

Facet: Authenticity

Presence: Is Authenticity a Learnable Leadership Skill?

By David Casullo, President

Everyone knows that executive presence is a must if a leader is going to wield influence and drive business results. In my experience, though, executive presence is often **misunderstood...or it's simply not understood at all.**



When we talk about executive presence, people often focus on the most visible aspects of it. **We can term this as “style.” When we focus on style, we talk about how a leader does things** – how they look, how they interact with others in various situations, and how they say and do things.

Beneath that layer of executive **presence**, there is the element of “**substance.**” This is the **way in which a leader does things.** This goes deeper and is reflected in a leader’s insights, thinking, and ability to be attuned to others.

The least visible layer is “**character.**” This boils down to who you are as a person – the traits that you’ve developed over your whole life. They include your temperament, personality, and clarity on what matters to you.



All three elements are important, but today I want to focus on one facet of character – authenticity. **This is the degree to which you are perceived as being “real” as a leader. A key aspect of it is transparency: Do people believe that you’re sincere and genuine, or do they think that you’re taking a stance that doesn’t reflect your true values?** Are you willing to reveal yourself, including your limitations and vulnerabilities? Are you consistently the same person?

I can think of three executives I’ve coached who have had issues with their perceived authenticity. This raises a question: If authenticity is part of your character – who you are in a fairly profound way – **is it something that can be changed if it’s keeping a leader from being effective?**

Although it may seem counterintuitive, the answer is “yes.” However, let’s qualify that:

Executive presence is definitely in the eye of the beholder. When we hear that a leader is lacking executive presence, it means that his or her stakeholders perceive that some of the key elements are missing or in need of improvement.

So, it is these perceptions that can be changed, but first we need to understand why they exist. I have seen three underlying causes when authenticity is perceived as an issue:

1. **The leader feels it’s unimportant to share his or her genuine self.**
2. The leader is unclear about what is important to share or how to share it.
3. The leader fears the consequences of revealing his or her genuine self.

All of these causes are understandable and not unusual. With the first cause, leaders may have been very successful in their careers without ever sharing much of their personal values. Yet, when you get to a certain level, you must be able to move hearts and minds.

That only happens if people “get you” as a leader.

The lack of clarity on what to share or how to share it also makes a lot of sense. Most leaders have risen in the ranks because of their technical knowledge and hard work – not **because they are master communicators. However, once they’re in “the seat,” that’s exactly what they need to become.** The good news is that storytelling is absolutely a learnable skill – **and it’s a crucial one for leaders who want to change how others perceive their character.** When you learn how to structure a story that connects your personal experiences and values to the organizational mission, you will energize your team in a most memorable and powerful way.



Fearing the consequences of revealing your genuine self is also a rational concern. Some **leaders have what we call “imposter syndrome.” They are secretly insecure and worry that they will be “found out” as someone who is undeserving of their lofty role and impressive paycheck.** Additionally, a leader may find it risky to share a story about a failure, awkward moment, or personal situation.

Obviously, there are some stories that are more appropriate for a cocktail party than a speech or presentation, and a leader may need coaching and advice on what, when, and **how to convey a personal experience.** Yet, I’ve found that many leaders **underrate just how** powerful it can be to share a hard-earned life lesson.

As we look to help leaders with executive presence, we do them an injustice if we operate under the assumption that executive presence is all about the surface elements of style, or if **we believe that perceptions of a leader’s character are fixed and unchangeable.**

Authenticity is a key driver of a leader’s ability to influence others and drive results – particularly with the “post-Boomer” generations, Gen X, and Gen Y. It’s also a muscle that can be developed over time, given the right support and the desire to build strength where it may be seen as lacking.

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