

# Executive Presence Summary

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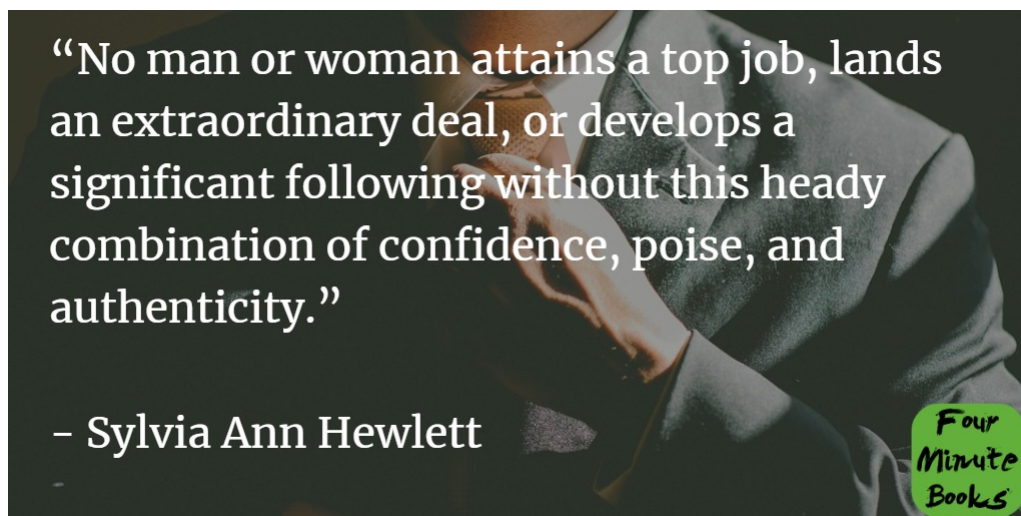


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**1-Sentence-Summary:** *Executive Presence* is an insightful and actionable overview of the most essential components of a successful leader's presence.

**Read in:** 4 minutes

**Favorite quote from the author:**



Whether you want to succeed in a corporate environment, politics, or as a performer, you need adequate skills and qualifications. But if you believe that these are what matter most, then Sylvia Hewlett would not agree with you.

While doing nationwide research for *Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success*, Hewlett found that the one thing that is more important than your merits is your presence. By "presence," she means the unique, distinguishable quality that you bring just by entering a room. Hewlett claims that this trait is the make-or-break factor for whether others will see you as worth following.

The concept of "presence" may sound confusing and undefinable at first. That's why Hewlett wrote this book in which she examines the main elements of a successful executive presence (EP). The examination focuses on a range of opinions from people in various sectors and occupations. Hewlett identifies three main components of a compelling EP: how you act (gravitas), the way you speak (communication), and what you look like (appearance).

Here are 3 lessons about each of these components:

1. Gravitas is the core of executive presence.
2. It's not *what* you say that counts, but *how* you say it.

### 3. Your physical appearance matters a great deal.

The good news is that you don't need to be born with these qualities, but you can work on them. Want to know how? Let's check it out!

## Lesson 1: Executive presence starts with your gravitas.

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More than half of the leaders surveyed by Hewlett pointed to gravitas as the core foundation of EP. **They usually defined gravitas as the ability to exude integrity, calmness, and confidence under the most pressing circumstances.**

Times of crisis are the best test of a leader's gravitas. One experience of the oil company BP illustrates how this may play out in real life.

In April 2010, crude oil spilled from the BP-operated Macondo prospect in the Gulf of Mexico. The government held the company responsible, which resulted in a PR crisis as the press grilled executives. Bob Dudley, the managing director of the company at the time, stepped up to the mark of representing BP during this difficult time.

Dudley remained patient and compassionate and didn't hold back from answering even one question. This was an ultimate test for his executive presence, and he passed with excellence. His gravitas proved to be so strong that within a few months he became the CEO of the company.

The secret to a great EP lies in finding the sweet spot between being compassionate and able to make tough decisions. Once you make a hard choice, own it with confidence and integrity. This may mean that you will experience criticism, but that's ok. As long as you can communicate why you did what you did, people will, at the very least respect you.

## Lesson 2: Good communication is about the "how" much more than the "what."

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Strong communication skills are an accurate representation of whether you qualify as a leader or not. How you present yourself and your opinions are much more important than what you are saying.

Suzi Digby, a British choral instructor, says that you have a mere *five-second slot* to first engage with your audience after you meet them. This is the famous "power of first impressions" that you should seize to your advantage. How can you do this?

**Start by showing yourself as completely human.**

Use the first moments of your interaction with others to establish a way for them to relate to you. Once you do this, there are certain guidelines to follow, based on Hewlett's survey responses. Follow these, and your EP will gain bonus points:

- Share insights through stories, rather than abstract ideas.
- Read the people who are in the room and adjust your way of speaking to them.
- Finally, focus on the technical aspects of your speech, such as proper grammar, reducing filler words, and controlling the pitch of your voice.

While all of that sounds like a lot to keep an eye on, you can master it with practice. The best way to do this is by requesting specific feedback. Rather than asking: "How did I do?", go for more detailed questions. For example, ask, "What did you think of my body language?" or "Was I in alignment with the group's mood?"

## Lesson 3: Your physical appearance is important, too.

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Even though Hewlett enlists your looks only as the third factor accounting for EP, it still matters. This is not to say that you need to look flawless, bold, and beautiful. The rule of thumb here is that your appearance shouldn't distract people from your professional competence, but should instead emphasize it.

Even before people get a chance to assess your gravitas or communication skills, they already get an impression about you from how you look. If they don't think you look adequate in the first place, they won't even bother assessing your other values.

The significance of a good appearance can go even further. Deb Elam, an executive from General Electric, says that being physically fit gives you an advantage as a leader, and that's not because of you looking more aesthetic. When people see a good body, they assume that you are capable of taking care of yourself and, by extension, of handling whatever else you are entrusted to do.

This applies not just to your fitness, but all the other aspects of your looks. **When people see you are in control of your general appearance, they automatically conclude that you are responsible with other matters, too.**

Luckily, sharp appearance is also not something with which you have to be born. You can cultivate it through proper grooming, clothing, exercise, diet, and a smile!

## Executive Presence Review

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These things seem so simple and obvious yet, we forget them. We overlook the fact that no matter our field of expertise, age, or years of experience, in the end, it all boils down to how we interact with other people. Your career doesn't exist in a void. Executive Presence is a

great reminder that whatever we do, it is important that we do it for, and with, others.

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## **Who would I recommend the Executive Presence summary to?**

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The 40-year-old corporate employee who is working hard for a promotion, the 35-year-old startup founder who wants to lead their company with passion, and to anyone willing to learn what it takes to captivate other people to join their cause.