

# Executive Presence

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Performance, hard work, and sponsors get top talent recognized and promoted. But “leadership potential” isn’t enough to lever men and women into the executive suite. Leadership roles are given to those who also look and act the part. Center for Talent Innovation research reveals that the top jobs often elude women and professionals of color because they lack “executive presence” (EP), or underestimate its importance. And they’re simply not getting the guidance they need to acquire it.

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## PILLARS OF EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

**Gravitas** is the core characteristic, according to 67 percent of the 268 senior executives we surveyed. Six behaviors characterize gravitas:

- Exuding confidence and “grace under fire” (79 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 76 percent say it contributes to a man’s)
- Acting decisively and “showing teeth” (70 percent say it contributes to men’s and women’s EP)
- Showing integrity and “speaking truth to power” (64 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 63 percent say it contributes to a man’s)
- Demonstrating emotional intelligence (61 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 58 percent say it contributes to a man’s)
- Burnishing reputation (56 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 57 percent say it contributes to a man’s)
- Projecting vision (50 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 54 percent say it contributes to a man’s)

**Communication**, according to 28 percent of senior executives, telegraphs you’re leadership material. They identify these key verbal and non-verbal abilities:

- Great speaking skills (60 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 63 percent say it contributes to a man’s)
- Ability to command a room (49 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 54 percent say it contributes to a man’s)
- Ability to read an audience (39 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 33 percent say it contributes to a man’s)

**Appearance** counts, largely as a filter through which your communication skills and gravitas become more apparent. Central to looking like a leader is:

- Good grooming (35 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 38 percent say it contributes to a man’s)
- Physical attractiveness (16 percent say it contributes to a woman’s EP, 14 percent say it contributes to a man’s)

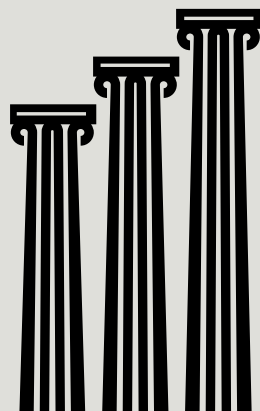
While only 5 percent of leaders consider appearance to be a key factor in EP, all of them recognize its potential for curtailing or derailing talented up-and-comers. Notable appearance blunders, not surprisingly, are unkempt attire (83 percent say it detracts from a woman’s EP, 76 percent say it detracts from a man’s) and, for women, too-tight or provocative clothing (73 percent say it detracts from a woman’s EP).

Marie Claire, and Moody's Foundation, CTI surveyed nearly 4,000 college-graduate professionals in large corporations to get at the essence of executive presence. EP, senior executives told us, accounts for 26 percent of what it takes to get the next promotion. It depends on getting three things right: appearance, communication, and gravitas (itself a set of behaviors). Additional findings from 18 focus groups and some 50 interviews revealed how these elements interact to generate that aura of authority that sets leaders apart. Presence alone won't get you promoted, we learned—but its absence will impede your progress, especially if you're female or a person of color.

Respondents also identified EP blunders around communication. Making racially-biased comments proved the most offensive, with 70 percent saying it detracts from a woman's EP and 72 percent from a man's. Sounding uneducated also proves a tripwire (59 percent say it detracts from a woman's EP and 58 percent say it detracts from a man's). Online communication can be even more fraught, as 78 percent of professionals first search online for information about a new colleague. Posting unflattering messages about colleagues, unprofessional photos, or controversial views all contribute to a negative online impression.

Our inquiry uncovered, as well, why women and multicultural professionals struggle with EP: an intrinsic tension between conforming to corporate culture and remaining true to oneself. Fifty-six percent of people of color feel they are held to a stricter code around EP, compared with 31 percent of Caucasians; 36 percent deliberately recast the way they tell their stories, compared with 29 percent of Caucasians. Women are held to stricter standards in terms of appearance, but at the same time denied feedback on what those standards are: 32 percent of women have received feedback from a male superior compared with 47 percent of men. For both women and people of color, feedback on EP can be hopelessly contradictory—which may be why 81 percent say they're unclear as to how to act on it.

Our findings also underscore that EP is elusive for men as well as women because it changes depending on the culture you find yourself in (Google is very different from Goldman Sachs), and the band level at which you operate. With seniority, your latitude grows in terms of personal expression. But so does the stage on which you express yourself—making it doubly imperative that you don't make a blunder on any EP front. How you look, how you speak, and how you act turn out to be critical to your success, our report concludes, at every step in your career journey.



**CTI's flagship project is the Task Force for Talent Innovation (formerly the Hidden Brain Drain Task Force)—a private-sector task force focused on helping organizations leverage their talent across the divides of gender, generation, geography and culture. The 75 global corporations and organizations that constitute the Task Force—representing 4 million employees and operating in 190 countries around the world—are united by an understanding that the full utilization of the talent pool is at the heart of competitive advantage and economic success.**

