

## Executive Presence! Secrets to Stand Out From Your Colleagues and Wow Your Boss

By Paula Lyons

I'll never forget setting up a TV interview with the VP of Marketing and Communications for a local supermarket chain. The first thing I thought when he walked through the door was that he was way too young for such a big job.

However, I was quickly impressed. This guy was well-dressed and carried himself with an air of energy and confidence. He spoke as if he had anticipated every question. His answers were clear and concise, and they were delivered with absolute conviction. All this at 29!

When he started his own business some years later I wasn't the least bit surprised. It's a business I'm sure you know...it's called Staples and that young man was one of its co-founders, Tom Stemberg.

Executive presence? He sure had it! We all know executive presence when we see it, but it's not easy to define. That's because it's a number of traits and qualities that when blended together send all the right signals.

The good news is executive presence is not something you are born with; people who have it seem to have developed the understanding that everything they do or say communicates volumes about who they are. They take control of the signals they send. And so can you.

Let's break it down, trait by trait. Think of an executive or colleague you know or admire. Write down the qualities that give this person presence. Is it the way they walk into a room, deliver a presentation, or treat people on the phone? What is it that makes people want to be around them?

I'll bet you come up with a list that looks a lot like this.

**Have a clear, simple message.** You may be an expert in your field, but what really matters is how you communicate the substance of what you know. People with presence learn to communicate clearly, crisply, and powerfully.

They tune in to each audience and give them what they want and need, rather than just spouting what they think the audience ought to know. They know how to organize material in a thoughtful, coherent way, with just enough detail so that everyone gets the message. The best of them speak in a way that conveys energy and confidence. They know how to generate excitement and buy-in for their ideas.

**Use your voice well.** People with presence use all aspects of their voice to sell their ideas and generate enthusiasm. They vary their pace and tone, use inflection to convey meaning, and, when they speak, people pay attention. Their voice conveys conviction. They don't equivocate or qualify. Where they lead, others are inspired to follow.

**Dress as if image matters.** "It may seem unfair, but the way you present yourself at work, speaks volumes about your executive presence," says nationally known image consultant Mary Lou Andre in her best selling book Ready to Wear.

You may think things like clothing, grooming, hairstyles or make-up shouldn't matter, but welcome to the real world! They do! You want to look your best every single day. Even in business casual environments, you cannot afford to dress as you would on weekends. Think of business casual as one step down from business professional: a suit jacket and collared shirt for men, and a pantsuit or other well coordinated outfit for women.

Pay attention to the little things. Soup stains on your tie, worn down heels, unpolished shoes, or a messy, disorganized briefcase send a message that you are stressed out, disorganized, or simply lack judgment.

**Carry yourself with confidence.** How you present yourself physically says a lot about your executive presence. You must learn to sit, stand, move and gesture with purpose. Own your space and always seem comfortable in your own skin. Body language, posture, gestures, facial expressions and movement convey energy, vitality, confidence.

**Listen well.** In today's world of constant distractions and interruptions, people who truly listen stand out. They make others feel valued, important, and heard! Try listening with all of your senses, and watch for the meaning or intent behind the speaker's words. Listening includes being accessible, encouraging people to express themselves, listening with mindfulness, not speaking too much, and using verbal and non verbal language to convey genuine interest in the other person.

**Be gracious, thoughtful, polite.** People with impressive presence put other's needs before their own, treat others just as they would want to be treated, and express gratitude and graciousness every day. They understand that it's the little courtesies that matter: offering people a seat, asking if they want coffee or water, thanking them for a job well done. Following these few simple rules of etiquette is a key component of executive presence.

**Be authentic.** People with presence learn a lot from watching others, but no one can become anyone else's carbon copy. Try it, and others will see right through you. We all have to find the best way to communicate who we are. For example, some people exude power. If you cannot communicate power, you still have to communicate something.

One of my clients shared with me that her boss communicates in every way that he is a regular guy, smart, but completely without pretension, totally willing and able to say just what is on his mind at any time. "When he gets up to speak," she said, "you know exactly who he is because he communicates all of that, every time." So polish all of your skills with one end in mind...to transmit the best possible you that you can be.

So how do you begin to work on all of this? The first step is to assess where you stand. Ask a trusted advisor to give you feedback, and accept it graciously. You will always remember the person who truly helped you take your professionalism to the next level. Work on one trait at a time and soon you'll be one of the people others point out as exceptional.