



Cultivating Executive Presence

How to Elevate Your Leadership Impact



What Is Executive Presence?

There's no shortage of outlines, models, and points of view from researchers and thought leaders that detail what executive presence looks and sounds like in action. Add to that the range of contexts and settings in which leaders operate, and efforts to define it precisely can be overwhelming. Simplified descriptions such as "you know it when you see it" or "a certain 'it' factor" or "gravitas" can be too nebulous to be helpful. Even if executive presence is in the eye of the beholder, there must be a way to focus on its essence.

Author Sylvia Ann Hewlett calls executive presence "an amalgam of qualities that telegraphs that you are in charge or deserve to be." Indeed, it encompasses a range of traits and abilities that positively impact how others perceive and respond to you as a leader.

Why Executive Presence Matters

Regardless of how it's defined and dissected, the benefits of executive presence for both the individual and the organization are clear. Leaders with executive presence inspire trust, confidence, and respect. They're seen as credible and capable and are therefore able to positively influence others to take action or offer support. They build strong relationships with stakeholders and foster collaboration. They are self-aware, reflective, and willing to learn and are therefore able to position themselves for advancement. Organizations whose leaders demonstrate executive presence realize increased employee morale, engagement, and loyalty. They experience better outcomes in negotiations, conflicts, and crises because their leaders remain composed and focused. Communications are succinct, expectations are clear, and overall performance increases.

Examples

- The CEO who stands tall, makes eye contact, and speaks authoritatively and with calm confidence at an investor meeting.
- The hospital administrator who offers clear solutions and provides transparent updates during a crisis.
- The plant manager who makes a point of personally greeting all new hires on their first day.
- The HR director who remains composed and focused during high-stakes negotiations about budget and strategy.
- The team leader who delegates tasks efficiently and inspires everyone to stay focused and motivated as a tight project deadline approaches.
- The sales leader who responds with honesty and empathy to tough questions from customers when expectations are not met.
- The new manager who decides to lean into the discomfort of providing performance feedback to their former peer because they know they can provide insightful coaching.

Breaking It Down

Our efforts at Dion Leadership to develop an approach to executive presence that supported our clients' needs involved reviewing decades' worth of work from thought leaders on the topic as well as discussions with business leaders, learning professionals, and our executive coaches. In addition to informing our own point of view, these efforts revealed six key points:

Executive presence is not about homogeneity and conformity. This may have been more true decades ago, in the era of power ties and three-martini lunches. Now more than ever, leaders are encouraged to be themselves instead of complying with a checklist of superficial traits. That doesn't mean anything goes, of course, but the shift has allowed for more inclusivity and self-expression.

Similarly . . .

Executive presence is not just achieved by extroverts. People often associate executive presence with being outgoing and charismatic. However, introverts can have an executive presence just as strong, as it is more about how you engage and influence others than about being the loudest or most dominant person in the room.

Interestingly . . .

Executive presence is important for leaders at all levels. It's not just for those in the C-suite. The same traits and behaviors that increase the impact of those in senior positions can also signal the effectiveness and leadership potential of those in other roles. These insights are helpful for all employees to achieve success in their current position and grow into new roles.

However . . .

Executive presence requires context. While there are certainly common traits, behaviors, and themes that apply in all circumstances, how they are rendered in practice can depend on the industry, corporate culture, geography, and role, among other factors. This requires leaders to be tuned in to those that are most impactful at their organization.

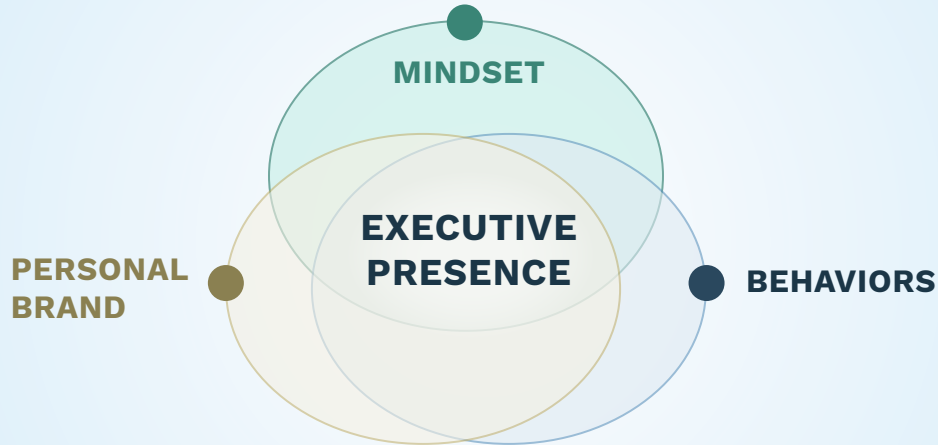
Similarly . . .

Not all aspects of executive presence carry equal weight. Some behaviors and traits are more impactful than others. Context, as noted above, will help clarify which are most important for leaders to emphasize to increase their effectiveness.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly . . .

Executive presence can be learned. While it may come more naturally for some leaders than others, executive presence is not an either-you-got-it-or-you-don't prospect; rather, it is a skill can be developed with self-awareness and practice.

Three Domains of Executive Presence



The Dion Leadership model illustrated above shows that executive presence occurs at the intersection of three domains. Exploring each domain begins with self-awareness.



Mindset: How and what you think about yourself and your abilities is at the foundation of executive presence. Your mindset directly impacts your behavior and therefore how others perceive you as a leader. As author Amy Cuddy observes, “We convince by our presence, and to convince others we need to convince ourselves.”

What is the story you’re telling yourself about who you are as a leader? Is that story serving you well or holding you back?



Behaviors: As noted above, behavior follows mindset. What you do and say—and how you do it and say it—shapes how others experience you as a leader. The more positive and consistent their experience is with you, the more impactful you will be.

How does what you do and say reflect who you want to be as a leader? What is the impact of these behaviors on others? Are these behaviors serving you well or holding you back?



Personal Brand: What others see, what they think, and how they feel in your presence are the basis for your reputation. When you have a clear idea of what you want your reputation to be, you can take the steps to shape it.

Who do you want to be as a leader? How do you want others to perceive you? Is the way you present yourself serving you well? How so? How is it holding you back?

Elements of Executive Presence

Within each domain, we've specified four key elements that serve as focal points for leaders looking to demonstrate and develop executive presence. Careful consideration of these elements is a good starting point for enhancing your impact as a leader.



“Nowadays, to be seen as leadership material, executives are expected to reveal who they fundamentally are—not mimic some dated, idealized model.”

– Sylvia Ann Hewlett,
“The New Rules of Executive Presence,” *Harvard Business Review*

MINDSET ELEMENT:

Confidence

You are self-assured and believe in your own abilities and judgment, prompting others to do the same.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Build a belief in yourself for this work:** Work with someone who can help you remove self-doubt and replace it with a belief in yourself and your abilities. Build a practice each day to catch self-deprecating talk and replace it with conviction.
- **Prepare and rehearse:** Thoroughly prepare for meetings, presentations, and difficult conversations so that you can reduce uncertainty and boost your confidence in any situation.
- **Embrace challenges and take risks:** Stepping outside of your comfort zone will expand your experience and resilience, helping you learn to handle different situations with composure.
- **Begin with the behavior and know that the feeling will follow:** Don't wait to feel comfortable, in control, or motivated. Do what is required for the situation, and the right feeling, such as accomplishment or pride, will follow.

MINDSET ELEMENT:

Authenticity

Your values and priorities align with your true self, regardless of external pressures.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Define what's important to you:** Articulate your core values and goals, and let them ground your actions as a leader.
 - **Be vulnerable:** Sharing challenges as well as successes when appropriate will help others see you as real and relatable.
 - **Stay true to your unique leadership style:** Avoid trying to mimic others; instead, lean into your own strengths and qualities.
 - **Slow down and ground yourself:** To ensure that you can deliver your true self, ready yourself to be present in each situation and not reactive.
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MINDSET ELEMENT:

Intentionality

You keep your goals, values, and desired impact on others in mind with every move you make.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Set clear goals and priorities:** Define your objectives with purpose, ensuring that every action and decision aligns with your broader vision so you can be focused and impactful.
 - **Be mindful in communication:** Choose your words carefully and deliver them with purpose, ensuring your messages are aligned with your intentions and resonate with your audience.
 - **Evaluate your actions regularly:** Continuously reflect on your decisions and behavior to ensure they are aligned with your values and long-term goals, making adjustments when needed.
 - **Choose where you spend your time wisely:** Show up with people, in places, and on the work that is required of you to achieve maximum impact.
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MINDSET ELEMENT:

Integrity

You are committed to honesty, ethical principles, and transparency in all actions and decisions.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Be accountable:** Take responsibility for your actions, admit mistakes when they happen, and commit to learning from them.
- **Be consistent:** Demonstrate ethical behavior in all situations, make decisions that align with your values, and match your words with your actions.
- **Maintain transparency:** Communicate openly and honestly with your team, sharing both challenges and successes.
- **Apologize:** When you are wrong, admit it. There is power in acknowledging your limitations or correcting a mistake.

BEHAVIORS ELEMENT:

Communication

You convey ideas clearly and convincingly, using both verbal and nonverbal cues to engage, inform, and inspire others.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Speak clearly and directly:** Avoid jargon or ambiguity, get to the point quickly, and take care that your message is concise, understandable, and aligned with your objectives.
 - **Be mindful of nonverbals:** Understand how body language, eye contact, and tone of voice can be used to convey your messages most effectively.
 - **Actively listen:** When you show genuine interest in others' perspectives, ask thoughtful questions, and respond with empathy, you invite connection and build trust.
 - **Use language aligned to the audience:** Select your vocabulary to fit the audience you are speaking with.
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BEHAVIORS ELEMENT:

Savvy

You have a deep understanding of people, processes, and the broader organizational landscape, allowing you to navigate complex situations and influence the dynamics of power and decision-making.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Develop your emotional intelligence:** Know how to identify and manage your emotions and those of others.
 - **Be curious and seek new learning:** Stay abreast of the range of resources and opportunities available to you—from asking questions of a colleague to more formal educational pursuits.
 - **Cultivate strategic awareness:** Know how your role and function align with the company's objectives.
 - **Spend time on politics:** Politics are an inherent part of every organization and require time and attention. Learn how decisions are made, how work gets done, who is influential, and what is expected of you.
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BEHAVIORS ELEMENT:

Command

You take control of situations, provide clear direction, and inspire respect and confidence while maintaining poise and focus under pressure.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Lead by example:** Hold yourself to a standard of excellence and consistently model the behavior you expect from others.
- **Maintain composure in high-pressure situations:** Identify mindfulness techniques that help you stay calm and focused in difficult situations.
- **Own your actions:** Stand behind your decisions and be ready to defend them if needed. Show accountability for both successes and failures.
- **Step into your own power:** Know when you need to be the first to speak and when you should listen. Stand firm in your position when appropriate, using appropriate methods to ensure you are heard and understood.

BEHAVIORS ELEMENT:

Decisiveness

You make clear, timely decisions that inspire action and commitment, even in uncertainty, and take responsibility for outcomes.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Learn to trust your instincts and expertise:** Lean into your experience, knowledge, and intuition so you can trust yourself and your ability to make the right choice, even with limited information.
 - **Set clear priorities:** Knowing your top priorities and aligning your decisions with your goals will help you make faster, more effective choices that support your vision for the organization.
 - **Use a decision-making model:** Determine when you have the right amount of information to make a decision, and then make it.
 - **Be flexible:** Once you make a decision, stand behind it with confidence. However, be open to adjusting your approach if new information emerges or things don't go as planned.
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PERSONAL BRAND ELEMENT:

Appearance

Your attire, grooming, and overall physical presentation align with the situation and environment and don't detract from your credibility and influence.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Dress for the role:** Choose clothing that is appropriate for your position and fits with company culture.
 - **Pay attention to details:** Grooming, personal hygiene, and neatness matter. Ensure your physical presentation matches your intention.
 - **Maintain good posture:** Standing tall with your shoulders back and your head held high portrays power, confidence, and approachability.
 - **Consider virtual meetings:** Apply these principles regardless of in-person or virtual meetings.
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PERSONAL BRAND ELEMENT:

Approachability

You are welcoming, open, and easy to engage with, which makes others feel comfortable seeking guidance, sharing ideas, or offering feedback.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Make yourself available and accessible:** Show that you are willing to engage with others by inviting dialogue and being present in your interactions.
- **Be a good listener:** When someone is speaking to you, give them your full attention—make eye contact, nod to acknowledge their point, refrain from interrupting, and ask questions.
- **Be visible:** Interact with others at all levels of the organization, both formally and informally.
- **Be humble and share your own experiences:** Approachability often stems from being relatable. Share your own challenges and successes in a way that makes you seem more human and less distant.

**PERSONAL BRAND
ELEMENT:**

Influence

You shape opinions, inspire action, and motivate others through your strategic use of communication, relationships, and authority, all while maintaining respect and trust.

DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Lean into your expertise:** Demonstrate deep knowledge of your area and follow through on your commitments.
- **Use a variety of communication techniques:** Frame your message in a way that aligns with the interests and needs of your audience. Use storytelling, powerful language, and a confident tone to persuade and inspire others to act or think differently.
- **Empower others:** Inspire others to step up and take ownership. When people feel trusted and valued, they are more likely to support your goals and contribute positively to achieving them.
- **Use your authority wisely:** Provide direct requests to others and expect results for work you manage; don't consider it a favor or allow others to deter you from achieving your results.

**PERSONAL BRAND
ELEMENT:**

Effectiveness

You achieve desired outcomes and consistently deliver results, inspiring confidence in others through action and accountability.

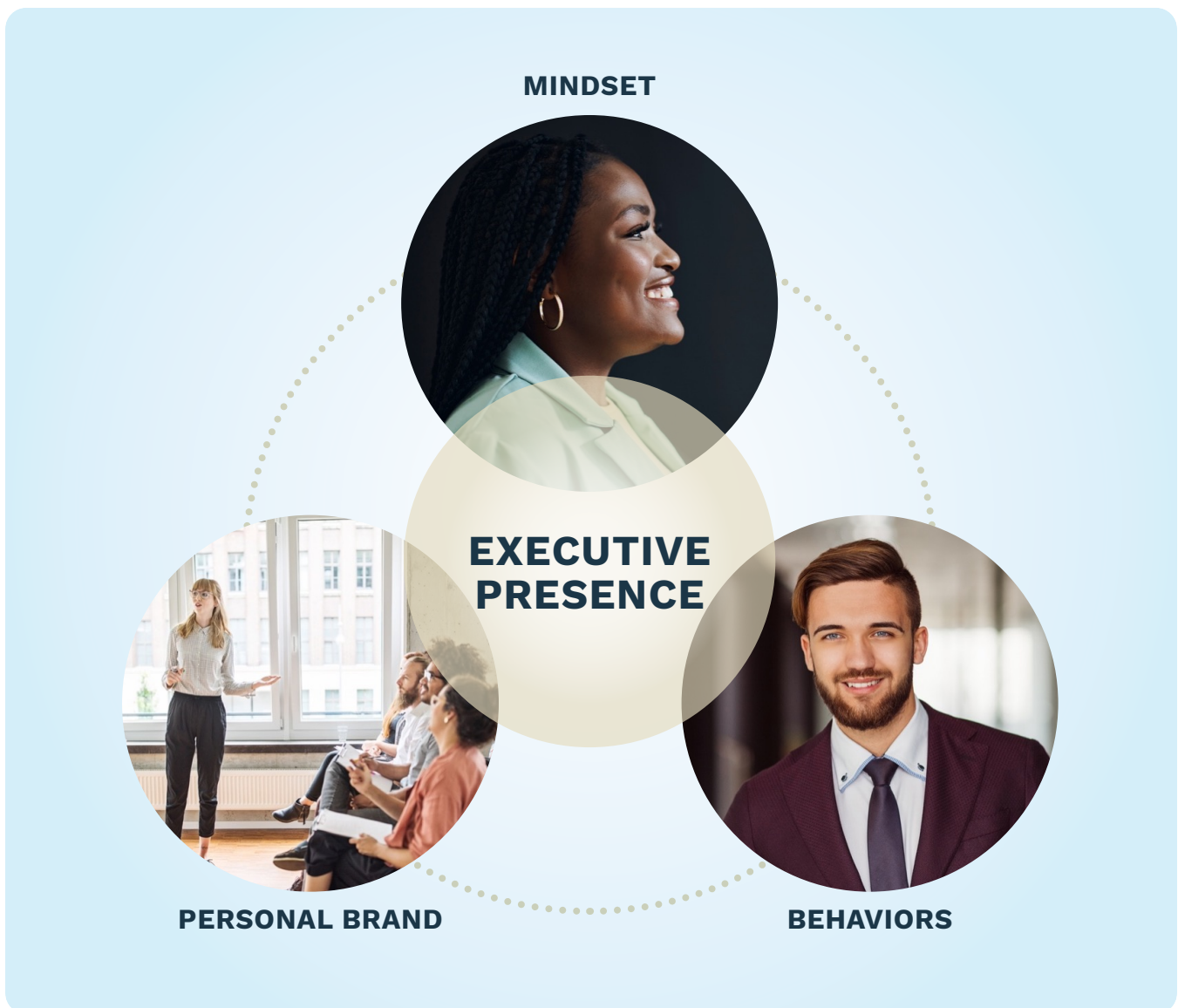
DEVELOPMENT TIPS:

- **Set clear, actionable goals:** Break down large projects into manageable steps and ensure that your team understands the priorities.
- **Prioritize and delegate wisely:** Focus on high-impact tasks that align with strategic goals, and delegate other responsibilities to the right people. Trust your team to handle the details while you focus on driving progress. Delegating not only improves productivity but also empowers others and reinforces your leadership.
- **Stay organized and efficient:** Keep track of your commitments, deadlines, and projects. Use tools or systems to streamline workflows and ensure follow-through. Demonstrating that you can stay on top of various tasks and maintain momentum will enhance your executive presence and show that you can deliver results without getting bogged down in distractions.
- **Get the most important work done:** Ensure you accomplish the most important work for the company, not the easiest work, what you most like to do, or the work that comes from the most persistent requestor.

Putting the Model into Action

By focusing on these elements and domains of executive presence, leaders at all levels can identify components in which they excel as well as those they want to develop. As noted earlier, not all elements are equal; leaders should focus on those that are critical to success in their role or organization and that will impact their effectiveness the most. To determine these areas of focus, it can be helpful to solicit the perspective of leaders, peers, and other trusted stakeholders on how improving executive presence can increase effectiveness.

Choosing to proactively and intentionally manage your executive presence gives you agency and control over elements of your work. We hope you will be pleasantly surprised at the results, not only at work but how you feel about yourself.





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