

66,678 views | May 10, 2013, 08:21am

Owning the Room -- Establishing Your Leadership Presence

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As an executive or want-to-be executive, wouldn't you love to have presence? Wouldn't you love to have people drawn to you when you speak and pay attention to what you are saying? Presence is one of the most common characteristics shared by over 150 CEOs that have come to our CEO Insights class or Speaker Series here at McGill. Two in particular lit up the room, Sir Richard Branson and Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus; very, very different personalities yet both had presence.

Presence or lack thereof is crucial in many different industries. It is a strange thing to watch an actor fall out of a scene. One minute they are driving the plot drawing you in and making you believe that you are right there with them. And then suddenly, it all stops. You are released from their world, you notice the person texting in front of you or decide to check your own phone. It is hard to identify why you lose interest.

This also tends to happen in boardrooms across the country. Some leaders seem to pull you in while others have you reaching for your phones, more interested in Facebook updates than your boss's vision for the company. Don't blame shortened attention spans or the new found connectivity that comes with a globalised world. The reason so many audience members whether in a movie or in a board room feel disconnected is because their speaker/leader tends to lack presence.

But can you learn presence? Our CEO visitors believe so. Most were typically vague however about the specifics of how to get there. So when I picked up the new book, *Own the Room*, I was intrigued – thankfully, the book delivers the goods.

Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins address the issue of presence in their book *Own The Room*. Both authors are executive coaches who help their clients find their signature voice, in order to build their leadership presence. A signature voice is their key idea – and it is an important one. They describe signature voice as “a unique leadership presence that is confident, authentic, and effective.”

Authenticity is a hot topic in leadership research these days, it is seen as critical component of leadership, particularly for the Millennials or Postmoderns, as co-author Margaret Snell and I call them in the book we are currently working on.

The authors define leadership presence as “the ability to consistently and clearly articulate your value proposition while influencing and connecting with others”. The authors take a holistic approach to developing a leader’s signature voice by having you focus on three key things: assumptions, communication strategies and energy – or **ACE** conditioning, as they call it.

Assumptions – know yours! Assumptions that we hold dear can propel you to greatness or hold you back, but without being aware of these assumptions, you will never know how they are acting for you. These beliefs are important because they permeate every interaction. Therefore you have to condition these assumptions, keeping those that work, and discarding the negative ones that pull you down. Three critical assumptions that every leader should examine are:

- Confidence – what you bring to the table
- Perspective – what hat you wear
- Clarity – what your values are

If you can frame these assumptions in a positive and collaborative fashion, these assumptions can help enable your leadership presence.

Communication strategies– own your style. Communication is all about practice and precision. You must know what you want to convey and you must practice choosing the right strategy in order to properly convey that message. There are so many ways in which communication can break, and so many channels that can be used, therefore conditioning of this skill is crucial to success. Points to remember to achieve the best communication strategy:

- Frame the discussion

- Practice advocacy
- Connect and engage your audience

Energy – actions speak louder than words. Energy is all about conditioning your physicality to help strengthen the delivery of your message. This relates to managing how your body language and mood affect others. People can get all sorts of cues from your non-verbal behaviour and it is important for you to make sure that you are sending the right ones.

- Know your physical cues
- Set the tone for your organization with your energy
- Make your presence known – identify key members who need face time

By addressing basic assumptions, communication strategies and the energy with which you communicate, you are able to address the mental self, your skills, and your physical self. This provides an all-round strategy for concentrating one's time and energy on specific elements of presence rather than floundering with vague statements. Su and Wilkins have also developed a diagnostic framework that enables you to diagnose your current level of presence and allow you to identify the areas in which you need to improve.

They split the *Signature Voice* into two different but equally important components. The “Inner Voice” is able to dictate a person's distinctiveness and value that they along with their team bring to a situation. The “Voice of Others” concerns the ability to connect with and impact stakeholders. Together these two components make up the “Signature Voice”, and both components need to be strong in order to achieve presence in leadership.

Often a person is strong in voice but weak in the other area. The authors address this problem with their presence quadrants (a 2 by 2 grid, with voice of self on one axis and voice of others on the other) in order to locate one's current voice position and therefore identify the area in which you need to focus.

Identifying your quadrant

Voice of Others: Are you generally more passive in meetings, always allowing other people to speak first? Do colleagues see you as collaborative individual and

someone they are able to confide in, someone who has good advice? If the answer is yes to these questions – you most likely belong in the supportive quadrant, meaning you have a strong voice of other. Research suggests that this is a great strength of introverted people.

In my personal research, I have interviewed over 50 CEOs, in which quite a few were introverted. They see the desire and ability to listen as a great strength, which it is. This is something to be proud of, but it also means that you may tend to neglect your own voice and people may have trouble grasping your value proposition. CEOs that are more introverted have all, in my research, learned to act like an extrovert when the situation requires ie to have the presence in relation to the position they hold. This is not dissimilar to what the book calls, voice of the self.

Voice of the self: You are often told you have a vision and are driven to achieve that vision. Generally you tend to evaluate decisions by their effect on your or your team's agenda. This can sometimes lead others to be critical of your singular focus. If this describes you, then you most likely fall into this category. You often connect with more extrovert related behaviour. You may need to work on incorporating other stakeholder viewpoints in order to achieve a strong signature voice.

Own the Room allows readers to identify their assumptions, communicate strategically and be more aware of how their energy levels affect their message. If you can identify with which voice you need to perfect, then you are well on your way to gaining your signature voice and achieving leadership presence. These lessons can help you achieve presence in a number of different situations and can be taught to fellow team mates and those who you lead. So rather than having everyone reach for their phones; keep them engaged and in the moment.

This was written with Emma Bambrick, a soon to be graduate of McGill and a former student and research assistant of mine. She helped organize this year's Hot Cities of World Tour –Part 5, this time to Russia.



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I am a professor at the Desautels Faculty, McGill University and have been an Fellow/associate fellow at Green Templeton College, Oxford University for over 20 years. Fo...

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