Executive presence eludes multicultural professionals, according to Center for Talent Innovation study

Findings show feedback failure as key impediment to cracking the executive presence code

NEW YORK, December 5, 2013 – Executive presence (EP) – gravitas, communication and appearance - constitutes 26 percent of what senior leaders say it takes to get the next promotion. Yet, because senior leaders are overwhelmingly Caucasian, multicultural professionals (African American, Asian and Hispanic individuals) find themselves at an immediate disadvantage in trying to look, sound, and act like a leader. These insights are part of “Cracking the Code: Executive Presence and Multicultural Professionals,” a report by the global think tank Center for Talent Innovation (CTI) that unpacks the impediments to achieving EP for the multicultural professional.

Across the board, a majority of minority professionals (56 percent) feel they are held to a stricter code of EP than their Caucasian peers. Further, the research found that EP feedback is either absent, overly vague, or contradictory, thus remaining an inscrutable set of rules for multiculturals. More than three-quarters (79 percent) of people of color surveyed say that when they get feedback they are unclear how to act on it, with Asians (84 percent) and Hispanics (80 percent) particularly confused about how to course-correct.

“The U.S. has made significant progress in providing equal access to higher education and to white-collar jobs, but progression to the upper echelons of management remains problematic for people of color,” stated Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Founder and CEO of the Center for Talent Innovation. “By recognizing the ethnic variations within interpretations of executive presence, we can expand outdated ideals of leadership to truly embrace—and harness—the power of difference.”

More:
- Professionals of color were more likely than Caucasians to agree that EP at their company consisted of conforming to traditionally white male standards: African Americans, especially, were 97 percent more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to agree with this assessment.
- People of color are 37 percent more likely than Caucasians to say they need to compromise their authenticity at their companies.
  - A surprising 38 percent of Asians, 35 percent of African Americans, and 32 percent of Hispanics say they deliberately change their personal story to bolster their professional image.
- Gravitas is the most important aspect of executive presence (according to all groups) but is replete with tripwires for multicultural professionals.
  - Part of gravitas is “showing teeth.” For executives of color, showing teeth is freighted with downsides as it requires them to walk a fine line between displaying strength and promulgating stereotypes of “the angry black” or “the hot-headed Latina.”
- For multicultural professionals, appearance can be a fraught issue. Roughly a third of multicultural women reported that they struggle with the “right” look.
The report also reveals what people of color and their organizations can do to transform the ill-defined tenets of EP into a more transparent, teachable skill set. It includes case studies from companies like Bank of America, GE, KPMG, McKesson Corporation and Morgan Stanley that have created customized approaches to addressing the EP gap.

“As the economy globalizes, success increasingly hinges on an organization’s ability to develop and empower leaders who can be effective across geographies and cultures, not just divisions. Hence, cultivating EP in rising talent of color is ultimately an investment not just in a company’s leadership, but in its future as a competitive organization,” added Hewlett.

To view the report findings, visit www.talentinnovation.org

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CHRISTINA FARGNOLI, Senior Research Associate at the Center for Talent Innovation, executes statistical analyses and collects qualitative research for research projects through the conduction of interviews, focus groups and Insights In-Depth® sessions. She is the manager for the Center’s master classes and webinars. She is co-author of The Power of “Out” 2.0, and led the data analysis for the project. She has also contributed to the data analysis of Executive Presence and is involved in the upcoming publication Athena 2.0. After graduating magna cum laude from SUNY Oswego with a BA in psychology, Fargnoli pursued social work with mentally ill and addiction-affected populations.

About the Research
The research consists of a survey, Insights in-Depth® sessions (a proprietary web-based tool used to conduct voice-facilitated virtual focus groups) involving more than 100 people from our Task Force organizations, and more than 60 one-on-one interviews.

The national survey, conducted online in March 2012, sampled 3,929 respondents (1,975 men and 1,954 women with 2,454 Caucasians, 507 African Americans, 463 Asians, and 438 Hispanics) in the U.S., aged 21–64, currently employed in certain white-collar occupations, with at least a bachelor’s degree.44 Data were weighted to be representative of the U.S. population of university/college graduates on key demographics (age, sex, race/ethnicity, and region). The base used for statistical testing was the effective base.

About the Center for Talent Innovation
The Center for Talent Innovation is a nonprofit think tank based in New York City. CTI’s flagship project is the Task Force for Talent Innovation—a private-sector task force focused on helping organizations leverages their talent across the divides of gender, generation, geography and culture. The 75 global corporations and organizations that constitute the Task Force, representing nearly six million employees and operating in 192 countries around the world, are united by an understanding that the full realization of the talent pool is at the heart of competitive advantage and economic success.

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