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White Paper: The Art of Executive Presence

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In Skyline Group's work with executives worldwide, executive presence is one of the top areas identified for development. Perhaps one of the reasons why so many leaders wrestle with mastering this competency is because effective executive presence requires successfully using a number skills. "Executive presence" is a multifaceted competency which includes the ability to build trust and confidence with others through self-confidence, self-trust and self-awareness, and the insight to discern the needs, interests, and styles of others. These skills are combined with embodying being present, authentic, and commanding respect through projecting calm, sincerity and understanding. Mastering executive presence is to become a soft skill polymath.

In this white paper, we present the behaviors that embody and are imperative to developing executive presence.

Know Yourself

Leaders with executive presence believe in themselves, and also believe in others. They demonstrate this by listening to others' input, acknowledging their expertise and ideas, and taking action based on the information they gather. They do so also by standing up for what they believe to be right and standing by their decisions even in the face of criticism, unafraid of making mistakes. However, when mistakes are made they are quick to admit that they have made them.

Believing in yourself and having the confidence to be open to others' ideas requires that you know your values and what you believe. Below are 10 qualities we associate with executive presence. Some people possess these qualities naturally, but all leaders can and should develop them.

As you read through the list, answer the questions posed.

1. **Genuine:** Do your actions align with your beliefs?
2. **Clarity:** Do you convey your thoughts and feelings effectively?
3. **Passion:** Are you committed, and does your commitment reflect how much you believe in what you do?
4. **Confidence:** Are you self-assured, objective and resilient, and do you demonstrate professional expertise, experience and education?
5. **Intelligence:** How well do you understand the topic behind your message, and how effectively do you share your ideas?
6. **Warmth:** How considerate are you of others' feelings?
7. **Humility:** How willing are you to admit your mistakes and acknowledge the value of others?
8. **Courage:** How willing are you to take risks?
9. **Humor:** How well do you use humor to put others at ease?
10. **Insight:** How well do you draw clear conclusions from complicated, multi-sourced data?

Make Your Voice Heard and Positions Clear

Leaders who can clearly articulate their positions help others connect with them as individuals and their vision. Leaders who use tone and facial expressions to convey meaning and emotion improve their ability to communicate and connect with others. Your voice, what you say, and how you say it are major factors in how you present yourself and how others respond to you.

To command respect, speak loudly enough to be heard clearly. Be deliberate, calm, and use tone and inflection to underscore your certainty. When you agree with others, say so. When you disagree with others, say so, but not in a combative way. And when you disagree, share your reasoning.

Believe in Yourself Even in The Presence of Greatness

Some otherwise confident people are rendered speechless when in the presence of their CEO or an industry guru. Showing respect for others is appropriate. However, do not give your power away. You are there to contribute. Your contribution could be a superior skill or information that no one else has, so show respect for yourself and others by remaining composed, and ready to answer questions and propose solutions.

If the opportunity presents itself, show respect to others by engaging with them. To do so, listen to them, engage with them, and appropriately acknowledge the respect you have if circumstances allow. Control your enthusiasm. Smile, make eye contact, and speak clearly and with purpose, moderating your voice to demonstrate confidence. Don't be afraid to admit what you don't know, and ask questions to learn. Share what you know if it contributes to the exchange. Represent yourself with dignity.

To improve your ability to hold your own in the presence of greatness, do the following:

- Be present. Listen, ask questions that help move the conversation forward, or make recommendations that address a specific need.
- Be fearless. Embrace an opportunity to join a group of people you respect.
- Be professional. Remember that you were hired for a particular knowledge or skill. Share that knowledge or skill when needed.
- Remember, everyone is human – with strengths, weaknesses, and insecurities.

Dress The Part

Obvious? Perhaps and often overlooked. First impressions are important. For leaders, their first impression is critical. Confidence in a leader begins with a first impression that conveys confidence and competency. If instead the first impression fails, a person can be unsure of the leader. As a result, recovering from that missed first impression can best take time and effort and in a worst-case confidence may never be achieved. You may have all the right tools a leader needs but if you present yourself in the wrong way you undermine all of your other qualifications.

In order to ensure that you are intentionally making the right impression, you must identify and embody the image you want people to have of you. This requires an understanding of the leader you want to be. You should dress in a matter that reflects

your professional environment and culture, but you should also be true to your personal style and the image you are seeking to portray.

What people first notice is the way you dress. We tend to dress according to how we feel. We can also change the way we feel by changing the way we dress. Therefore, no matter whether at work or on the weekend, dress in a style that projects the image you want people to have of you.

To command respect, wear clothes that are professional, clean, contemporary and properly fitted, and that make you feel confident. Identify your personal style as well as how to use it to rise above the standard or acceptable norm. From the shoes on your feet to the hat on your head (if you choose to wear one), you should exude confidence and self-respect. You must feel worthy of self-respect before you can expect others to respect you.

Groom for The Part

Dressing for success is only part of the equation. The other is grooming and physical conditioning. Thoughtful and intentional grooming and personal hygiene reflect self-respect and respect for others. Similar to how you dress, if your grooming is not up to the expectations of your professional environment you will undermine your leadership qualities. In addition, poor grooming distracts from your who you are and your message.

To command respect, be meticulous in grooming and physical conditioning. Whether you wear the same hairstyle or vary it, your grooming should convey a calm, unflappable demeanor.

Finally, take care of your body with a healthy diet, and get regular sleep and exercise. You should project a sense of power and confidence through your health. Research has shown that people make assumptions about a person's ability to lead based on how healthy they appear. If a leader is not fit, the assumption is that they may not be around long enough to lead.

If you eat a poor diet, and do too much sitting, smoking or drinking, you will be sluggish, your brain will not be at its most effective, and even your coloring will exploit someone whose conditioning habits reflect minimal self-respect, little initiative, and a seeming inability to manage just the stress of living. People will question your ability to lead them successfully if they do not perceive that you are leading yourself well; they certainly will not be inspired.

To ensure that you take care of yourself:

- Get regular physical check-ups.
- Get regular exercise, at home or at work.
- Eat to support your body and stress level. Work with a nutritionist, if necessary, to identify good choices when traveling or to accommodate special health requirements.

Act Like a Leader

By definition, leaders set direction. They do this by anticipating events, actions and outcomes that will create or maximize opportunity and minimize risk or downside. They inspire vision and in setting strategy develop contingencies to help manage the unexpected. They do so with courage, decisiveness, integrity and emotional intelligence

A study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* is an excellent example of how much presence plays a role in other people's perceptions. In the study, people watched silent videos of pianists performing in an international competition, and, despite not hearing any of the music performed, they picked out the winners more often than those people who actually heard the performance. The musicians whose body language and facial expressions communicated passion were most successful in the competition.

The greatest challenge to maintaining executive presence and opportunity to demonstrate your skills occurs under duress. When the unexpected and stressful occurs, maintain composure and compassion. Know all that you can about the situation, consider possibilities, and be decisive. Maintain impeccable integrity, empathize, and communicate with authority.

Execute With Authority and Influence With Care

As a leader authority is associated with hierarchy and enables you as a leader, to take independent and decisive action. However, if you have the ability to influence, you can be even more effective, because with influence you can inspire others to take action on your behalf without hierarchal authority.

Having influence requires the trust and respect of others. Trust develops when you make or influence good decisions or actions. This trust will grow or diminish with each action taken or influenced by you. To command respect with authority and influence, include others in the exploration and decision process. However, as the leader you will need to make and own the final decision.

Communicate With Impact

Communicating in a way that reinforces executive presence requires you to be clear, concise, and confident while simultaneously connecting with the audience and showing composure and charisma. Presentation skills are important. However, more important is the use of key words that connect with your audience and the conviction you have for your ideas and message.

To command respect, be clear on what you want to say, choose words that convey your intent and connect with your audience. If you are meeting in person, make eye contact and use body language to emphasize the importance of the message and your confidence in what you are saying. Get to the point, but don't be abrupt. Engage your audience by considering their thoughts, emotions and perspectives so that the content is meaningful to them.

For important written communication, create a draft and put it away for a short time. Later, review your work and share it with others who have less bias toward your desired

outcome, perhaps someone more like your audience, and ask them for feedback. To ensure that your messaging is effective, let them tell you what your communication is conveying to them vs telling them what you are trying to convey.

Master Body Language

Body language is a powerful way to reinforce your image. The more adept you are at applying it, the more impressive will be your style and presence. From a confident stance to a firm handshake, from a simple smile to leaning toward people, and from shoulder movement to hand gestures, body language tells a story, emphasizes a point, asks a question, generates enthusiasm, and creates energy and image. Most importantly, the right body language reinforces what you want to convey.

To command respect, hold your head up, your shoulders back, and make eye contact, but don't glare or stare. Stand or sit straight, not slouched, and lean in slightly. Take up space by spreading your weight across both feet and opening your body by placing your hands behind your back or letting them hang naturally at your side if standing. If you are sitting, put your hands on the table or your arms on the chair arms. Relax your face, stand tall, tilt your head slightly forward or to the side, and relax and square your shoulders. Make eye contact and smile. Make palm-to-palm contact when shaking hands. Don't fidget, don't lean against things, don't scratch, and don't shift your attention away from the people you are engaged with.

Conclusion

No matter your role or title, you are never done developing executive presence and the image that you create. Developing and honing your executive presence requires reflecting on the leader you are today and the one you want to be tomorrow. With this in mind, the leader you want to be tomorrow will evolve and change as you evolve and change today.

As you develop and manifest your executive presence, consider how it reflects your authentic self – who you really are. The most effective leaders exude a presence that is an authentic manifestation of who they are and what they value.

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