Executive presence: disrupting what we think we know

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Overview

Run a search on "executive presence" and you will see hundreds of articles and opinion pieces in the popular press explaining what the term means and how to acquire it. Look more closely and you'll find nearly as many definitions of executive presence as there are articles—and none of them agree.

Indeed, the concept of executive presence lacks a clear definition. Even so, the term "executive presence" has seduced many of us into believing it's a tangible leadership concept. Terms like "gravitas,""je ne sais quoi," and the "it factor," seem to imply there's some mystical quality we can acquire with the right kind of development. Recruiters are asked to identify it in possible candidates, leaders are expected to have executive presence to advance their careers, and executive coaches are asked to help coachees develop it. Our perceptions of whether a leader has executive presence or not have enormous consequences. And yet, how can such weight be put on a concept that lacks clear definition—let alone a shared understanding of the behaviors that exemplify it?

This position paper presents the evidence for and against the existence of executive presence as a tangible leadership construct. We explore models of executive presence, the research behind them (or lack thereof), the characteristics and behaviors associated with executive presence, and identify four traits that models have in common. We argue that many characteristics of "executive presence" are simply characteristics of models of good leadership that can be assessed in a typical 360—but note that some leadership characteristics do seem particularly representative of executive presence, like confidence. We end by reflecting on actions that can be taken to develop executive presence with this caveat: Is the concept of "executive presence" more about the leader—or about us?

Is executive presence real?

The "it factor" of executive presence has generated dozens of models, assessments, and guides for identifying it in job applicants, developing it as individuals, and coaching it in high-potential employees. However, among all of the models and advice for developing executive presence you will find no agreed-upon definition. Worse, you will see virtually no evidence-based research that identifies the behaviors that exemplify executive presence or that links executive presence to measurable outcomes—for leaders, teams, or organizations.

Executive presence is a fuzzy concept at best—but somehow that concept has embedded itself in our collective understanding of what characterizes great leaders—even if we can't articulate exactly what executive presence is. In fact, we will argue that executive presence is not a validated leadership construct for three critical reasons:

1) There is no accepted definition of executive presence.
2) Models of executive presence have little consistency in the leadership characteristics that define it— and some models contain so many characteristics that it becomes a kitchen sink of good leadership.
3) Whether a leader is viewed as having executive presence depends on the eye of the beholder—and societal norms and individual biases play a significant role in shaping those perspectives.

No accepted definition exists

Articles and opinions about executive presence have exploded, with everyone having a different twist on what it means. An internet search on the term "definition of executive presence" results in a variety of definitions and characteristics. Examples include the 7 C's (composure, connection, charisma, confidence, credibility, clarity, conciseness); a 3-component model (effective communication skills, self-awareness, and appearance); and yet another model claiming that executive presence depends on the ability to inspire others, assertiveness in role, and consistent demonstration of confidence. This inconsistency in definition and characteristics has created a mess. And therein lies the rub: No accepted definition exists. How can a leadership development construct exist—let alone be coached—if there is no shared understanding of what it is?

As we reviewed various articles and research papers, we found that Dagley and Gaskin (2014) provided the clearest definition.

> *A person with executive presence is someone who, by virtue of how he or she is perceived by audience members at any given point in time, exerts influence beyond that conferred through formal authority.*
>
> *(Dagley & Gaskin, 2014)*

This is one of many definitions—and many authors and researchers admit that the lack of definition is confusing and difficult. In our reviews, we have found that the definition of executive presence often simply reiterates the traits and characteristics associated with good leadership rather than articulating a clear definition. Identifying those traits—and whether various authors agree on them—is the foundation for defining executive presence.

Executive Presence = Good Leadership

Let's go all the way back to 1948 to a literature review of leadership behaviors and traits titled "Personal Factors Associated with Leadership: A Literature Review" (Stogdill, 1948). The author reviewed all research studies prior to 1948 that attempted to determine the traits and characteristics of good leaders. The research examined emerging leadership characteristics in children as well as leadership characteristics of adults. Stogdill concluded that ten characteristics distinguish outstanding leaders from average leaders (see Table 1). Stogdill's work effectively lays out a general model of leadership characteristics—and what is fascinating is that these general leadership characteristics are similar to what we find in today's models of effective leaders—and many are included in today's descriptions of executive presence.

Fast forward to 2011. Sally Williamson released the book, "The Hidden Factor: Executive Presence" in which she proposed a model for executive presence based on four major categories: physical, functional, rational, and emotional. Within these categories she identified 28 characteristics that make up executive presence. In 2014, Sylvia Ann Hewlett released a book titled "Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success" (Hewlett, 2014) based on survey research with 268 U.S. business professionals. Respondents ranked the importance of 25 traits to executive presence, and then grouped them into three major categories: Gravitas, communication, and appearance. Note that Hewlett conducted her research again a decade later to compare how perceptions of executive presence had shifted (Hewlett, 2024). The three categories remained the same, but the traits shifted. Bates produced a model of executive presence based on three categories: Character, Substance, and Style (Bates, 2014; Bates, 2022; Dalavai, 2019) that included 15 traits. Note the sheer number of traits that a leader must have to exemplify executive presence. It's a tall ask.

Other authors have attempted to identify and categorize characteristics representing executive presence. In Table 1, we compiled the characteristics identified by six different authors (Hewlett is listed twice to represent her two studies). We grouped the various executive presence traits under the overarching categories defined by Hewlett: Gravitas, Communication, and Appearance.

Notes:

1) Where the definition of traits seemed similar but slightly different between authors, we added the specific word or phrase used by the author. 2) We only included characteristics from papers or articles that appeared to use some form of evidence-based research. 3) Where we could not clearly map onto Hewlett's categories of Gravitas, Communication, and Appearance, we created a final category simply titled "Other."

As you review the characteristics in Table 1, reflect on these questions:

- Is there consistency among the characteristics?
- Do they seem like common indicators of good leadership—and would you find them on a 360 or other leadership assessment?
- Are the characteristics substantive or superficial?
- Do the characteristics reflect properties that people cannot change, like physical characteristics or socioeconomic status?
- What do the characteristics say about cultural norms and our own biases?

Table 1: Executive Presence Characteristics by Author

	Stogdill 1948	Williamson 2011	Hewlett 2014	Hewlett 2024	Bates 2014	Kerns 2017	Dagley & Gaskin 2014
GRAVITAS							
Confidence	X	X	X	X	X		X
Decisiveness	Knowing how to get things done; initiative		X	X		X	
Integrity			X	X	X		X
Emotional intelligence		Empathetic	X				
Blue-chip pedigree			X				
Vision			X	X	X		
Inclusiveness				X	X		
Respect for others				X		Interest in others	
Displaying composure					X	X	
Managing core values					Intentionality	X	X (Values in action)
Status and reputation	Popularity						X
COMMUNICATION							
Superior speaking skills/high impact communication	X	X	X	X		X	X
Command of a room		X	X	X			
Forcefulness			X		Assertiveness	Warm assertiveness	Coercive power use
Ability to read an audience	*Situational awareness and insight		X	X			
Engaging	Sociability	Engaging	Joking/bantering manner				Engagement skills
Use of body language			X	X			
Listen to learn orientation				X			
Authenticity		X	X	X	X		
APPEARANCE							
Polished look		X	X	X			
Physical attractiveness			X				
"Next job" style of dress"			X	"New normal" style of dress			
Tallness			X				
Youthfulness/vigor			X	Fitness/vigor			
Slimness			X				
Curation of online image				X			
Appearance (general)		X			X	X	X
OTHER							
Displaying self-knowledge/awareness						X	
Intellect and expertise		Strategic thinking;					
Expertise					X		
Insight		Intuitive			Practical wisdom		
Popularity	X				X		
Adaptability	X				X		
Cooperativeness	X				X		
Initiative	X	Driven			X		
Humility					X		
Restraint					X		
Concern					X		
Resonance					X		
Interactivity					X		

A review of Table 1 leads to two key observations:

- Of the 40 executive presence traits compiled in Table 1, only four traits were identified by at least four authors, including confidence, decisiveness, superior communication skills, and appearance.
- Twenty-three traits (58%) were identified by two or fewer authors.

Each author has created their own definition of executive presence, and each uses different language, characteristics, and categories to define what it is. All work is based on surveys, usually with small sample sizes. These surveys do not include measured behaviors or leadership outcomes such as promotion, employee engagement, or organizational results. Further, many of the traits and characteristics that authors have identified can be found in established models of good leadership, such as inclusiveness (Seitchik, 2019) organizational savvy, the ability to motivate and develop subordinates, and honor (Lombardo et al., 1988).

We've established that various authors disagree on how to define executive presence and its associated traits. There is some consensus around the four characteristics of confidence, decisiveness, superior communication skills, and appearance. We'll come back to these characteristics when we discuss how to coach executive presence. In the meantime, let's turn to the next question: Do observers agree on who has executive presence? In other words, would 10 people observing the same leader all agree that the leader exhibits executive presence characteristics—and would they place the same value on these characteristics? The answer is a resounding no.

The eye of the beholder

Perceptions of executive presence depend on the eye of the beholder—and those perceptions are influenced by societal norms, social-identity biases, and organizational culture. For example, in the U.S., self-confidence is a characteristic that many people think is critical to executive presence. However, in Japan, high displays of self-confidence might lead to demotion. Research conducted using the Hogan Motives, Values, & Preferences Inventory (Hogan Assessments) concluded that "Charisma, overconfidence, and self-promotion are almost necessary for leaders to get noticed and promoted in the U.S., but in Japan, these characteristics are frowned upon and could be perceived as a threat to the achievement of collective goals and harmony" (Paiement & Pedersen, 2024). In the U.S., Asian leaders, particularly women, may display leadership styles that value other characteristics than their U.S. counterparts, e.g., being reserved (Shelton & Wu, 2023). Female Asian leaders may be perceived by their U.S. peers as lacking confidence—when in fact they are simply, well, reserved. Imagine the difficulties of working in multi-national countries with such different values for executive presence.

Similarly, specific social identities are associated with executive presence—regardless of the capabilities of the leader. Numerous articles conclude that we are more likely to attribute executive presence to white men than other groups (Goudreau, 2012; Hewlett, 2024; Stogdill, 1948). This association has led people who are not white and/or not male to attempt to conform to an ideal that may be akin to slipping on a mask. For example, women CEOs have attempted to conform with expectations of what of executive presence is by taking on extremely high-risk roles to become Fortune 500 leaders (Glass & Cook, 2016), Black women shift their language and appearance, (Stewart, 2022), and women leaders downplay their membership in stigmatized groups to increase perceptions of professionalism and the likelihood of being hired (McCluney et al., 2019). We even hold ideals for how competent leaders should sound (Truninger et. al., 2021). Famously, Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, undertook extensive voice training because her voice was perceived as too "shrill" to be an effective prime minister. We profess to value inclusivity and authenticity. We recommend that leaders from the LGBTQ community be more "transparent and authentic" to develop executive presence (Bloomberg, 2017) even in a world where that authenticity may have significant and sometimes dangerous consequences. As another example, we encourage young leaders to change their language by mimicking the language and vocabulary of those above them, or adopting certain stances intended to convey confidence (Wells, 2023). While our ingrained mental models of **who** has executive presence are changing to be much more inclusive (Ubaka et al., 2023), our coaching and advice tends to focus on how leaders can transmogrify themselves to fit others' perceptions of executive presence—but never questions the biased perceptions of the observer. We are asked to become who others think we should be.

Furthermore, there is an unquestioning and seemingly unexamined bias towards physical characteristics and physical attractiveness. We humans desire to associate with people we see as being attractive—and we attribute positive characteristics to attractive people with no real reason to do so (Lemay et al., 2010). Being tall (a physical characteristic that is unalterable, genetic, and impacted by environmental factors such as good nutrition), being fit, looking "polished"—all of these visual cues impact perceptions of executive presence. Note that even the concept of "polish" differs based on societal and cultural norms. Some people may perceive Gen Z's untucked shirts as unprofessional and disheveled; others might perceive suits and ties as stuffy and too formal. A tech CEO's T-shirt and jeans might be normal dress at work but would likely be inappropriate at a congressional hearing. Times change. Context matters.

Our own biases and cultural lenses shape how we perceive executive presence. Superficial judgments can be made based on underlying biases and conceptions of what executive presence looks and sounds like—and there is simply no evidence that "executive presence" yields better leadership outcomes. "Executive presence is based on audience perceptions of the characteristics of particular people." (Dagley & Gaskin, 2014)

We've argued that executive presence isn't real for three reasons: 1) No accepted definition exists; 2) Authors disagree on the characteristics that comprise executive presence and many of those characteristics have been previously established as evidence of good leadership; and 3) Perceptions of whether an individual has or does not have executive presence depends on the eye of the beholder. How can leaders develop executive presence when it cannot be defined and depends on the eye of the beholder? How can leaders coach it? Should we even try? Given how fuzzy this concept is, we encourage organizations to reconsider demanding that leaders develop "executive presence." Instead, we recommend taking actions that disrupt beliefs and focus on new ways of thinking for four groups: Authors and researchers, coaches, individual leaders, and ourselves.

> *"Executive presence is based on audience perceptions of the characteristics of particular people."*
>
> *(Dagley & Gaskin, 2014)*

Disrupting ourselves and rethinking executive presence

For Authors and Researchers

Drop the catchy marketing terms. Too many catchy phrases have been used to create buzz about executive presence. Consider the term "ability to read a room." What is that exactly? How would you coach it? Does it mean one has the emotional intelligence to sense conflict in a room? That you have experience reading behavioral cues? That you know people's roles and ambitions and what they stand to win or lose before entering the room? Let's drop the veil of mystery and define tangible, coachable behaviors as exemplars of the characteristic. In the case of "ability to read a room," perhaps effective leaders have practiced reading body language and can pick up cues for tension; perhaps they spend time getting to know each person and understanding their roles, as well as their mandates for success.

Practice good science. The relative lack of published research in peer-reviewed journals is troubling. As scientists in the field of leadership development, it is our responsibility to conduct and publish research that validates these constructs, relates them to important outcomes, and uses behavior-based research rather than surveys. We also need to review the literature and acknowledge the known models and constructs of good leadership. Too much is at stake to dismiss rigorous science.

For Coaches

Focus on behaviors—and practice. Coaches need to get specific on what needs to change and how to change it. Upgrading a wardrobe is one thing. Developing superb speaking skills is another. Rather than constantly asking others' opinions of whether a person has this characteristic or not, show coachees what good looks like—and then help them get there. What makes for a compelling speech from a current CEO or a TED talk? With the leader, unpack why that speech works and then have the leader give a speech while being filmed. Have the leader watch themselves and compare their speech against a great one. This type of coaching would be tangible and explicit—and doing research with these types of observable behaviors would go a long way towards demystifying these facets of effective leadership.

Do focus on confidence. Confidence comes up over and over again in various models and conversations about executive presence. In fact, Vitanova (2021) validated that confident CEOs—even overconfident ones—have a significantly positive impact on firm performance. But confidence may look different for different people—and building confidence sometimes requires opportunities to both fail and succeed as leaders gain experience. When you obtain feedback about a leader, get specific with the person providing the feedback. For example, one executive reflected on a teammate who was passed over for a promotion—partly because others felt they lacked confidence (and ergo executive presence). The employee presented information in too favorable a light, often glossing over risks, and spoke too positively about potential outcomes. This was perceived as lacking the confidence to admit to risks and being willing to work through them. Simply providing this information—"be more balanced in your assessment and presentation of opportunities and risk"—provides specific behaviors that could a) be an important component of strategic thinking and decision-making and b) make the leader be perceived as being more confident . . . and that would inspire others' confidence in the leader.

For Individual Leaders

Focus on substance—people and results. Leaders develop and motivate high-performing teams that deliver measurable results. Your ability to do this—to motivate individuals to work together to achieve extraordinary goals—is a fundamental outcome of effective leadership. Underneath the words "gravitas" and "substance" lies the ability to influence others to get things done. Making decisions, taking action, and achieving results are critical to your own and the organization's success. Do you have followers who will help you achieve as a team what cannot be done individually?

Develop your leadership brand—what you stand for. Seriousness of purpose, values in action, managing core values—these are the fundamental bedrocks of who you are and how you want to be as a leader. Get clear on what your core values are immediately. Take the time to articulate a compelling purpose. Create a written leadership philosophy document that includes your core values, team expectations, and a critical leadership agenda clarifying the goals and objectives you need to achieve for your organization. And carefully consider what you are willing to change (wardrobe? voice? communication skills?) in order to develop your own model of leadership excellence.

Seek opportunities to develop your expertise—particularly in risky situations. Confidence comes from increasing responsibilities, the ability to make decisions and learn from both success and failure, and new experiences where you must manage through risky situations. You need stretch assignments to develop confidence (Glass & Cook, 2016). Seek out those challenging opportunities that require you to assess situations, make decisions, and take action. Remember that others will watch how you take responsibility for both the positive and negative consequences of those actions. Hone your craft because expertise is respected.

For the Rest of Us

Stop saying "I'll know when I see it." No passes here. This attitude simply reflects that we expect others to conform to our hidden mental model of what effective leadership looks like. Instead, identify leaders whom you consider to have the ability to influence beyond their role and some who do not. Reflect on the differences and allow yourself to be surprised. Do you see patterns that give you pause? Do you find you weigh certain traits very heavily vs. others? Do you take into account potential information that could sway your thinking, like knowing whether someone already has a position of power? Does good leadership look and sound only a certain way to you?

Be open to context and others' norms. Business is increasingly global—and the norms and cultures of societies and organizations differ. What do other cultures value in leaders? Is it a Western view of gravitas, communication skills, and appearance? How does socioeconomic status or education level fit in? How do your perceptions and biases conform to others' views of "executive presence." Be courageous and curious enough to have novel conversations, and then flex your mental model to include new views.

Be aware of the enormous burden on others to be what we want. Code-switching at work occurs when minority members adapt their behavior to conform to the majority's perceptions of how to be—as colleagues, as leaders, and teammates. It's exhausting to hide who you are or attempt to conform—and it's a no-win situation. Members of the majority won't think you conform enough, and members of the minority will disparage you for changing your identity (McCluney et al., 2019). Let people be who they are and just accept that hairstyles, names, accents, interests, and communication styles are different and represent the wonderful collage we call humanity.

Why does any of this matter?

Why have we chosen to step back and question the leadership concept of executive presence? Because this fuzzy, difficult concept has become embedded in our views of what makes good leaders— and that impacts how we recruit, retain, and promote talent. Our perceptions of who has and doesn't have executive presence impacts individuals' opportunities to become leaders.

- Organizations ask recruiters to identify candidates with executive presence, often with the vague instruction to select those whom the employer would feel confident putting in front of senior executives. The information recruiters can glean may be superficial, with a focus on appearance and speaking skills (Riley, 2024). Worse yet, recruiters' own biases and ideals for what executive presence looks like will impact who they move forward with in the selection process. Finally, our perceptions of executive presence change after we get to know people (Dagley & Gaskin, 2014; Truninger, 2021). How many exceptional candidates are ignored and opportunities lost in such a process?

- Organizations ask executive coaches to help potential leaders develop executive presence. That's a difficult task given that there is no clear definition, so it's difficult to identify the behaviors that coachees should adopt, and whether one has it or not depends on others' perceptions. Executive presence is such an ambiguous construct that it becomes difficult to establish clear and specific goals. What does success look like? What does progress look like? For these reasons, coaching executive presence can be frustrating for both the coach and coachee.

- Many organizations identify "high potential" leaders who will be placed on an accelerated career path marked by challenging and highly visible assignments, investments in coaching, and opportunities for leadership development. Who is left out because that person fails to meet others' perceptions of "executive presence"?

- Finally, we place a burden on individuals to conform to others' perceptions of what executive presence is—even though what it is depends on the eye of the beholder. Imagine that an individual has exceptional communication skills but speaks in a high voice. Would that person ever be perceived as having executive presence? How might leaders be perceived if they display vulnerability instead of confidence? Perhaps the equation needs to change: The observer needs to be aware of their own biases about what "good leadership" looks like.

In sum

Leaders today face enormous challenges—some with global impacts such as climate change, governance of generative artificial intelligence, shifting demographics, and polarized nations. We need exceptional leaders. We need to give leaders the opportunity to develop expertise and experience. We ourselves need to recognize exceptional leadership—even when it doesn't fit our mental models for what it looks and sounds like. Finally, we need to drop the language that creates mystery around leadership, like the "it factor" or "gravitas" and get real about specific, coachable behaviors that will help leaders unite teams to accomplish both the possible and the impossible.

There is no magic here. Opportunities and experience allow leaders to develop confidence and a track record that others will respect and perceive as good leadership. We all have a responsibility to reshape our mental models of perceptions of what good leadership is. It's really more about us than about them.

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