There is complete clarity in what he is trying to convey. Even though Ram is speaking on a complex topic that is difficult to understand and apply, he has an air of self-assurance and knows exactly what is to be said. Ram has interesting examples to illustrate each point he makes. The right words and sentences seem to come to him effortlessly. At the same time, Ram does not display any false bravado or arrogance. He makes his presence felt in the room without displaying unnecessary flamboyance or hype. We do not get a feeling he is trying to "impress" us.

The way Ram looks at us, it is also obvious he has struck an emotional chord with us. As Ram speaks, when we find it difficult to comprehend something and give a perplexed look, he seems to catch on quickly and asks us what it is we do not understand. When we ask a question, he looks at us with rapt attention and empathy, as if no one else is around in the room. The way he tries to understand our query, rearticulates it for the benefit of others and responds is impressive to say the least. When Ram finally finishes his talk, we all wish, he would have spoken for some more time. A strange feeling indeed considering that on most occasions we tear our hair in frustration and hope that the meeting will finish quickly and we can get back to our work.

### **The building blocks**

Now that we have seen executive presence in action, it is time to attempt a working definition. Executive presence is nothing but the ability of leaders to connect authentically with the thoughts and feelings of others and thereby inspire them to channelize their energies in the right direction.

Executive presence has 4 building blocks:

- a) **Being present:** We must be attentive to what is going on, feeling and experiencing the people around us and flexible enough to adjust our behaviors according to the needs of the situation.
- b) **Connection:** We must be able to connect with the audience through empathetic listening and by displaying authentic (not put on) behaviors.
- c) **Expressiveness:** We must be able to express ourselves effectively using words, voice modulation, facial expressions and body language.
- d) **Self-awareness:** We must know what we stand for and align what we communicate with our values.

### **Concluding notes**

Clearly, executive presence is an important attribute of successful leaders. And there is general agreement that executive presence is an absolutely critical capability to develop as we enter the ranks of senior management. Is it not time

we paid more attention to this important area? We do not need to be gifted speakers to develop executive presence. Simple steps can get us there.

- To start with, we need to pay more attention to what others are saying during meetings.
- We should not get distracted by our smart phones and laptops.
- When we speak, we must be careful not to ramble and not mechanically read out from our PPT slides.
- We must try to keep our message simple and focused.
- Instead of reeling out facts, we must narrate stories.
- We must check every now and then that people are with us.
- We must learn to pick up cues from the audience to understand when they are enjoying and when they are getting bored.

If we do all this, we can certainly master this skill.