

Body Language and Leadership Effectiveness – How to Achieve ‘Executive Presence’

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Most of us think of charisma, or executive presence, as something mysterious and elusive that certain executives are born with or are trained to achieve in some executive school we haven't been invited to. We all know we need that mysterious quality when we're in front of an audience, or in an important meeting, or taking part in a crucial negotiation. But what is executive presence, or charisma, exactly? Is it sprinkled like fairy dust on a few lucky individuals, or is it something anyone can learn?

Charisma or executive presence is something we all can learn. In fact, it is relatively simple to understand. But it takes real work to demonstrate it when it's needed. It consists of three related activities involving body language and your unconscious mind.

First, you need to understand that we are always communicating two conversations simultaneously – the content, what we're saying, and the body language underlying it – which reveals our actual attitude toward what we're saying. So, to take a very simple example, if I say I'm excited to meet you, but my body language indicates that I'm unhappy, or distracted, or angry about something – I've got my arms folded, or I have a scowl on my face, or I'm looking over my shoulder at something else – then you won't believe what I'm saying. The body language always trumps the content. It's how we determine what we really are feeling toward each other.

So the first step to executive presence is to align your body language and your content.

The second step is to become clear about your intent, because if you are not clear, then you will fail to keep your body language and content aligned. Becoming an intentional communicator means deciding how you are going to show up for that speech, or that important meeting, or that negotiation. Are you going in with high energy and excitement? Or are you letting your nerves distract you and cause your body language to display a lack of confidence? You must decide how you wish to be present in the moment, and then work to achieve that feeling.

The third step to achieving charisma, or strong executive presence, is to focus. Most of us go through the day with a complicated, ever-growing to-do list in our heads. We're thinking about where we've been, where we need to be, what's for dinner, that vacation coming up, the balance on our credit cards – anything but the present moment. When you carry that to-do list around, your body language looks distracted, unfocused, and ultimately weak, because your body signals what your mind is feeling – that you're pulled in several directions at once.

In order to prepare for that important meeting or speech, then, part of the work – in fact, the most important part – is to spend a few minutes focusing your mind on how you're feeling, what the meeting or speech is about, what you want to achieve in it, and eliminating any other distracting thought that might cause you to be less than fully present. This focus is not simple to achieve, at first, but it does become easier as time goes on if you practice it.

So that's executive presence, in three steps. First, align your message and your body language. Next, decide on your intention for the important meeting or speech coming up. And third, focus just before the event so that nothing distracts you. If you can achieve emotional focus and walk into the event with that focus clear and strong, then you will have executive presence.

It's almost impossible for most people to take control over every aspect of their posture, their gestures, and their motions during an important event, while also thinking about what they're going to say, listening to anyone else who's talking, and to make sure they pay attention to anything else that's going on in the room. But you can take these three steps, and if you do them rigorously enough, your body language will take care of itself.



About the Author: *Dr. Nick Morgan is one of America's top communication coaches and thinkers. His clients include leaders of Fortune 50 companies, and he has coached people to give Congressional testimony, to appear on the Today Show, and to take on the investment community. He is the author of several acclaimed books on public speaking and communication. His most recent book is The Washington Post bestseller Can You Hear Me?: How to Connect with People in a Virtual World.*