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I write about navigating success for professional women.

FORBESWOMAN | 10/29/2012 @ 12:00PM | 4,765 views

Do You Have 'Executive Presence'?

Do you *have it*? Can you command the room? Do people stop and listen when you speak? If so, you have likely mastered the illusive art of “executive presence,” a term that’s been buzzing around leadership circles recently. If not, you may be in for a rude awakening.

According to a new study by the [Center for Talent Innovation](#), a non-profit research organization in [New York](#), being *perceived* as leadership material is essential to being promoted into leadership positions. In fact, the 268 senior executives surveyed said “executive presence” counts for 26% of what it takes to get promoted.



Photo: Andrey Rudakov/Bloomberg

So what is executive presence? The ability to project gravitas—confidence, poise under pressure and decisiveness—seems to be its core characteristic, according to more than two-thirds of the executives surveyed. Furthermore, communication—including speaking skills, assertiveness and the ability to read an audience or situation—and appearance contribute to a person’s perceived executive presence.

Communications expert Karen Friedman [says](#) oftentimes people who exhibit executive presence exude a “wow factor,” or magnetism, and are able to easily influence others. They often [speak up, use strong and clear language](#), communicate with passion and energy, and display positive [body language](#) by standing tall, making eye contact, offering a firm handshake and using an [authoritative tone of voice](#). Moreover, nearly 60% of the executives surveyed said sounding uneducated negatively impacts the way others perceive you.

Appearance represents just a small part of it, but those surveyed said major [mistakes](#) in appearance can be detrimental. More than three-quarters said [unkempt attire](#) detracts from both men and women’s executive presence, and among women specifically, 73% said too-tight or provocative clothing undercuts it.

The study authors say the findings offer new insight into why [fewer women](#) make it to the C-suite. Women and racial minorities were found to struggle more with executive presence, likely because corporate culture has long been a bastion of white men. Some 56% of minority-race professionals feel they are held to a stricter code, compared to 31% of white professionals. Meanwhile, [women](#) said feedback on executive presence is often contradictory and confusing, which may be why a whopping 81% say they’re unclear about how

to act on it.

John Beeson, principal of management consulting firm Beeson Consulting, [says](#) executive presence can be developed “if you have a baseline of self-confidence and a willingness to deal with unpredictable situations” that come with executive leadership responsibilities. He recommends asking two or three people you trust to offer honest feedback; looking for opportunities to hone your presentation skills, as public speaking is an important executive requirement; and finding your executive voice, meaning identifying your communication assets—like listening, thinking and speaking [on your feet](#), or maintaining composure—and leveraging them.

[10 Worst Body Language Mistakes](#)

Readers: Do you have ‘executive presence’? How do you know it when you see it, and which aspect do you struggle with most?

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