



# Executive Presence

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*A leader is one who knows the way,  
goes the way, and shows the way.*

-John Maxwell

The ability to project confidence and gravitas to an audience or listener involves the trait known as “executive presence.” Though there are many aspects of a person’s communication that contribute to creating this “wow” factor in the eyes of an audience, the idea of “presence” is often highly intuitive and difficult to pin down — a combination of many factors such as magnetism, knowledge, passion, speaking skills, assertiveness, etc.

We all know someone who displays the traits associated with executive presence — that person who engages an audience, displays poise under pressure or inspires others to take action. Communicating with executive presence has many benefits. It can help you build relationships, facilitate change or simply create your personal “brand” — that impression that comes to mind when people see or hear of you.

**List three public figures that exhibit executive presence:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_



According to a recent survey, \_\_\_\_\_% of executives said that presence enables a person to get ahead in business.



## The Eight Elements of Executive Presence

1. **Confidence.** A relaxed and comfortable communication style contributes greatly to projecting executive presence. If your speech and demeanor convey confidence, that is how you will be perceived by an audience or listener.
2. **Substance.** A person's vocabulary and the words they choose when speaking are important. Be knowledgeable and prepared. Sounding uneducated or uncertain can negatively impact others' perceptions of you.
3. **Dress.** Inappropriate or unkempt attire can undercut credibility in the eyes of an audience. Know your audience and dress appropriately.
4. **Body language.** Standing tall and not slumping, using expansive gestures and a firm handshake, and utilizing direct eye contact all contribute to the perception of executive presence.
5. **Vocal dynamics.** By eliminating monotone and verbal viruses and ensuring you speak with strong volume and clear articulation, you can create an executive vocal presence.
6. **Receptivity.** Being open to the ideas or opinions of others and listening actively can contribute to a confident presence. Often undervalued, accessibility and listening are leadership skills.
7. **Manners/Etiquette.** A basic grasp of manners and etiquette can not only create a positive lasting impression with an associate or listener, it can also help you build rapport and relationships.
8. **Authenticity.** Executive presence means being sincere and authentic. It also means communicating passion about your subject or message. These factors will help you create a "personal brand" that can impact an audience.

*Presence is the beginning and ending  
of all good and powerful communication.*

—Patsy Rodenburg



*Don't raise your voice,  
improve your argument.*

—Desmond Tutu

## Presenting to Senior Leadership

There are certain challenges you may experience when communicating or presenting to senior leadership. Often, high-level executives have limited time and tunnel vision, thus making them particularly difficult audiences.

Here are five tips to remember when dealing with senior leaders:

1. **Don't be afraid to let them know what you want upfront.** If you are delivering a presentation to request more resources, you can expect they will want to know how much you are requesting. You may have been planning to provide that information at the end of your meeting, but try asking them for what you want (and how much) at the beginning. This will ensure the rest of the time they are focused on your justification as to why it is a great investment and not how much it will cost.
2. **Know your audience and the personalities involved.** Different executives have different personalities. Be aware of the types you are dealing with so you know the best way to move forward through your presentation.
3. **Stay within your area of expertise and be prepared.** Don't stray too far from the material you have prepared. Stay on track. And definitely don't begin speaking about a topic that you don't know well. Don't fake it. Offer to do some further research and let them know you will be happy to share the findings once you do.
4. **Offer choices and alternatives—accept responsibility.** While developing your material, put together various options for the executives to consider. Give them choices. Own your presentation and the information included within it. If an error is discovered, own that too and accept responsibility and assure the group that the mistake will be fixed.
5. **Be flexible with your presentation or message.** When dealing with top brass, often a new topic may arise that may supersede the topic that you are speaking about currently. It's up to you to stay nimble as a presenter and be able to shift quickly and effortlessly to a different area or topic to accommodate the executive's request.



## Gaining Commitment from Senior Leadership

1. **Tout the benefits.** Don't be shy about providing details about how your program or plan could have a positive effect on productivity or the bottom line for the senior leader.
2. **Uncover needs.** Spend as much time as necessary gathering information. This will help you identify and qualify the needs of the leader: past buying patterns, previous decisions that were made and present pain points.
3. **Utilize open-ended questions.** Instead of asking, "Do you think our team might benefit from this investment?" phrase it in a way that will solicit more than a simple yes or no answer. A better way to ask that question might be, "In what ways can you see this investment benefitting our team?"
4. **Listen actively.** This means listening with your eyes as well as your ears. Listen not only to what the senior leader is saying but also to the way she is saying it. Keep your eyes and ears open to signals coming from the other party and adjust your communication as necessary.
5. **Don't oversell.** Senior leaders do not like to feel that they are being "sold" to, so be careful about going overboard with your pitch or proposal. Avoid the hard sell at all costs. Be sincere, be factual and be brief.
6. **Use trial closes.** As you feel the process getting closer to commitment, float a trial close to the senior leader to test the waters and your assumptions about the process to this point. Trial closes could be questions such as, "Does this request for more funding seem reasonable to you?" or "Do you think this is something we will be able to initiate in the next two weeks?"
7. **Bring the passion.** Senior leaders are drawn to others who are passionate and excited so make sure your body language and voice communicate this intention when it comes to your proposal. Be sincere, be engaged and be present in your presentation or meeting.
8. **Ask for a commitment.** If you don't ask, you don't get. Don't be afraid to ask for the funding or push for buy-in once you've earned the right to do so.

*In order to succeed, we  
must first believe we can.*

—Nikos Kazantzakis