

As You Start Your Career, Focus on People Skills

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett

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All across the country, this year's soon-to-be graduates are revving up to start their careers. You may be one of them. You're already thinking about what you'll do when get into your new position. You're smart and energetic, and you're eager to commit both of those attributes to moving ahead. But is that enough to succeed? Unfortunately, no.

Brains only take you so far. Smarts get you through the gate, but everyone in your cohort of incoming hires has the hard skills required to qualify for the position. The fact is, the link between merit and success is forged through soft skills – ones you may not be able to attain on your own.

You need a helping hand, someone to show you the ropes, decipher the unwritten codes of conduct, and guide you through the corporate jungle. You need a sponsor, which is different from a mentor. A sponsor serves as your advocate. They open the door to career-changing opportunities, by making important introductions to senior leaders, expanding the perception of what you can offer the organization, and offering powerful backing to help you soar and protection when you stumble.

But most important, a sponsor helps you develop your executive presence, so that when those opportunities arise, you will be perceived as the undoubtedly right candidate. Executive presence is the “it factor,” a heady combination of confidence, poise, and authenticity that convinces the rest of us we're in the presence of someone who's going places. It's an amalgam of qualities that telegraphs that you're in charge – or deserve to be.

Executive presence is not just a measure of performance: After all, it's a given that every entry-level hire is ready to work hard and excel – that's why you all were hired. Rather, executive presence is a measure of image: whether you signal to others that you “have what it takes,” that you're leadership material.

Research from the Center for Talent Innovation found that executive presence rests on three pillars:

- **Gravitas.** This is the core characteristic, with 67% of the 268 senior executives surveyed saying that gravitas is what really matters to move to a leadership position. More than intellectual horsepower, gravitas is about signaling that you have the confidence and credibility to get your point across and create buy-in when the going gets rough.
- **Communication.** People know you have gravitas because you *communicate* the authority of a leader through your bearing, speaking skills, and ability to command a room. That's why 28% of executives surveyed put this attribute at the top of the list of leadership materials.
- **Appearance.** While only 5% of leaders consider appearance key in executive presences, all recognize its power as a critical filter – and its potential for derailing talented up-and-comers.

These three pillars are universal and interrelated. If your communication skills ensure you can command a room, your gravitas grows exponentially; conversely, if your presentation is rambling and your manner timid, your gravitas plummets. And while you may be the smartest guy or gal in the room, no one will pay much attention to what you say if they're distracted by the coffee stains on your shirt or a neckline gaping down to your navel.

How do you know how people perceive you? Ask your sponsor for feedback. After all, they are in the perfect position to hear the whispered comments or spot the telltale clues that you either hit the mark or missed it.

Make your request for advice timely, specific, and prescriptive. The blanket, “How am I doing?” usually returns a blanket answer (“Fine!”). Better to laser in on a recent encounter that required considerable executive presence – a meeting with a leader in the firm or a presentation to a group of clients – and request an assessment on your body language, speech and delivery, attire, or command of the room.

Of course, not every sponsor is an ace at giving clear feedback. If you don't understand, it's up to you to clarify the confusion. Ask, "How is what I'm doing getting in the way of my job?" Continue to ask questions like these until you can identify specific steps to improve the way you're presenting yourself.

Then, demonstrate that you will act on the feedback you've been given. Unless you show that you're willing to course-correct, your sponsor might conclude that you're not worth the time and energy it takes to impart feedback in the first place. That could mean something as obvious as ditching the graduate student wardrobe for a polished, mature look. A common communications improvement is learning to distill a rambling presentation style into three succinct bullet points. Because gravitas is an amalgam of knowledge and confidence in that knowledge, one way to enhance it is to immerse yourself in a particular subject so that you stand out for your expertise.

The good news is, nobody's perfect – especially when you're starting out. It's within your power to do something about it. If you're able to find the right support and crack the code of executive presence, you'll be first in line for the next plum assignment and set your career off on the right foot.

This is the fourth post in a blog series on using mentorship to advance your career. Sylvia Ann Hewlett is a contributor to the HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Need.

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Post #1: Three Questions to Advance Your Career

Post #2: Engage a Mentor with a Short-Term Project

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disqus_LwsleKCkcZ 3 years ago

People issues are key to performance as you state. I do not know if this story fits into what you are talking about as being a sponsor; but, this is how I relate to your comments. First, a few comments on being a first line manager. Then, how I related these to a supervisor with a relationship problem.

One morning, my District Manager came into my office, he stated, “if someone told me about all these employee problems, I would not want to be a manager.” This was in 1986. Over the years, I heard this statement made by many managers. I always wanted to manage people, this is management. I thought everyone knew, maybe not.

Welcome to my world. I am a first line manager and have been for over 40 years. Your life changes when you become a first line manager. You are sandwiched between employees making a career; and, employees just trying to make a living.

First line managers are the backbone of a business. These managers are usually the only ones that really understand what it takes to make a product or provide a service. They are the ones on the shop floor or customer service office who keep the business in business day to day, hour to hour. If someone in middle or upper management is absent, no problem, the business will still function at the first line. But, when employees that work for a first line manager are absent some part of the plant or service process will suffer, and thus, the business. When the production line or the service line back up; the first line manager is expected to get it moving again. First line managers stand in the gap between the business and the customer. They are the real deal makers in any business.

A young first line manager came into my office recently. He was struggling with a problem. He was caught in a disagreement between his manager and a higher level manager on a performance issue. I told him welcome to the bottom of the pond. He asked me what I meant. I stated, “You and I are like a catfish at the bottom of a pond. Catfish know the bottom better than any fish. Catfish are not pretty. They usually live in a hole. They do not have scales; but, very tough skin. Catfish have long whiskers to feel the bottom when the water gets muddy. They can see the flashy

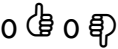
and pretty fish above darting around. But every time they attempt to get off the bottom they fall back. It is hard to catch these flashy fish; people spend a lot of money on bait to catch them. Catfish on the other hand are so hungry they will eat anything they find on the bottom, and every now and then they have to eat crap.”

The young man laughed and said, “What a description?”

In the book, “How I raised myself for failure to success in selling” by Frank Bettiger, he states, “experience is the best teacher, it just costs too much.” He meant, if we read about someone’s experiences we get that experience cheaply. If we get experience by our hard knocks in the real world, that experience is too costly.

If a young person can get this experience for a career employee at a company they are well on there way of understanding, "Knowledge ain't everything."

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