

DEVELOPING EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

Welcome to The Highly Valued Leader podcast where I make it simple for leaders at all levels to amplify their value. My name is Mel Savage and I went from working in the mailroom at a small ad agency to making multiple six figures in senior management at McDonald's, to running my own multiple six-figure executive coaching business. I've had huge successes in my career and epic failures. All of it taught me the world-class leadership, mind and skill sets that I simplify for my clients and share with you on this podcast. I'll help you reset your leadership style, demystify the politics, and help you become the highly valued leader everyone wants on their team. Get ready for the most honest, direct and revolutionary leadership coaching you've ever heard. Let's simplify leadership together.

Welcome back to the podcast, everyone. This week, we're talking about developing executive presence. There are a lot of my more seasoned leader clients asking me about how to develop executive presence. I think it just means different things to different people. And certainly, it means different things in different organizations. But I think it's worth a conversation. What is executive presence? How do you develop it? It can also mean different things in a more established sophisticated global organization, versus if you're working at a scrappy startup company. It can be lots of different things.

But even though it means different things, I think the elements of what creates it remain the same. You get to decide ultimately what success looks like and what you want executive presence to look like for you. But the elements of it remain the same. The execution and emphasis of the elements may differ depending on where you work. And I think it's worth a conversation to talk about what it could look like and how you might develop it.

Another thing to consider when we talk about executive presence before we get too far into it is that a lot of things have changed in the last five years or so, pre and post-pandemic. I think the pandemic changed a lot of things about what executive presence looks like. Zoom changed a lot of things. Working remotely changed a lot of things. Me, too. pre-pandemic changed a lot of things. And then, of course, the whole importance and emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion.

Given all the things that happened during the pandemic, that certainly changed; not just in the United States, but certainly in Canada too. The residential school tragedies really came to the forefront. And it really changed how we look at each other. It's not just about race, either, or gender, which I know is a big part of it. But it's also about even just how you look. I think the whole idea of accepting people and that beauty can mean a lot of different things. Being thin isn't perfection.

I'm going to reference an article as I talk about this going forward in this podcast. If you reference some of the stats that came out of that podcast, being thin and fit was one of the things that represented executive presence pre-pandemic. And it's not so much as an important thing anymore. And I think even what we wear to the office has changed, if we go to the office, has changed pre and post-pandemic. So that changed a lot of things, even since I was in corporate seven years ago. Things are shifting in terms of how we execute against executive presence, but I think the fundamentals of it remain the same. That's really what I want to cover today.

What are these building blocks of executive presence? I'm going to reference an article that I found. Where are we with this right now? What's going on with this right now when it comes to corporate life or being a leader? The first place I always go is Harvard Business Review. That's my go-to place. I search for articles on that and just to see what other people are saying about it. I always have my own opinion, because that's just what I'm like. But it's always good to hear what other people are saying. You always want to be rather a student of your craft and knowing what other people say is part of that.

There was a great article that came out in Harvard Business Review in Q1 this year. I'm going to put the link in the show notes. But I thought I would kind of use that as a jumping-off point for the conversation today because I think it's a really great start. The article gives a lot of information on pre/post-pandemic shifts in executive presence. But I want to take what the author wrote about a little bit deeper and add my own three skill sets that I think are the foundation of naturally creating an executive presence in your authentic style. That's really what I want to cover today.

That article was called *The New Rules of Executive Presence*, and it came out in the first quarter. Like I said, I will link it in the show notes. Usually, Harvard Business Review will give you three free articles a month. So if you haven't used those up, you can take a look at that article. The author defined executive presence in three buckets. It's going to be gravitas, communication, and appearance. Gravitas, communication, and appearance—those were her three buckets for executive presence now.

She spoke to 80-something different executives and got their opinions on what makes up gravitas, communication, and appearance. What was it before the pandemic and what was it after the pandemic? But I want you to keep in mind when you look at this article, that this is not a quantitative study. This is just a person who defined some arbitrary buckets, which we all need to do. I'm not saying that was the wrong thing to do. Of course, it is.

As leaders and as people who are experts in working in corporate environments, we see a lot of different things. We get to bucket things however we like. And you know that. Because when you write a strategy, you do the same thing. So this person has picked some arbitrary buckets, which are gravitas, communication, and appearance, send it to just under 100 execs, and ask them their opinion. I love that she did that. I'm really respectful that she tried to do that. And I really liked those buckets to a point. But like I said, this is not quantitative, this isn't official, that sort of thing. There's a lot of opinion involved here.

When you look at the article, you're going to see that underneath those three buckets, there are certain skill sets that are very tactical. For instance, under gravitas, there are things like decisiveness, confidence, inclusiveness, respect for others, that sort of thing. So you'll see different skill sets that make up each of those buckets that are headlines as gravitas, communication, and appearance.

One of the things that I was not on the same page with was the fact that the author had put emotional intelligence as a skill under gravitas. And that I think, limits the scope of emotional intelligence. I really think actually, emotional intelligence is the foundation of your ability to have executive precedence. It's actually one of the three skill sets that I think are the foundation of naturally creating your own executive presence in your style.

I think that emotional intelligence informs your ability to be confident, decisive, and have respect for others. Emotional intelligence informs how you communicate, read a room, listen, speak, encourage, and show your

authentic self. Emotional intelligence really informs that. So I think in order to have a strong executive presence, you need to have strong emotional intelligence. I think that's so important.

Before you step into the leader role, there's more space for you to operate from a reactive state. And when I say a reactive state, it's like, whatever the first thing that pops into your mind. There's more space for you to be reactive when you're more of an individual contributor. It's not great to operate from that space. Obviously, it's always great to be intentional with how you show up. But that only becomes more and more important when you become a leader.

Because when you become a leader, it's actually so important for you to be intentional and not be reactive. Because reactivity just comes from our lower brain. It comes from our habits; it comes from our past behaviour. So when you're reacting, you're just going with whatever comes up and you're not being intentional with how you're showing up, you're actually pulling from your past self of who you've been in the past. If you're someone for instance, who's prone to be impatient, when you stay reactive versus intentional, your first reaction is always going to be impatient.

As a leader, our goal is to be intentional with how we show up. And the more senior you get, the more intentional you need to be with your emotions, with your strategies, etc., to be able to create influence. Emotional intelligence or the practice of being intentional is critical of executive presence. I've talked about this before, but those key elements of emotional intelligence are things like, first of all, being self-aware—aware of how you're feeling, aware of those first reactions that your brain is feeding you, aware of the thinking behind those first reactions, and aware of your ability to question those first reactions.

Like *why am I being impatient right now? Oh, because I think this person should hurry up and finish what they're saying.* That's just your thought. Is it really true they need to hurry up? Or is there also a truth they're aware of? Maybe you could listen, maybe there's some value to what they're saying, or maybe they don't need to hurry up. It's just your brain telling you they need to hurry up. But maybe they don't really need to hurry up. It's the ability to slow things down and be self-aware about how you're feeling, and why you're feeling that way, and giving yourself the practice to question it so that you're just not going with your first emotion all the time.

Emotional intelligence is also your ability to regulate those emotions. When you do first feel impatient, for instance, it's your ability to normalize that going, *"Of course, I'm impatient. I would love it if they would go faster. But that's not really what's required right now."* It's your ability to normalize your initial reactivity and not make yourself wrong. I see it so often with clients who are trying to be less impatient. Once they become aware of their impatience, they start judging themselves every time that reactivity comes in to be impatient. You don't have to judge the reaction to be impatient. You've trained your brain to be impatient for years, of course, it's going to keep offering you that. It's your job just to notice it and just normalize it. *'Of course, I'm being impatient right now. That's what I'm used to feeling.'*

Emotional intelligence also allows you to choose the emotion that you actually think would be better for you in this situation. Decide what you want to think and feel about the situation without force, without doing it through gritted teeth, without pushing down your impatience and pretending that you're really interested in what someone's saying. That's forcefulness that's really hard to sustain. But instead, what emotional intelligence teaches you how to do is like, *"I know my first reaction is impatience. But actually, I don't want to be impatient. I want to be supportive of this person right now. So what would make me feel supportive of this person and focus on that."* It's so important.

If you want to have executive presence, when you're an executive, so much comes flying at you—people's opinions, people's agendas, people's reactions to things, changing initiatives, changing directions, people aren't talking to each other, your team makes a mistake, all the stuff. You're sort of in the center of it. Everything's flying around you. And it's so important to keep it cool.

As I always say, our job as a leader is to create the environment for results to happen, which means that the environment largely is directed by you. You're the thermostat for your team. And if you're reactive, if you're impatient, if you're pissed off that things went sideways, if you're pissed off that so and so is putting a wrench in things, then that's going to be felt by everyone around you. That's going to be part of the environment you're creating.

As you become more of a leader, your steadiness, your calmness, and your ability to not react but to be thoughtful in how you show up is everything. It's going to feed how you show up with the executive team, with your peers in the C-suite, how decisions are made, etc. So I don't feel like it's a part of gravitas, I think it is like a higher order to gravitas. I think it is foundational to who you are as a leader. That's the very first skill set. Growing your ability to be more emotionally intelligent is key.

The other thing I want to throw out too is when you're an individual contributor, your IQ plays a big role in your success, and when you move into leadership, your EQ starts to build a bigger and bigger role. So it's important that you are nurturing that and the more you nurture that the more executive presence you're going to have.

The second foundational skill set of executive presence is self-trust and just believing in yourself. I can't tell you how many of my clients come to me saying that they're not confident in the beginning, of course. When they leave, they're super confident. They know how to trust themselves, and they know how to believe in themselves.

One of my favorite thoughts that I use to build my own confidence is that I can figure anything out. It may not be easy, I may not do it perfectly the first few times, but I can keep showing up. I can keep showing up with ease. When I say with ease, what I mean by that is I keep showing up without putting pressure on myself. Because I know that I believe no matter what, I'm going to figure this out. So there's no pressure here, I just need to focus and keep showing up.

The other thing that I always tell myself is that big change is made up of a lot of little attempts to change things every single day, to improve things, or to move things forward every single day. My only responsibility is to take little steps forward every single day towards figuring anything out, towards my goals. And knowing that keeps me grounded in self-trust because no one can take that away from me. No one can take away my ability to believe that I can figure anything out. I just have to keep showing up. And I just keep showing up without putting pressure on myself.

People might try to put pressure on me. Of course, that happens all the time at work. But I don't have to accept it. I can understand why they feel the pressure, and I can support them and help them. But I don't have to take on their pressure on myself. And that is something, my friends, that I have learned to do through the years. It's not an easy skill, I know that. But it's possible. I'm telling you this from someone who messed it up so many times. You don't have to mess it up as many times as me. You can know that now that it's possible not to have to take on the pressure that other people are trying to put on you.

Because I'm in control of all of that, I feel calm and pragmatic, and I can have the space to be supportive of others. And that feeds into everything that the author of that article was talking about. When you trust yourself,

that gives you gravitas because it feeds your confidence. It feeds your decisiveness because you know that no matter what decision you make, you're going to make it a good decision. It's never the decision that defines whether something is good or bad; it's what we do with the decision and you know you can figure anything out. So no decision is a bad decision. You can include everyone in the decision. You can not be tied to your own agenda about the decision, which allows you to collaborate because it doesn't really matter what the decision is, we can make it really good. And that allows you space to have respect for others, which is part of some of the things that this author was talking about.

Also, your ability to trust yourself just feeds into your communication because you can stop talking and listen; because you can read the room; because you can see what's not being said; because you can create safety for other people to speak because you're not worried about yourself all the time. One of the things that the author says is an executive presence-based trait of communication is how you command a room. And I kind of feel like that's a *male* way of saying that. I would say more inspire a room than command a room, like how can you get people to lean in.

I think when you trust yourself and you have that confidence, you're willing to say whatever comes into your mind because you can create your own safety. Even if it's the wrong thing to say or the stupid thing to say or whatever, who cares? *I don't care if people judge me. I know that I'm 95% of the time really good at my job. So if I say stupid things, who cares? That just makes me human.*

That happened to me yesterday. I said the stupidest thing in a conversation with my girlfriends, which was something about the eclipse. I kind of got it backwards where I said, I thought that you couldn't look at the eclipse when it was in full eclipse, but it's actually pre and post-full eclipse when you can't look at the sun. I got it backwards. And they were all laughing at me and I was like, "Yeah, that is stupid. How come I didn't know that?" But I didn't feel stupid. Not just because they're my girlfriends, I know they love me. But I love me. So I'm not going to beat myself up for getting it wrong. Of course, I'm going to get things wrong. And I'm allowed to be wrong because I trust myself so much; because I believe in myself so much that being wrong is just part of being human, and I'm okay with it.

When you have that belief in yourself, then your communication becomes clear. You're not afraid to ask the question. You're not afraid to speak up because you know you have your own back. And even in this area of appearance that the author talked about, the way she defined it, and no judgment here, it was a polished, authentic, fit, elements of self-care, clean, energetic, great attitude, that sort of thing. I call it the impression that you give to people. What's the impression you give to people? I might move that forward into the 2024s.

What's the impression that you want to give to people? I think when you trust yourself, the impression that you give is that you can be authentic. It doesn't matter if you're wearing shorts and a hoodie, you can still have executive presence, because that comes from inside, not just outside. It really comes from the impression that you're giving people, in general. You can still be polished and be in shorts and a hoodie. I think that's possible. I have to think that's possible. So EQ and self-trust are two of the three foundational skills.

The third one is really your ability to think and act strategically. It's not just about understanding your subject matter and how that subject matter helps the overall goals of the organization and how to move things forward. That's a yes. You absolutely want to have a good understanding of that. You want to understand how you think and your team thinks, but it's also your ability to want to understand the needs of the stakeholders that you're serving, or that you work with. Those could be your colleagues or your upper management stakeholders.

Why are they acting the way they are? Why do they want the things that they want? Why are they putting a wrench in things? Rather than getting upset, and annoyed by all of it, it's really about taking the time to understand where they're coming from. Because all of those people are smart people. They just don't agree with the way that you're thinking about it.

When you want to have an executive presence, it's important that you take the time to listen and take the time to learn. In order to be able to do that, you need to be able to manage your mind and think in a way that allows you the space to understand. Understanding is an emotion, but it's also something that you can do by asking questions and seeking to understand where the other person is coming from. So you need to be able to manage your mind to be able to act in that kind of a strategic way.

When you understand where other people are coming from, it not only makes you someone people like working with because you're creating a safe space for them to talk, but also it makes you smarter because you are hearing other people's opinions and you're able to integrate them into your own. A little bit like I talked about at the very beginning, where I'm willing to listen to other people's ideas on certain topics so that I can integrate them into my own and come up with my own ideas around them. And it's a great way to influence people as well.

Because when they hear their words coming out of your mouth, in a way that supports what they need, or a portion of what they need, that helps your overall influence as an executive which creates presence. I think the key emotions there are making sure that you're always dropping into a space of curiosity, patience, and pragmatism. I love pragmatism because it helps me get past my own ego. It's less about emotionally how I feel about things. I kind of think about pragmatism like logic. Like, let's just take this one step at a time. It just really slows me down, lets me let go of my own ego and what I want and helps me make more focused logical decisions when I drop into that pragmatic space. And it also allows me to kind of bring everybody back when people get lost.

I'm sure you've been in meetings like this where everyone's talking and all of a sudden, you've gone down some rabbit hole that nobody meant to go down, it wasn't on the agenda, and all that kind of stuff. That's where you can bring everyone back and go, *"This is what we're here to talk about today... Here's what the decisions that we need to make right now."* Your ability to think and act strategically in the moment is a big part of executive presence.

The three things, three skill sets, I think there are grounding for executive presence are emotional intelligence, self-trust, and your ability to think and act strategically in the moment. When you're able to do those things, then yes, those areas that the author talked about in the HBR article, which is your ability to be decisive and have gravitas and communicate effectively and she's mentioned appearance, but I'm going to call it the impression that you give to people. I think all of that just flows naturally when you have those three other grounding skills.

It's so much easier for you to have an executive presence in your own style, in your own way when you trust yourself, when you have a strong command of your emotions, when you have the ability to slow down and think and act strategically in situations and your ability to work with others.

If these are some of the things that you're working on, or if you're working on your executive presence, and maybe you have some gaps in some of the areas that I've mentioned, don't worry. Executive presence is something that you practice. One of the things that I work on my clients with is creating what I call a *Power Brand*

Framework, which is a really good snapshot, almost like a cheat sheet of who you're trying to become, and how that person thinks and feels and acts in certain situations.

Create for yourself almost a roadmap of who it is that you want to be and practice being that person. You're going to get it wrong more than you get it right in the beginning. But you're going to see that over time you get it right more and more often. And that, my friends, is the way that we grow.

That's what I have for you this week. Take it easy. Talk to you soon. Bye for now.

Hey, if you want to simplify leadership while amplifying your value, then you need to get your hands on my free training. Head over to melsavage.com/simple for instant access to the training and get a taste of how I help my clients lead with ease and make more money in the process. I'll see you there.

