

## EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

It's a story common to companies large and small, private and public: the firm employs two individuals who are equally talented. However, over time, one person prospers while the other stagnates. The former becomes integral to the organization's future, while the latter never becomes a company leader.

Why does this happen? Because the successful employee is not only talented – he or she is also highly skilled at creating impact, exercising influence and consistently providing value. All organizations draw their future executives from these kind of individuals.

How does an employee become part of this desirable talent pool? By identifying and increasing their executive presence to ensure advancement and ultimate success.

### **| What is Executive Presence?**

Executive presence is the ability to win the confidence of those around you. You possess a professional magnetism that influences others; you're admired for exemplary leadership and respected as an authority. When you have executive presence your colleagues, subordinates and superiors rely on your strength and wisdom. In the article "She's Gotta Have 'It'", Michelle Conlin says, "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." (*BusinessWeek* July 2002)

With executive presence, you transform self-doubt and uncertainty into self-assurance, energy and the conviction to successfully navigate the corporate landscape and advance up the corporate ladder.

Having executive presence infuses you with confidence about yourself and your abilities. You're able to evaluate and ultimately eliminate the roadblocks that have kept you from rising to the top of an organization and contributing to its success.

When you have executive presence you think in new ways that help you reframe your relationship to work. You redefine your goals for yourself and your place in your company. You alter your perspective so that a different, more productive and positive attitude and belief system can be created.

Executive presence is about creating a consistent view of yourself as a compelling force inside an organization. You are known as someone who doesn't just rely on your authority or title, but your influence to shape and positively affect the outcome of situations. In the book, *The Leader of the Future*, Charles Handy says, "A career is now not so much a ladder of roles, but a growing reputation for making things happen. Influence, not authority, is what drives the political organization today in all organizations" (Jossey-Bass, 1996)

## EXECUTIVE PRESENCE: AS IMPORTANT AS YOUR CURRENT JOB

Look at the training programs offered by your company. Is developing executive presence on the list? Probably not. Very few companies educate employees to develop executive presence. They fail to recognize its vital importance. So it is up to you. Creating an executive presence doesn't happen by accident. You need to mentally, emotionally and spiritually frame and contort yourself for what you will become. Executive presence sometimes doesn't feel natural and easy. It is something that is practiced and learned over time. What is it going to take for you to commit to making the necessary changes so that executive presence is a vital part of your work life?

Creating an executive presence and focusing on career advancement is a separate, part-time job that deserves almost as much attention as your current assignment. Phylis Esposito, the executive vice president and chief strategy officer at Omaha-based TD Ameritrade, emphasizes the need for a proactive approach. She advises, "Doing nothing and just hoping your next promotion will somehow take care of itself is really the biggest risk," says Esposito. "Don't forget that there are people coming up behind you who want your job." (Fortune Magazine, August, 2006)

Although executive presence requires a tremendous amount of effort, time and energy, the end result will be an extraordinary career. You will fully realize your professional, personal and financial goals and improve the quality and quantity of your contributions to your company.

As Roger Enrico, PepsiCo's former CEO, noted in *BusinessWeek*: "The way I look upon it is that leadership is a skill like many others. Whatever leadership ability an individual has can be made better through practice and honing." (October, 2003)

Practicing your leadership skills is vital to boosting your executive presence. You will increase your competence and confidence, as well as the level of contribution to your organization. Like an athlete who runs several additional miles a week, strengthening your executive presence is an undertaking that requires dedication, repetition of key elements and time spent beyond the typical workweek.

For example, in Harvard Business School's newsletter, *HBS Working Knowledge*, associate professor Scott Snook described an interaction with Bobby Knight, the winningest coach in men's college basketball:

"I was in high school and what I remember was he'd throw all the balls out [of the gym] and lock the doors. He'd only do defensive positioning drills. As a young kid all you want to do is shoot the ball and play games. But for a half day, he would just have us doing defensive positioning drills, never touching a basketball, and he'd run around and cuss us out and keep us in the right defensive position. It was all about drills, it was all about discipline. In retrospect, he got us to work on the fundamentals of basketball, the things we didn't want to do. We dreaded the day that he would come to camp. In the end he made us all better defensive players because of it."

Snook continued, "There are skills in the workplace that you only get through repetition, drill, habit and discipline. A lot of times we're not real good at those, so having an external force, whether it's a leader or a compensation system, forces you to do something you wouldn't ordinarily do, the mundane things that make you a better person, a better leader or a better basketball player. Coach Knight was good at it..." (August 14, 2006)

## WHAT IS EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

Just as Knight's insistence on practicing fundamentals gave his team a strong foundation upon which to build their basketball skills, your own efforts to practice the skills and habits that support a strong executive presence will lay the groundwork for your becoming the best leader possible.

Developing your executive presence may seem like a daunting task. There is a lot of work involved, but it's the kind of work that will have far-reaching, long-lasting benefits. You will become more motivated, you'll learn how to recognize and promote your own value and you'll develop a meaningful and effective career plan. These are all things you can accomplish on your way to becoming a better leader.

Leadership is something that can – and must – be learned. As Michael Useem, director of the Center for Leadership and Change Management at Wharton, says, "Leadership at the front, mid and top lines alike is not innate. It is true some people have a huge head start. They're exceptionally clear minded. They communicate well. They're exceptionally persuasive. They look physically like a leader should, at least in the idealized Hollywood version. But the real skills of leadership at every level must be acquired in our lifetimes. There are no biological advantages. You have to learn those skills. And any organization, by implication, has to provide a chance for everybody to be a leader." (*Knowledge@Wharton*, December, 2003)

## WHEN PROMOTIONS ARE OUT OF YOUR CONTROL

Promotions often can be out of your personal influence. Regardless of how deserving you are, many circumstances beyond your control can derail your progress and affect your chances of advancement.

These circumstances might include: a job opening or future opportunity is cancelled; a re-organization occurs within the company which directly or indirectly affects you; last-minute departmental recommendations receive precedent above your situation; office politics or personality conflicts sway the decision; the position isn't a good fit for you; or you have been on the verge of promotion, but had your "clock reset" when a new manager took over the department.

Along with these internal, company-specific situations, there are circumstances outside the company that can limit your advancement opportunities: new opportunities at other companies are equally scarce; feeling trapped in the same job; few companies are hiring; workers are staying put; or streamlined management and obsessive cost-cutting.

Despite these situations, all of which you cannot personally control, executive presence will help you view them in the context of the bigger picture. You will need to build upon this viewpoint by working to increase your visibility by campaigning and promoting yourself. Executive presence, over time, will directly impact the advancement and success of your career. It will help you remain steadfast in your commitment to an impending promotion and in your determination to more fully contribute to your organization.

Although you cannot control whether or not you are promoted, making your utmost effort to build executive presence will pay off in increased respect, responsibility and relationships with colleagues in your organization and industry. Working to create your own destiny will strengthen your career even as it enhances your current situation – and your future.

## FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK

Communicating from a strong financial framework is a common characteristic of today's executive leaders. They speak about almost everything in terms of finances, including accomplishments, goals and requests.

An article "How to speak like a CFO" in *Purchasing Magazine* offers helpful suggestions on how to develop a financial mindset:

- "First, make sure you understand profit and loss statements and working capital," says David Hope-Ross of Oracle."
- "Learn how costs are developed in your company so you can make informed decisions on cutting them," says Michael Horricks of Clemmer Steelcraft Technologies.
- "Don't talk about cost avoidance. Translate your cost savings into profitability," says Chris Sawchuk of The Hackett Group.
- "...talk about how you're increasing your company's competitiveness," advises Dennie Norman of SAS.
- "Think in terms of risk. For example, understand what inventory does to a company's return on assets and cash flow, and know how to assess the mergers and acquisitions," says Brett Mauser of NCR.
- "Understand return on invested capital (ROIC) and earnings per share. Those concepts drive C-level attention because they are what Wall Street and bankers are interested in," advises Bob Rudzki of Greybeard Advisors. (*Purchasing*, May 2006).

The higher you advance, the more bottom-line, financial responsibilities you'll assume. It's imperative you know how to communicate accomplishments in terms of specific, measurable results. This will clearly demonstrate your value and enhance your credibility. Effective financial communication will help you gain more resources, receive the appropriate financial backing, acquire the desired head-count and secure the necessary buy-in so your projects can be successful.

Financial communication isn't difficult. It is a learned skill that everyone can develop. Remember: when speaking about professional or departmental goals and accomplishments, explain in concrete financial terms exactly what has been gained, such as the amount of money you saved or the percentage of dollars earned.

To speak the language of finance, you'll need to understand such financial terms as:

- Balance sheets
- Cash flows
- Net present value
- Accruals
- Budget planning
- Capital vs revenue
- Free cash flow
- Discounted cash flow
- Liabilities and risks

**FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK**

- Gross profit and ratios
- Performance ratios
- ROI (return on investment)
- EVA (economic value added)
- ROIC (Return on Invested Capital)
- Cost of capital
- EPS (Earnings per Share)

If you can't provide actual numbers, give an idea of how your efforts financially benefited the company. Executives typically care about absolutes, as measured by unit sales and profit. Always have hard facts and know them off the top of your head. At a minimum, here are the questions you should be able to answer:

- Did you generate revenue?
- Did you reduce expenses?
- How did your department improve the company's bottom line?
- What type of profitable growth did your department experience last quarter?
- How much time did you save doing a project efficiently and quickly?
- Did you improve customer retention?
- Did you help create higher profitability, better service or improved sales?
- Did you improve time-to-market?
- Were all of your financial goals met?
- Did you increase productivity?
- Did you identify new opportunities for growth?
- What is the revenue potential for these new opportunities?

Developing strong financial communication skills requires you ask yourself the right questions. To do so, write the following questions on a Post-It note and stick them to the side of your computer or in your calendar or handheld computer. That way, whether you're on the phone, writing a report or talking to a colleague, you'll be reminded:

- How do your division's accomplishments contribute to company profit?
- How can your division be seen as a money-producing one?
- How does your work financially benefit the company?

## LEAPING AHEAD IN YOUR CAREER

Ascending the corporate ladder and leaping ahead within a company is about exceeding expectations. Doing everything right -- such as attending appropriate meetings and training sessions, accomplishing what is asked of you and performing your responsibilities -- is just enough to be average, to meet the status quo. Leaping ahead is about excelling beyond the expected level, standing out and making an impact. Doing so can catapult you to the next level of your organization -- which takes concerted effort and a willingness to try new things and take risks.

As Phylis Esposito, executive vice president and chief strategy officer at Omaha-based TD Ameritrade, says, "If you're in middle management at any age...you have a big decision to make. Do you really want to break into the senior echelons? If so, you have to find a way to stand out. You have to get more visible, which usually means taking a risk -- sometimes a big risk. It's tough, because you may even have to put everything you've already earned on the line in order to do it." (Fortune Magazine, August, 2006)

Taking risks is nothing new for Cirque du Soleil, a half-billion-dollar global company that has dazzled audiences for 21 years by getting its performers to go beyond what is expected. Cirque's founder, Guy Laliberte, is famous for asking his people to stretch beyond the great to the jaw-dropping. "It's a commitment to a degree of sophistication and performance that distinguishes Cirque du Soleil productions from their less-demanding peers," says coach Boris Verkhovsky. (*Fast Company*, July 2005).

Once you have proven you can do your current job well, you have a strong foundation from which to leap ahead. Having an outstanding work record and a reputation for reliability will help you when you suggest new ideas, ask to take on more challenging projects or assume other work-related risks. Colleagues and superiors are more likely to listen to or take a chance on someone who has already proven themselves an asset to the company.

Here is one way to help you leap ahead in your career is Innovative Improvement.

### **INNOVATIVE IMPROVEMENT**

One key to leaping ahead is to always be on the lookout for innovative improvements regarding your company, division and the projects you work on. Innovation is a well-used tool in many areas, but many employees mistakenly save their best ideas for trouble spots and star products. To cultivate extreme innovation, take smart risks by revolutionizing your core products or services, not just those that are flagging.

When is the last time your division had a brainstorming session where everyone creatively thought aloud and came up with different solutions and ideas for current problems or challenges? Although not a new concept, brainstorming efficiently and quickly produces a slew of innovative ideas. If you want to improve your product to meet specific customer needs, for example, a brainstorming session with your team would most likely yield more than twenty innovative ideas. By meeting's end, you would have at least one that could immediately be implemented or studied further. In addition, you would be able to identify the most creative thinkers on your team.

## LEAPING AHEAD IN YOUR CAREER

An April 24, 2006 *BusinessWeek* article, “The World’s Most Innovative Companies,” describes a fruitful brainstorming session at Southwest Airlines: “Southwest recently gathered people from its in-flight, ground, maintenance and dispatch operations. For six months they met for 10 hours a week, brainstorming ideas to address a broad issue: What are the highest-impact changes we can make to our aircraft operations? The group presented 109 ideas to senior management, three of which involve sweeping operational changes.”

Bill Campbell, former CEO of Intuit and mentor of many Silicon Valley executives including Google’s Eric Schmidt, says, “Many company founders really want to be inventors. They want to break new ground with products and services that haven’t been done before. Google wants to let a thousand flowers bloom. It gives its engineers personal time to work on things of their choosing—potentially breakthrough stuff that can make a difference. These projects are reviewed and evaluated and have the opportunity to become mainstream Google products.” (*The McKinsey Quarterly*, April 15, 2007)

It may not always be possible to have a large-scale brainstorming session because others may not be available. However, you can always choose to brainstorm with just one colleague who you like and trust. You can also talk with individuals outside your company (e.g., other friends, family members or colleagues) whose ideas are innovative and resourceful.

One innovative brainstorming technique is to use teams from the “far side” of the organization to bring “crazy wisdom” to bear on the problems of another department. For example, have your operations team brainstorm your new product rollout. Or ask a salesperson for their ideas regarding ways to increase production in your manufacturing plant. Innovation doesn’t take long when you put fresh minds into a room together and give them the leeway and the whiteboards to think up something new.

Look for ways to create “constructive conflict,” suggests Deborah Mills, head of the early-stage marketing team at Corning. According to CNNMoney.com story on “The Best Kept Secrets of the World’s Best companies:

“few times a year, the company (Corning) runs half-day brainstorm sessions at its New York headquarters to kick off the quest for innovations. First, managers from a special marketing group—a 15-person unit tasked with identifying \$500 million-plus business opportunities—gather for several hours to listen to outside experts, from renewable-energy gurus to nanotech engineers.

The group then breaks into teams of five, each assigned to drum up ideas related to the talk. After that, the most promising ideas are handed off to teams of two employees: one with a marketing background, the other with technical expertise. The two spend up to four months hashing out feasibility and market potential, and then present the plan to execs, who give it the go-ahead or send it back for more research. In October 2004, one team devised a method for making water desalinization faster and cheaper, using carbon electrodes. Up to \$74 million has been set aside to bring that project, and several others, to market.” (CNNMoney.com, March 16, 2006)

## BEYOND YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Stretch your capabilities, take risks and go beyond your comfort zone. Maintaining the status quo – and settling for being average -- will allow others to pass you by, regardless of talent or skill. When you take risks, being scared comes with the territory. As Kevin Sharer, Amgen CEO, said, “You are trying to engender a passion and a desire to do something new. And new is scary. As a leader, you are putting your ass on the line to make it happen. So you should be scared.” (*Fortune Magazine*, December, 2005)

How will you know when you’ve gone beyond your comfort zone? You will likely feel uncomfortable or anxious and unsure you can do your project or task. Can you imagine overriding the fears and the challenges that limit you from doing something you know will benefit your career? If you worked through these fears and got to the other side of this self-doubt-inducing situation, what would happen? You would have more control of a potentially limiting situation and feel more competent and comfortable. As a result, you would perform well and be better compensated for your newly improved skills. This would ultimately enable you to have more freedom to achieve what you most want.

As we advance in our careers and move up within our organizations, we increase our responsibility and leadership abilities – and find new ways to go beyond our comfort zones. With practice, you will view these situations as exciting challenges rather than situations to be feared. You’ll know you’ve adopted a leap ahead mindset when you embrace opportunities to go beyond your comfort zone, rather than viewing them as limiting.

In fact, you may realize moving beyond your comfort zone can be quite profitable. As Meryl Golden, The Progressive Corp.’s Northeast Agency general manager says, “You want to know how to get noticed? Take on the riskiest projects. I turned around the business losing the most money at Progressive and you can bet I got noticed. Now I have such a network inside the company that I can get anything done. Also, keep in touch with all the smartest alumni of your company. They will become your competitors, your future employees, your future bosses. Stay friends with smart people. It will be worth it.” (*Knowledge@Wharton*, January, 2005)

Michael Useem, the Director for the Center for Leadership and Change Management at Wharton School adds, “...put yourself in situations that get you out of your comfort zone...The more you can force yourself to do things 30% different from what you’ve already done, again and again, the better you’ll be prepared to stretch under huge duress.” (*Fast Company*, September, 2004)

One way to uncover opportunities to be in charge is to work with your supervisor to identify ways to provide you with more responsibility. Arrange meetings with other influential company executives who can recommend that you be put in charge of projects or assignments that are beyond your current comfort zone. Ask to be invited to meetings where opportunities that interest you will be discussed and you can volunteer to help. Explain to the managers that shifting some projects to you will lessen their workload – and allow them more time to pursue important projects and further their own careers.

## KNOW YOUR WORTH

You know you're good – you deserve recognition, increased responsibility and a promotion to the next level. But does anyone else know? Many employees are passed by or completely overlooked simply because senior management doesn't know how valuable they are – or because senior management doesn't know these employees are looking for more responsibility. When executives don't give deserving and talented employees a promotion, those employees often will leave for a new job at a competitor because they believe they will be more valued. Thus, to make the most of your talents, you must know your worth and be comfortable communicating it to others – particularly if a promotion or recognition is what you need to feel valued.

Knowing your worth entails being aware of all you've accomplished. This level of awareness isn't possible without a process for recording and tracking information about your achievements. Of course, to successfully track this data, you must be committed to documenting everything you accomplish, and willing to devote the necessary time and effort to the process. The first step of the process is determining the type of information to track.

Because bottom-line responsibility increases as you advance up the ranks, accomplishments that can be stated in financial terms are especially useful. Those aren't the only accomplishments worth tracking, of course, but whatever information you capture should be based solely on facts.

Focus on four primary areas when you track your accomplishments:

- (1) The value you've provided to the company.
- (2) Accomplishments that are relevant to the promotion you want.
- (3) The development of your executive presence and its 16 traits.
- (4) Project-based accomplishments.

Although this tracking requires you to focus on your past successes, revisiting these achievements and documenting how you handled changes and obstacles helps you learn to convert setbacks into accomplishments, too.

Your current position is a rich resource because you have the opportunity to gain experiences that will propel you toward your next promotion. Look beyond your current responsibilities to the tasks and projects you've undertaken in other arenas and on behalf of others. Similarly, actively pursue experiences outside your job duties to showcase abilities that might not get a lot of exposure in your current position.

If you can't identify many opportunities outside of your job description, try joining a professional association. Serving on a board of directors or a participating in a committee (whether for an event, such as an awards ceremony or a subject area, such as marketing or membership) will give you opportunities to try different things and develop experience that can help you get promoted.

**BEYOND YOUR COMFORT ZONE**

Above all, knowing your worth means being – and valuing – yourself instead of developing a false image that imitates someone you consider successful. Identify and track your own unique abilities and accomplishments and use them as a springboard to create success for your own career.

In a Newsweek article, Sharon Allen, Chairman of the board, Deloitte & Touche USA, said the following:

“Take responsibility for your own career. Don’t assume that others are aware of the good work you’re doing. When I was a young accountant, I was unhappy about not getting a promotion. I went to my supervisor and told him all of these things that I thought I should be given credit for and he said “Well, gee, I didn’t know that you had done all of these things.” It was a real wakeup call. You don’t have to be a bragger, but I think it’s very important that we make people aware of our accomplishments...”  
(*Newsweek*, October 2005)

## GAIN POLITICAL ADVANTAGE

When it comes to career advancement, aptitude, talent, experience and politics are equally important. There are many more ambitious and talented people than there are great positions, so it's vitally important you inform others what you have done, what you can do, and why you are the best person for the job. The likelihood you'll be promoted into the position you want may hang on your ability to persuasively present your value to the right people.

Politics is about perception and gaining favor with the people who help get you where you want to go. It's important to present the right image and create the energy that gets people to notice you. Stand out from the crowd in the best way possible.

Being perceptive and savvy at networking are key to gaining political advantage. Diane McGarry, Xerox's chief marketing officer, confirms this, "success at a big company such as Xerox requires an understanding of the many layers of office politics as well as the confidence to put your best ideas forward." She adds, "You have to know which people you need to get your ideas in front of in order to get those ideas advanced. Every time you make a move in a big company, you expand your network of people who are in your corner. (*Knowledge@Wharton*, January, 2005)

### **7 Ways to Position Yourself for Political Advantage:**

1. Undertake activities that allow you to do things that others (especially your bosses) find beneficial.
2. Understand the problems facing your supervisors and do things to make their jobs easier.
3. Involve yourself in high-profile projects so your name comes up frequently (and positively) in discussions at the top levels of the company.
4. Get top management to believe in your abilities so they will recommend you for future advancement.
5. Ask for feedback from those above you, so you know how you're perceived. It's better to know in advance what people are saying about you.
6. Create as many advocates as possible. The greater the number of people who know you and the value you provide, the better your chance of influencing your advancement and the opportunity to make a bigger contribution to your company.
7. Communicate your accomplishments. If others don't hear about them from you, they can only operate from perception and second-hand information.

## ACT ABOVE YOURSELF

Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” That’s a powerful way to say that if you want something to happen, act as if it’s already happened. In other words, if you want to land a better position, do what you can now to act as if you are already performing at that level.

Look for opportunities in your current job with responsibilities that relate directly to your target position. For example, if you are a senior manager who wants to become a VP, attend meetings where VPs will be present and choose tasks that allow you to make the decisions and perform duties a VP would handle. Let people with the power to promote see how well you fit into the position you aspire to. Make it obvious that promoting you to VP would create an effortless transition.

Every day, ask yourself, “How can I act more like [whatever position I want] in my current job?” Get to know the type of people who hold those positions. What qualities and characteristics do they exhibit? What are their backgrounds? How do they dress, talk, behave? How do they conduct meetings? How do they respond to questions? How do they interact with those above them, their peers and with their staff?

Compare where you are to where you want to be. Decide what needs to change and do so. In the meantime, do as William James suggested: “Act as if.” Act as if you already have changed and those changes will soon become a part of you.

As a manager who wants to become a VP, wake up each day and say to yourself, “Today I am going to act as if I’m the VP of this company. I am not going to wait for my company to recognize I am capable of doing the job.” At first it might be quite a stretch and may move you out of your comfort zone. Perhaps VPs in your company are required to do a lot of public speaking. If you’re uncomfortable with that, you’ll have to practice until it’s second nature to you.

Start living what you expect will become your reality. Eliminate anything you are doing that limits your ability to act like a VP. Experiment with behaviors at your current level so when you actually become the VP, you’ll make fewer mistakes and succeed effortlessly.

You might be surprised to find people start treating you with more respect. They may pay closer attention when you speak. Your manager may give you more important assignments and seek out your opinions. People react positively to genuine confidence, and that’s just what you’re exhibiting.