

Executive Presence: What is it and How to Get it

Stephen Long

Abstract

Executive presence is demonstrated by leaders who achieve high performance, while doing it the right way. Research conducted by The Institute for Level Six Leadership at the University of Kansas and the United States Air Force Academy has shown that leadership skills can be acquired and developed. Leaders who are able to connect the ends of continuums such as action and thinking, the abstract and the concrete, and the theoretical and the practical experience heightened judgment, stronger character and greater emotional maturity within themselves and their followers. Four components of executive presence are identified in the paper:

1. Successful track record
2. Establishing trust through high performance
3. Self-management skills
4. Relationship management skills.

Using the Level Six Leadership concept as a foundation, seven American executives were interviewed on the topic of executive presence. Executives served in both the private and public sectors and it appears that executive presence can be developed in both segments of management.

Key words

Executive presence; leadership; trust; high performance; credibility; character; emotional intelligence; personal effectiveness; judgment; authenticity; decision-making; risk-analysis; communication; power

Introduction

In the opening scene of the legendary film, *Casablanca*, an employee walks intently through the casino with a piece of paper in hand. The employee arrives at a table and reaches across to hand the paper to an unseen recipient. All the viewer can see is the recipient writing his signature authorising a payment of 1,000 francs with the words – ‘Rick-OK’. The camera slowly pans up to Humphrey Bogart’s face, and the viewer becomes aware of who Rick Blaine is. From the opening scene, Rick establishes that he’s the boss, and in the end, he has the

executive presence to do the right thing.

What is executive presence?

Executive presence is demonstrating the judgment and character to do the right thing –to be the leader who’ll get the job done with integrity and inspire others to fully commit to the task, mission and vision. Mark W Sickles, an adviser to corporate boards and executive teams, knows executive presence when he sees it. ‘*When executives with presence walk into the room, people think, “now something good is going to happen”*’,

says Sickles. *'These leaders are respected for the job they're doing, not just the job they're in'* (Personal communication, 4 November 2008). Bart Nasta, Director of Information Services for Perot Systems, experienced executive presence up close and personal in founder Ross Perot. *'People respect the leader not so much for their position, but for their personal effectiveness and credibility.'* (Personal communication, 14 November 2008)

Executive presence has less to do with titles and hierarchy and more to do with the judgement and competency that enables high performance to occur. Leaders with executive presence display multi-dimensional skills sets. They not only set strategy, they also implement the plan and lead others to assist them. They think *and* do. In essence, it comes down to character; those with executive presence have the *judgement* to determine the right course of action and have the *fortitude* to drive the implementation process to completion.

Executive presence, like character, combines the head and the heart of the leader. Great leaders have a passion for the business and display the judgment to make the right decisions. David Zumwalt, the Executive Director of the University of the Virgin Islands Research and Technology Park Corporation (RTPark) says, *'Executive presence arises from a multifaceted set of skills. The leader must exude authenticity, which includes confidence, competence and the ability to engage emotionally, as well'* (Personal communication, 17 November 2008). Self-awareness, intellectual and interpersonal competencies are probably the most important aspects of executive presence, but David Cardenas of Olympus Partners has learned that executive presence must include an integrated developmental approach (Personal communication, 10 November 2008).

How to get it

Can a leader acquire executive presence? The answer is yes.

Can any leader acquire executive presence? Though all executives can improve, developing true executive presence is probably not within everyone's reach to the same degree.

How does a leader acquire executive presence? The answer is simple to explain, but takes work and time to achieve.

Build a foundation

Cardenas says that experience and a successful track record are a good start, though they're

only prerequisites (Personal communication 10 November 2008). They're an imperative foundation to build on and without a strong performance background an executive will never acquire executive presence. Developing it, though, involves more than just putting in time and delivering the numbers; executive presence develops organically over time, not with an instant epiphany. Like the sun coming out from behind the clouds, executive presence emerges gradually throughout a career.

Establish trust

Rick Turner, President of Greenbrier Rail Services-Wheel Division believes that trust is the cornerstone of the leader-follower relationship. Over time, leaders earn the trust of followers and other stakeholders. Turner says, *'Trust is based in degrees in the beginning of the relationship, then is eventually measured in black and white terms'* (Personal communication, 20 November, 2008) Again, performance is the primary driver.

In the beginning of the relationship, most employees give the benefit of the doubt to the new leader. If the executive delivers, trust grows stronger, however, if failure is experienced, trust grows weaker. Both trust and distrust are developed by the rule of three – one instance is an aberration, two's a trend and three's a law. After time and more evidence, trust is either firmly established or permanently lost, based on whether they've seen consistent success or consistent failure.

Manage yourself – intellectually and emotionally

Potential leaders initially develop the ability to manage and lead themselves before they're able to manage and lead others. If executives are unable to lead and manage themselves, they'll never be able to manage and lead others.

Self-management has two primary skill sets. One for the head – intellectual skills, and one for the heart – emotional skills. Most executives believe that any given person is predisposed to one or the other skills sets and that a person cannot have both a high IQ and a high level of emotional intelligence, often referred to as EQ. Leaders with executive presence manage this paradox successfully by developing both their heads and hearts.

Tad McIntosh, president of HumCap, an HR outsourcing and executive search firm based in Dallas, recognises the need for a pragmatic mindset in the executives that he's placed. *'Leaders with executive presence see the reality of a situation',*

McIntosh says, *'To get to point b, they clearly see where point a is; not just the problem, but also organisationally, individually and personally'* (Personal communication 10 November 2008). It's vital for the executive to understand how the organisation ranks against competitors, what the employees need in order to contribute so the organisation moves forward and have a clear idea of their own strengths and weaknesses. Executives must accurately identify the problem so they're able to determine which resources are allocated to its solution.

Self-management also influences decision-making capabilities. According to John Fitzpatrick, president and CEO of Woodcraft Industries, leaders who lack self-management skills, also lack intellectual skills in risk analysis. *'They fail to consider the consequences of their decisions, positive and negative, and they're unable to predict what will happen next. They also lack decision-making discipline. Decisions are reflexive rather than reflective'*, he states (Personal communication 10 November 2008).

Just as important as intellectual skills are the emotional skills a leader possesses. Many assume only intellectual skills can be developed, but it's been empirically proven that emotional skills such as confidence, discipline and frustration tolerance are not only learnable, but have a significant positive impact on executive performance. Decisions based on fear and frustration rarely translates into productive actions. Fitzpatrick studies the level of self-awareness of his executives. *'Insecure people are revealed under pressure. They fail to address their weakness because they fail to admit their weaknesses to themselves'*, says Fitzpatrick. And it affects their work. Fitzpatrick adds, *'Insecure people fail to prepare because they rely too heavily on their inherent talent rather than applying the fundamental need for hard work'* (Personal communication, 10 November 2008).

Manage your relationships

Cardenas believes that *'empathy is a highly under-recognised and under-valued leadership skill'* (Personal communication, 10 November 2008). Empathy is more than seeing a perspective from another's viewpoint. It also includes the ability to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of a particular person or group and foresee the roadblocks they'll face. In essence, empathy is vital to seeing the reality of the entirety of a situation.

At the heart of relationship management is communication. McIntosh describes relationship

management as *'the ability to capture an audience'* (Personal communication, 10 November 2008) More than productivity, relationship management is the foundation for establishing a belief system within the organisation, which cements organisational culture. People look for opportunities to experience excellence and high performers look for strong leaders who'll provide a path toward excellence. Zumwalt says, *'The only resource you can truly leverage is people, and during the time they spend with you they're either learning how to do something, or how not to do it. It takes "A" players to positively influence and persuade other "A" players'*. (Personal communication, 17 November 2008)

Just as with self-management, relationship management is a matter of the heart and the head. Leaders set the direction with their heads and then engage their employees with their hearts. Leaders are able to digest abstract concepts and turn them into practical action – this is where we're going and this is how we're going to get there. *'The vision becomes reality'*, says Zumwalt, *'the strategy becomes achievable and people recognise that'* (Personal communication, 17 November 2008).

Cardenas has seen leaders with executive presence and their employees 'get it'. Executives establish clarity to the direction of the organisation. Says Cardenas, *'The vision may be theoretically based, but it's communicated in a pragmatic manner. The vision is logical and linear. It's not sexy. The leaders spells out what, who, how and when and people get excited by doing it, by experiencing success, not by just hearing about it.'* (Personal communication, 10 November 2008)

Cardenas witnessed that leaders with executive presence are able to manage internally and externally. *'Position power means nothing outside the organisation. While it's important to manage downward and align people to the vision, it's equally important to manage upward and outward. The ability to persuade people is crucial. If the leader relies too heavily on his position within the organisation, then he'll never be effective outside the organisation.'* (Personal communication, 10 November 2008)

Sound relationship management skills coupled with self-management skills leads to accountability. Turner states, *'There is a direct relationship between accountability and trust. Both the leader and employees must fulfil their functions'* (Personal communication, 20 November 2008). Leaders with executive presence recognise that *'when they design work to be significant and important, employees will freely give an extraordinary effort leading to superior performance'*,

says Sickles (Personal communication, 4 November 2008). The combination of self-management and relationship management skills brings a strong sense of dignity into the workplace.

Do the right thing – effectively and authentically

Leaders with executive presence have the ability to align their personal ambitions to the needs of the organisation. Leaders recognise their own talents and use them in a productive manner. Nasta uses his problem-solving and analytical skills to do what he really wants to do – help other people, specifically his employees and clients. Only by demonstrating strengths in a productive and healthy manner, do leaders demonstrate authenticity. Nasta believes that leaders must *'have a passion for the business. They should recognise the social relevance of the product or service that the company provides. And it doesn't apply only to work. Leaders should have a passion during off-hours through continuous improvement and learning. Bottom line, they act consistently in their professional life and personal life. They may or may not have the same executive presence in their personal life, but their actions are*

consistent and authentic' (Personal communication, 14 November 2008). The fact is, personal behaviour affects reputation and directly impacts the ability to persuade people.

In the end, executive presence is about character. Executive presence is displayed by doing the right thing in the right way and getting consistent results. The leader strives to find solutions without cutting corners. *'People won't go all-in if they don't trust the top guy'* says Fitzpatrick. (Personal communication, 10 November 2008) Without trust, employees resort to 'survivalism' – paying more attention to their personal agendas than the organisational mission.

Executive presence is a result of the head and heart working together to their maximum capabilities. *'Judgement and wisdom, character and courage – these are the things that effective leaders convey consistently'* says Sickles (Personal communication, 4 November 2008). They do the right thing. Nasta sums it up, *'It's about being a whole person. Leaders with executive presence have both a high IQ and a high EQ.'* (Personal communication, 14 November, 2008)