

## Executive Presence: Haves and Have Nots

By Ron Crossland

Michelle Conlin, in her article concerning female executive presence, "**She's Gotta Have It**," *BusinessWeek*, July 22, 2002, concluded executive presence "refers to that ability to take hold of a room by making a polished entrance, immediately shaking people's hands, and forging quick, personal connections instead of defaulting to robotic formalism and shrinking into a chair. When leaders with executive presence speak, people listen - because the talk is filled with conviction instead of equivocation. They inspire that I'll-follow-you-anywhere loyalty, conveying an aura of warmth and authenticity to everybody from the receptionist to the CEO."

Peter Ciampa, in his article "How Leaders Move Up" (*Harvard Business Review*, January 2005), outlines the differences between good and elite CEO candidates. He lists three major areas in which the great excel - management savvy, political intelligence, and personal style. He concludes the elite candidates help constituents feel appreciated, don't appear to be self-serving, make the right judgments concerning where to expend energy, and make success look effortless.

I reviewed several websites of companies conducting executive presence training. Several seemed to only provide this service; others provided this in conjunction with other developmental services. What was intriguing to me in the review was the content of the training.

In some cases, the work focused nearly exclusively on communication issues such as techniques for relaxing under pressure, managing energy, using expression to add the "human touch" to messages, organizing messages, and delivering emotional impact. Some included assessments geared to helping individuals focus on their specific communication issues through practices designed to help them learn new behaviors. Some literally specialized in helping managers gain more upward influence, navigate corporate politics, gain access to promotions, and solicit greater support for projects and programs. Nearly all of them appealed to those who had aspirations for gaining top leadership positions.

Nick Morgan, former editor of the *Harvard Management Communication Letter* and author of *Give Your Speech, Change the World: How to Move Your Audience to Action and Working the Room: How to Move People to Action through Audience-Centered Speaking* has worked in the arena of effective communication and the issues of presence for over twenty years. In his April, 2001, article in the *Harvard Business Review*, he wrote concerning the ineffectiveness of many managerial presentations. It seemed his article was a precursor to the field of inquiry known as executive presence. Morgan argues

that when a manager does deliver an effective presentation, it "can have an emotional impact. It can win people's trust and motivate them to act, thereby sparking organizational insight and change. And, on a personal level, the ability to move an audience can shape the trajectory of a manager's career."

As I reviewed these websites, scoured past issues of scholarly magazines, and looked through various business periodicals, it seemed the consensus concerning executive presence centered on two major ideas. One was the ability to communicate--the other, how to use presence to better your career. While I wouldn't niggle with the communication idea, I do wonder about the career argument.

Is the purpose of executive presence to aid a manager's ascent, trajectory, and ultimate landing upon the highest job they can attain? Or is it to create greater alignment, stir passion for formidable work, and create an engaged workforce that wants to do something special? I am not insensitive to the idea that a person who develops executive presence will likely find their career enhanced. But what are they using their presence for: personal gain or organizational success?

The late John W. Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and leadership expert once wrote, "Leaders conceive and articulate goals that lift people out of their petty preoccupations, carry them above the conflicts that tear a society apart and unite them in pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts." For a short time, I considered Gardner a mentor of mine. On several occasions I traveled to and from Cincinnati, where I live, to Washington, D.C. to meet with this accomplished man in his office close to the center of national government.

His office appeared to be part library, part personal museum. Photos of Gardner with dozens of distinguished world leaders, many of whom certainly possessed executive presence, adorned the walls. Floor to ceiling bookshelves completely enclosed the office like a fortress of knowledge. Towards a large window an oversized desk with stacks of books and papers, writing instruments, and a large clock seemed to tell a story of a man who both gave his time to others, and was conscious he only had so much time to accomplish what he felt was important. Casually placed amongst the memorabilia was the Medal of Freedom he had been awarded by President Lyndon Johnson, who enacted John F. Kennedy's nomination of Gardner.

In that office one day, he told Boyd Clarke, my late partner, and I that communication between leader and follower was at the heart of everything. It caught our attention like all our discussions with Gardner. They were never long and always insightful. Though calm, approachable, and engaging, Gardner's energy seemed restless, and he got to key issues quickly.

As a man with a degree in psychology, I would imagine Gardner wouldn't argue that executive presence was very helpful for organizational ascension. But I believe he and most other students of leadership would argue that this ability must be put to work towards the betterment of constituents, or it simply unravels as a political version of a PlayStation or Xbox multi-level game. Executive presence and the ability to communicate should be directed towards what Kouzes and Posner describe in their book, *The Leadership Challenge*, as "enlisting others ... to find and focus on the very best that the culture - group, unit, project, program, agency, community, organization, government, or nation - shares in common and what that means to its members. This communion of purpose, this commemoration of our dreams, helps to bind us together."

Currently there are many men and women in executive positions who seem to have little of this dynamism, this "presence" of the leader. While many of the programs, articles, and information concerning developing more presence are well intentioned and likely successful, I often wonder if those who have attained positional power without a sense of "presence" will be able to change. Can training alone develop the personal authenticity and communication ability required to "lift people out of their petty preoccupations?" Can individuals who define executive success solely in terms of execution, financial success, and personal reward truly develop the type of executive presence we all really long for? How many truly "elite" candidates, according to Ciampa's criteria, or Conlin's "conviction and authenticity," exist and how can training or coaching help the good candidate move into the elite category? To what degree do leaders use their presence for what Morgan calls sparking organizational insight and change versus altering the trajectory of their career? Fundamentally, can we infuse the authentic, well intentioned good woman or good man with greater dynamism and communication ability if these abilities have not been well developed previously? In a way I'm reframing an age old quote, "You can lead an executive to an audience, but can you make him have presence?"

Howard Gardner, author of several books on leadership, and an accomplished student of human behavior, development, creativity, and leadership, has written at length on the topic of leadership communication. He concludes in his book, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*, that when "linguistic intelligence is yoked to considerable personal intelligence, one has the makings of an effective communicator and, perhaps, a promising leader." Reading his material thoroughly, I believe Gardner supports the idea that highly developed communication ability is essential to promising leadership. But this ability must be accompanied by interpersonal intelligence and even then does not guarantee a person to become a leader. When great communication ability collides with an authentic leader who has genuine heart for constituents and the organization's collective aspirations, then, I think, we have individuals who have the potential to move from good to elite.

I'd love to publish your comments in a follow up article to this in a later edition. Send me your thoughts on the following;

1. A definition of leadership presence
2. Persons who seem to have executive presence
3. What it takes to develop executive presence in those able and well intentioned leaders who seem to lack it
4. Is the purpose of presence building to aid the individual's career, enable the organization's constituents, or both?

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