

Leadership Presence: What it is, What it isn't, and How to Increase it

✘ By [Carol Kinsey Goman](#), Ph.D

[Leadership presence](#), that illusive but “we know it when we see it” quality, is a blending of personal and interpersonal skills that when combined, send all the right signals. It’s how you show up, how you make others feel, and how effectively you communicate both verbally and non-verbally. It’s the “wow” factor that sets you up for the next promotion and gives your career that extra boost.

That’s what leadership presence is. Here is what it is not:

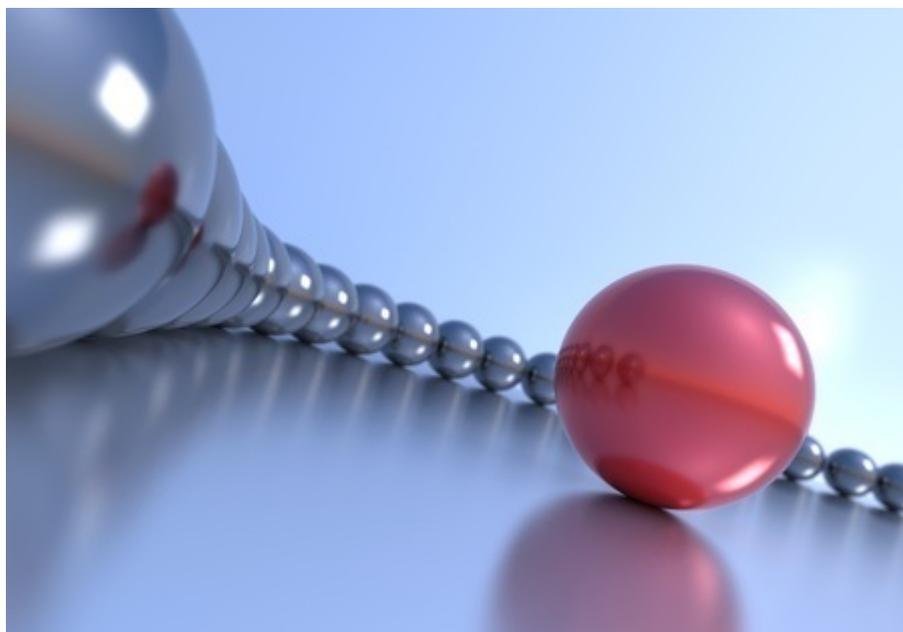
1. It is not an attribute that is automatically assigned to you because of your business results.
2. It is not necessarily reflective of your true qualities and potential.

Instead, it depends entirely on how other people in the workplace evaluate you. The first key to building leadership presence is to realize that it is all about impression management. As Suzy Monford, CEO Andronico’s, says: “You need to show up each day the way you want to be perceived – which is simple to say, but difficult to accomplish unless you do your homework and really know yourself.”

I agree. Leadership presence needs to be rooted in your basic values – and the “homework” of knowing your strengths, weaknesses, talents and biases is crucial to aligning people’s impression of you with your best authentic self. But I am also aware that small attitudinal or behavioral changes can have an instant and powerful effect on how others perceive you.

As a leader (or a potential leader) you are constantly being evaluated on how well you display confidence, composure, credibility, connection, and charisma. Here are five simple strategies that can influence people's impression of you and instantly increase your leadership presence:

1) Power up your confidence by priming your brain.



Self-confidence is the personality trait most responsible for an individual being seen as having leadership presence. In [“The Confidence Effect: Every Woman’s Guide to the Attitude that Attracts Success,”](#) author Grace Killelea sees the lack of confidence in business women as a major obstacle to their career progression: “While men are prone to overestimate their abilities, all too often women sell themselves short and needlessly languish in marginalized careers. Realizing a high level of achievement requires women to speak out, take risks and assume leadership positions with perceptible self-assurance, but too many otherwise qualified women are not living up to their full potential. Aspiring women must become more inherently confident with the kind of authenticity that will get them noticed and take their careers to new heights.”

Confident people (male and female) attract followers by being self-motivated, assured, and willing to take risks. But even the most confident people may suffer a crisis of self-doubt,

and that's where having a personal strategy becomes crucial.

One key to displaying confidence is to change your physical posture by standing straight, holding your head up and pulling your shoulders back – or even holding a “Superman” or “Wonder Woman” pose for two minutes to elevate your testosterone (the power hormone) level.

But another, equally effective strategy, is to prime your brain for higher confidence by recalling a time when you had power over another person or performed a task extremely well. Focus on what happened, how you felt, and what that experience was like. This doesn't have to be a business-related event. It's the emotional memory you are tapping into. Research shows that even thinking about a time when you felt physically attractive can increase your level of confidence.

2) Retain your composure with this mantra.

On the popular U.S. television show Shark Tank, entrepreneurs pitch their companies/products/ideas to a panel of potential investors. One of those investors, Barbara Corcoran, describes how the contestants have to stand in front of the “sharks” for a full five minutes without saying a word as studio lighting is adjusted. Corcoran says, “When I watch someone who's under tremendous pressure, that is a great test. Even before they open their mouth I know who I'm out on. I just sort of come up with a reason ‘why’ that I can say on camera. But the truth is I know when I'm out fight away because the guy takes his hands out of his pockets, then he's shifting, he's no longer making eye contact, he's sweating bullets, his knees are jiggling. I mean is this a guy I'm going to give my money to?”

You may never be a contestant on Shark Tank, but in any job interview, sales presentation or important business conversation, your emotions (and subsequently your performance) can get high-jacked by high levels of stress.

John Sudol, author of [“Acting: Face to Face,”](#) coaches actors

on how to prepare for an audition, and he offers an interesting insight that applies equally well to business professionals: “One of the things that can throw you off a well-prepared game plan might surprise you. It’s the snap judgments you make about what you read on the interviewer’s face. In an audition, that automatic judgment can provoke a variety of unwanted feelings and thoughts, such as anxiety, self-doubt, and insecurity. If enough stress is produced it can trigger a limbic response and put you into a freeze-fight-or-flee state.

But when we view someone’s face from a place of inner security, we know that what’s on their face is about them, so I’ve adopted the mantra *What’s on their face is not about me!* These words have saved me numerous of times when speaking in large rooms looking out and seeing facial billboards flashing judgment, criticism, boredom, doubt, suspicion. Most often, and ironically, those are the very same people who will approach me after the lecture to thank me for my work and their favorable experience in the audience that day!”

3) Gain credibility by saying the word because.

Credibility is all about how you communicate. It’s about body language that’s aligned with your verbal message and it’s about being truthful, diplomatic, empathetic, succinct, and decisive. But certain words and phrases have almost magical powers to instantly increase your credibility. The word because is one of them.

[A study at Harvard](#), asked people to break into a line of strangers waiting to make photocopies. When asked simply if they could use the photocopier (“Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the machine?”), research subjects were successful 60% of the time. However, when a reason beginning with the word because was added (“May I use the photocopier because I’m in a rush”), the request gained instant credibility, and compliance skyrocketed to 94%.

What's more amazing, it didn't seem to matter what the given reason was ("May I use the photocopier because I need to make copies"), compliance remained at about the same level, 93%.

4) Connect more powerfully by changing your focus.

Capital is defined as "accumulated wealth, especially as used to produce more wealth." Social capital is the wealth or benefit that exists because of your social relationships. I think of social capital as the value created by your connection to others. There is no more valuable commodity in today's business environment, and no more valuable use of your time than to build your professional network, within and external to your organization.

Gayle Hallgren-Rezac and Judy Thomson, networking masters and the co-authors of "WORK THE POND! Use the Power of Positive Networking to Leap Forward in Work and Life" talk about ways to optimize any opportunity to network. They say it begins with a change in attitude: Networking is not about promoting yourself or getting new business. It's about creating or deepening professional relationships.

Try this at your next networking event: Enter each conversation with the goal of finding something that you can do for the other person. The minute you take the focus off promoting yourself and put it on assisting others, you dramatically improve your ability to connect.

5) Display your natural charisma by warming up your body language.

It's well known that people won't always remember what you say, but they will never forget how you make them feel. I've found that when I speak with a successful executive, I get the feeling that he or she is wonderful – but when I speak with a charismatic leader, I'm made to feel that I am wonderful! My emotional reaction has a lot to do with the body language of the two types of leaders: The first embodies nonverbal cues of

confidence and power (which accentuates their prestige and status), while the second radiates charisma through warm, inclusive, and open body language. You will have the most impact if you can send both sets of signals, remembering that studies show leaders with warm body language are perceived more positively and are more persuasive.

The body language of warmth includes positive eye contact, smiles (which we don't see enough of in the workplace) and open postures in which legs are uncrossed, and arms are held away from your body, with palms exposed or resting comfortably on the desk or conference table.

Mirroring is another nonverbal sign of genuine warmth and empathy. You may not realize it, but when you are dealing with people you like or agree with, you'll automatically begin to match their stance, arm positions and facial expressions. It's a way of signaling that you are connected and engaged.

And when it comes to charismatic body language, facing people directly when they're talking is crucial. It shows that you are totally focused on them. Even a quarter turn away signals a lack of interest and makes the other person feel discounted. Of course, giving others your complete attention when they are speaking is one of the warmest signals you can send.

While there are many behavioral and attitudinal strategies that increase your leadership presence, these five simple tips are a good place to start.

About the Author: Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D. is the author of ["The Silent Language of Leaders: How Body Language Can Help – or Hurt – How You Lead."](#) The impact of body language on leadership effectiveness is a topic she addresses in keynote speeches and seminars on "The Power of Collaborative Leadership." She can be reached at Carol@CarolKinseyGoman.com.

