

Decoding Executive Presence – part 3



Successful business professionals possess executive presence, an intangible blend of **physical and emotional traits** that combined, enable them to generate trust in employers, clients and reports.

Parts one and two of this series described the critical role both physicality (posture, body language) and communication play in manifesting a professional's executive presence.



In part three, Templar consultant [Carolina Perez Sanz](#) explores **gravitas**, the **backbone of executive presence**.

Gravitas – weight in Latin – was one of the virtues the Romans expected of leaders. They understood it as seriousness, dignity, and commitment to the mission.

This metaphorical quality of *heaviness* correlates with the steady energy, deliberate movements, and non-reactiveness characteristic of high-status people.

A world-wide survey by the Center for Talent Innovation analyzed what executives really meant when they talked about *gravitas*. Out of a total of six qualities, 80% of respondents considered confidence as key – the other five being decisiveness, integrity, emotional intelligence, burnishing reputation and projecting a vision.

Let's consider how Melanie, a coaching client at a European bank, let a lack of confidence undermine her gravitas.

NOISE IN GRAVITAS

Debriefing after a recent client prospect meeting, Melanie's boss told her she came across as unprepared, and that her rambling across the pitchbook was distracting.

Melanie was quick to respond: she couldn't find a chart she was sure she'd inserted in the presentation. That's why she got anxious and all her preparation evaporated. She asked herself if she hadn't saved the file or she'd printed out an old version.

Bottom line, she was reluctant to admit that her performance at the meeting had been poor. Instead of owning a mishap, she was justifying it and trying to explain why it had

happened.

**Fictional name, based on a real event.*

CONFIDENCE AND CRITICISM

Confidence arises from the belief that someone is capable of succeeding in any enterprise they undertake. The feeling of being threatened, on the contrary, implies believing that success depends on factors that are out of one's control.

Professionals with gravitas exude confidence because they don't feel threatened by external circumstances such as deadlines, other people's agendas, or criticism. They know succeeding is within their power and are committed to the mission. Therefore, they take full responsibility for their actions – both those leading to successful and unsuccessful outcomes.

Not taking ownership for one's mistakes reflects lack of confidence – 'will I survive this mistake?' – and fear of judgment – 'what will they think of me?'

When facing negative comments about their work, professionals with gravitas manifest their confidence by asking the other person how they think they can improve. They appreciate both positive feedback and criticism. The former informs them about what will help them complete the mission; the latter helps them understand the adjustments they need to do.

HOW PERFECTIONISM UNDERMINES CONFIDENCE

As we dug in, Melanie realized she was bound by a strong desire for perfection. That made her see negative feedback as a threat to her success instead of a route to doing better work.

If someone found her work not perfect and made a constructive comment, she felt threatened. Justifying every mistake was Melanie's unconscious way of letting others know that she was capable of doing perfect work.

Perfect means finished, complete. It implies that something no longer needs to change because it will never get better. Perfection leaves no room for improvement, growth, or innovation because it focuses on the current state of things – whereas improvement and growth look at the future.

Critically, the ability to visualize the future is necessary to building confidence. If what

someone sees in front of them is possibility, they'll push through uncertainty until they reach their goals, confident that they'll succeed.

HOW WE HELPED MELANIE

Melanie needed to change her perspective on what feedback and criticism mean. By following four simple steps, she could start using feedback as a tool of growth and take ownership of her development.

HOW TO RECEIVE CRITICISM IN FOUR STEPS

Step 1: Inquiry – *Be proactive about what you need to learn about yourself. Ask a close colleague to observe you in specific situations and give them permission to be open and honest about their feedback.*

Step 2: Attention – *Don't interrupt. Don't judge the criticism. Don't plan your response.*

Step 3: Gratitude – *Say, 'thank you' and go away.*

Step 4: Progress – *Before the next performance opportunity, tell the same person you're working on improving on something they pointed out. Ask them to observe you and tell you how you are doing.*

We established with Melanie a co-active executive coaching relationship to help her deepen the learning about herself and understand what actions would move her forward.

By asking powerful questions, we helped her discover the inner voices that were driving her to perfectionism. We worked with her to uncover her values, and she committed to a number of steps that would align her with them.

Because she valued excellent work, she was able to view both praise and criticism as the way to bring that value to life. As a result, she developed curiosity about what people around her thought about her work.

When someone praised her work, Melanie asked them about the parts they thought were more effective. If the comment was negative, she inquired about what she could do better next time.

After the six-month executive coaching engagement, Melanie exuded confidence because she was no longer chasing an unreachable ideal of perfection. Instead, she was proactively

using feedback as a tool to do excellent work.

Because she wasn't striving for perfection, she started to see what was possible.

CONCLUSION

In this three-part series we've analysed executive presence, that vital composite of qualities that enables good professionals to reach their full potential.

We've seen how successful executives leverage their physicality, communication and gravitas to telegraph that they'll deliver on their promise. And we've discovered how easy it is for anyone who's not fully aware of these issues to destroy their executive presence when they're under pressure.

For ambitious professionals, training and executive coaching are tools that allow them to pinpoint which behaviors to avoid and which to tune up. Demonstrating strong executive presence, they avoid compromising their central message: 'Trust me to execute.'

- [Decoding executive presence – part 1](#)
- [Decoding Executive Presence – part 2](#)

At Templar, we work with employers on diversity initiatives, female talent development and leadership programmes, as well as individual women on a coaching basis. Please see our [Women's Development Series](#) for more details or get in touch to speak to one of our consultants.