

MANAGING YOURSELF

Developing Executive Presence

by Joshua Ehrlich

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“Make her two inches taller!” This command came from Bruce, an executive who wanted me to work with his most talented direct report. Amy was a brilliant high potential who Bruce hoped would succeed him, but she had one serious flaw – she lacked presence.

When I met Amy this was immediately visible. She was indeed short – a slight woman who walked quickly, hunched over so she occupied even less space. When she spoke, it was hesitantly with her hand over her mouth. She seldom made eye contact and glanced nervously around the ceiling as we talked.

I knew this would be challenging – but not impossible. Presence is not some innate quality that you either have or do not. It is a set of learned behaviors that enable you to command attention. And when you are fully present, it inspires others.

Amy understood this intellectually but didn’t know where to begin. In her case, we progressed through these general principles to improve her executive presence:

Focus. Attention is like a flashlight waving wildly around a dark room, and there is need to focus that attention mindfully and intentionally. Amy learned to pay attention to her breathing, which she used as an anchor to expand her awareness to include her body and external surroundings. As she became more in tune with her body, she began to relax.

Use body language. In addition to learning from the inside-out, work from the outside-in by increasing awareness of the messages your body sends. Amy’s strategy was to “carry herself like a queen.” Walking upright made her feel more poised and dignified, and she began to outwardly convey more authority.

Reflect on your habits. As Amy's trust and comfort grew I was able to ask why she held her hand over her face. We explored some of the layers of her traditional Asian upbringing, such as the importance of not standing out. She also realized that being a woman in a male-dominated environment had led her to de-feminize herself. We continued to reflect on her identity, and she began experimenting with how to express herself through her appearance. Introspective conversations like this – either within us or with others – can help you face your fears and start experimenting more courageously.

Practice with support. Letting a colleague or mentor know you are working on presence can boost your skills and confidence. Bruce noticed Amy's more open demeanor, and his feedback reinforced her positive momentum. He started inviting her to speak to larger audiences in the organization.

Connect, don't transact. Maintaining your presence in front of an audience can be daunting, and public speaking for Amy was initially uncomfortable. She videotaped herself, using her breath to give some words more weight and the occasional "presidential pause." She connected with audiences by learning to tell engaging and captivating stories. Mindfulness also helped her to clear her head so she could think strategically, which enabled her to influence more effectively. Soon she began to enjoy interacting with groups.

Be still. Calm is the foundation of presence – a tall order for most busy executives. To maintain a peaceful center, Amy learned to use breath-awareness as a barometer of her anxiety. She was able to speed up and slow down intentionally without negatively impacting her clarity or relationships. No longer abrupt or impulsive, she could set boundaries, handle interruptions and ensure she had time to think under stress.

After several months, Bruce, Amy, and I met to close out the coaching. Bruce commented, "I asked for two inches and I got two feet!" In the past, this kind of feedback would make Amy shrink from embarrassment. Without missing a beat she thanked us both, smiling graciously.

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