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White Coats in the Boardroom



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Why Executive Presence is Compulsory for Highly-Qualified Healthcare Professionals

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Today, healthcare professionals routinely receive executive appointments, achieve C-Suite status and join the elite ranks of Boards of Directors. These highly qualified professionals from multiple disciplines carry authority, experience and, often, prestigious reputations. Exceptionally well educated, they appear to have the ideal credentials for senior leadership roles. Expectations run high—from the people they are going to lead, from their new peers and perhaps highest of all, from themselves. Yet, when top ranks and stature are thrust upon these seasoned professionals they often fail to realise there are missing pieces: the skills to bring people on board, to share their vision, to move things forward. In short, they lack executive presence.

Leaders Are Made, Not Born

The expression 'executive presence' refers to the behaviour and mindset fundamental to achieve success as a leader. There is no leadership gene; leaders are made, not born. Unquestionably, high performance is a given—along with experience, knowledge, talent and ambition. The much-needed additive to this mix is executive presence. It combines the ability to influence with authority—often referred to as gravitas in the parlance of executive presence—with polished, poised communication skills and engagement expertise.

Healthcare focuses on managing and nurturing multiple patient relationships and caring for individuals on a case-by-case basis. Leadership, on the other hand demands big-picture thinking. To paraphrase Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz, consider this analogy: typically, if healthcare professionals were to attend a dance in a large ballroom, they would be focused on their individual dance partner. If, however, they were to go up on the balcony, they would have a far different perspective of what was going on. As Heifetz said, "The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray" (Heifetz 2002). Executive presence demonstrates an acute awareness of the view from the balcony. Developing this perspective requires the understanding that although 'visiting' the balcony is mandatory, it's still critical to join the dance and move adeptly with diverse partners.

As executive presence training specialists, we have noticed a parallel between the healthcare and IT sectors. Despite their academic achievements, both groups frequently struggle to grasp the requirements that follow appointment. Why does successful leadership elude these intellectually-gifted people? Clearly, recognising they must shift perspective and take a more holistic viewpoint represents a significant departure from their comfort zones. Another part of the puzzle may be that they simply are not aware of executive presence, its concept or importance, and as a result they don't investigate training.

Presentation Skills

We know, first-hand, that even the most "natural" leaders have carefully honed their presence. Just like riding a bicycle, once learned, it is never

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forgotten. The starting point is self-awareness—taking inventory of strengths and shortcomings. For example, acknowledging a fear of public speaking is a prime issue for leaders, whether newly appointed or long in denial. Presentation prowess is essential. From daily boardroom meetings to major conferences and conventions, the expectation across every leadership level is that speakers will deliver high-quality, professional presentations. Executives and leaders overcome their public speaking anxieties by developing genuine skills. There is a system and process for preparing and specific techniques to practise. Speaking with confidence and conviction is a learned skill. It combines expressing ideas memorably to inspire, persuade and win people over. Facial expressions, eye contact and body language all combine with verbal delivery to elevate the message.

Communications Skills

Although presentation skills figure prominently in the context of executive presence training, they are only one segment of the spectrum comprising communications skills. The impromptu conversations and brief exchanges or meetings people have are the bridges that build connections. Leaders have a responsibility to develop highly-tuned messaging and listening skills. Body language—the silent signals people send and receive—is a pivotal communications tool. There are far more subtle clues to what someone is really thinking than shielding the chest with crossed arms. Advancement to a high-profile role automatically increases visibility where the ability to 'translate' the interwoven connections between verbal and non-verbal communications is critical. The subtleties and nuances of body language include reading other people's signs and messages, and very significantly for leaders, managing their own.

Empathy

The ability to interpret and relate to the emotions of others is central to executive presence. Emotional intelligence, or empathy, demands an awareness and understanding of other people's emotions. Although executive presence training fosters its development—body language provides an ideal window—perhaps one of the most intriguing insights into measuring capacity for empathy is through a personal leadership profile assessment. Dr. Kathleen Kelley Reardon, Professor Emerita at the USC Marshall School of Business, developed this system (Reardon 2000). Through a series of questions, it takes stock of an individual's predisposed leadership style: Commanding, Logical, Inspirational or Supportive. The process assesses both the primary and backup styles. It describes how and when a style should be modified or adapted to suit the situation. A byproduct of the process is developing the ability to identify other people's styles and, ultimately, work more effectively with them.

The mandate for every leader today is forging alliances, achieving goals and improving the bottom line. In our complex, challenging and competitive world, executive presence is not an optional asset; executive presence is an expectation. We encourage healthcare leaders to take stock of their presence to take charge of their future.

Key Points

- Healthcare professionals need to work on leadership skills in order to meet C-suite expectations
- Presentation skills are essential for healthcare executives but are often lacking
- Leaders are made not born
- Emotional intelligence is a necessary leadership skill for team empathy

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