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How to Look and Act Like a Leader

By JOANN S. LUBLIN



Savvy executives know the part, act the part and look the part. That's because they exude "executive presence," a broad term used to describe the aura of leadership.

For Janie Sharritt, now a vice president at Sara Lee Corp., an image makeover helped her gain the managerial gravitas that she needed to advance further up the ladder.

In 2005, Ms. Sharritt was a newly promoted middle manager for another consumer-products manufacturer. She preferred to wear a ponytail, scant makeup, khakis, sweaters and loafers. But by taking a "Power of Image" workshop led by image coach Jonna Martin, she got an expert makeover. Her revamped look included a sophisticated hairstyle, dressy slacks and jackets, pumps, colorful necklaces and extra makeup.

She thinks the changes boosted her self confidence, resulting in faster acceptance of her ideas by senior management. "In the past, [that quick buy-in] wasn't one of the things I was known for," says Ms. Sharritt. She joined Sara Lee four years ago.

Perfect Presence

To Improve Your Executive Presence:

- Sit on one hand if you gesture excessively
- Avoid interruptions by counting to four before you reply
- Stand or sit large to demonstrate you take up space
- Use few qualifiers as they imply lack of confidence
- Don't clasp your hands behind your back because you'll look deceptive
- Practice a firm handshake

Source: Dee Soder, founder of CEO Perspective Group, an executive-assessment and advisory concern in New York.

Executives with presence act self confident, strategic, decisive and assertive, concludes a study released late last year by the Center for Work-Life Policy, a New York think tank.

Presence plays an increasingly important role as companies grapple with a weak recovery and fewer management layers. "You have less time to make that lasting impression," warns Stefanie Smith, head of Stratex Consulting, a New York coaching firm. Today, 75% of her coaching practice involves enhancing clients' presence—up from 35% in 2007.

Several big businesses, including Intel Corp. and Morgan Stanley, recently launched programs to teach ambitious staffers about executive presence. Rosalind

Hudnell, Intel's chief diversity officer, says she created a "Command Presence" workshop for its rising

female technical stars last year after realizing they needed extra help selling their ideas within the company. Nearly 200 women at the computer-chip maker have taken the four-hour session.



Jonna Martin

Janie Sharritt, a vice president at Sara Lee says that a makeover in 2005 when she was a middle manager helped her advance up the ladder. Her before and after pics are shown here.

These mid-level staffers learn how to present effectively through a discussion of "constructive confrontation" and a simulated meeting with an executive audience, according to an Intel spokeswoman.

Ms. Hudnell recalls that her survival long "depended on my being able to command a room." She believes executive presence also involves the ability to command other leaders.

How can polish your presence? For starters, you should pinpoint your strengths and weaknesses. "People are blind to their biggest derailers," says Karen Kaufman, a Philadelphia executive coach.

You could glean additional clues by keeping a journal based on workplace observations of executives with authoritative presence, says James Citrin, a CEO recruiter for search firm Spencer Stuart. Imitate their behaviors "that feel comfortable and natural for you," he recommends. Mr. Citrin cites a CEO candidate he recently watched being interviewed by the board search committee at a \$10-billion company. Among other things, the prospect "looked the committee members alternately straight in the eye" as he answered their questions "slowly but very clearly."

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Formal assistance may make an even bigger difference. It ranges from extensive sessions with an executive coach to voice lessons, presentation training and improvisational acting classes.

Jason Bernstein retained coach Dee Soder in 2009 to bolster his presence while an executive of a midsized technology company in suburban New York. "People who don't know him can miss his high energy and drive because he has such an easygoing style," says Dr. Soder, an industrial psychologist who founded CEO Perspective Group, an executive assessment and advisory firm in New York.

To correct this misperception, Mr. Bernstein says he embraced many of her suggestions. He tried to avoid a monotone in commanding his employees, sit upright during meetings and display powerful confidence at a conference table by marking his territory with a water bottle and notebook.

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Dr. Soder also urged him to wave his hand slightly rather than nod his head in agreement when someone else speaks "to show you got it," Mr. Bernstein adds.

"Nodding your head is in some ways a gesture of deference," Mr. Bernstein explains. "It was one of the

toughest things I found to work on." He says the executive-presence coaching "helped improve my performance reviews," which soon praised his board-level presentations and leadership ability.

Colleagues also notice flaws in your executive presence. But it's frequently hard to get frank feedback. "You have to take the responsibility to ask," says Gillian Christie, a managing director of a big financial-services firm. She remembers how coworkers at a prior employer only hinted about her tendency to show off during meetings because her behavior intimidated them.

Now, Ms. Christie continues, she often solicits associates' reaction following her presentations. Some reply, "You were a little off base." As a result, she tones down her strong delivery.

Intel's Ms. Hudnell finds male colleagues usually request her advice before they appear before the executive team for the first time. They want to know who will ask the toughest questions. Yet many Intel women only seek her counsel after a presentation "has not gone well," she says.

The insight inspired Ms. Hudnell to propose the presence workshop for emerging female stars. "You have to have executive presence in ways that will set you apart," she notes.

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