

The softer side of 'executive presence': how better communication skills deliver business results

Do you think that CEOs should all be Apprentice-style despots? Forget it. True executive presence is not founded on shouting the loudest, blowing your own trumpet or having the biggest ego. You can Trump Sugar with a softer (but more effective) style.

'High expectations are the key to absolutely everything', Sam Walton (CEO of Walmart)

Be the conductor

Executives need to do more than play their part in the orchestra. They need to take up the conductor's baton and set pace and style for other people. This requires a firm guiding hand, but also a fair and measured approach. Shouting and raving won't help employees flourish or express themselves. Start by setting high standards for yourself and for your organisation.

Put people first

Just as a conductor shares the curtain call with the leading players and the whole orchestra, executives don't hog the limelight and steal credit. Motivation starts with recognition and it's cheaper and more effective to use your status to give praise than it is to give financial rewards. In fact, [research suggests](#) that financially-based incentives rarely work. Instead, follow the advice of leadership expert Simon Sinek in Leaders Eat Last, and [put people first](#).

Listen harder

'When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen,' Ernest Hemingway.

One of the worst things an executive can be is a bad listener, yet [one in every four corporate leaders](#) has a listening deficit. For a manager this can be costly in terms of morale and motivation. However in a CEO it can derail the whole company.

Listening builds trust between you and your team. It shows respect and helps people grow in confidence. It also provides a forum for new ideas and perspectives to blossom. Julian Treasure's TED talk outlines [5 ways to listen better](#) and this is a great place to start.

Learn to lead

In Malcom Coxall's book '[Machiavellian management: a chief executive's guide](#)' he creates a checklist of desirable and undesirable attributes. In the desirable column are traits such as assertiveness and compassion, resoluteness and modesty.

Crucially, these behavioural traits aren't innate. Chief executives can repress or develop these qualities to suit business strategy. Flexibility works best – deploying the right behaviour at the right time.

[Dana Mead](#), CEO of Tenneco in 1992, turned the business around with a hard-line policy of change, firing employees unwilling to embrace such development. [Although Dana was softly spoken, even subdued, he nonetheless managed to deploy the necessary behavioural skills for leadership](#). He wasn't born with it – he acquired it.

Walk the walk



Body language affects how others see us but, according to social psychologist [Amy Cuddy](#), it also shapes how we see ourselves. Present yourself with confidence (but not arrogance) to exert a positive influence.

Executives carry out an important duty with their body language and communication style. Leadership requires you to present yourself in a professional manner and set an example to those around you. [A positive, can-do attitude goes a long way in business](#). Negativity is infectious; don't let it filter down.

(More on [the science of body language](#))

Talk the talk

How you present yourself can make a big difference. When CEOs are viewed as attractive, competent and trustworthy during investor pitch meetings, they are more likely to have a higher-priced IPO, according to a [Stanford University study](#).

According to the [Wall Street Journal](#), 'The study found that for the average CEO, a 5% higher rating on perceptions correlated to an IPO price roughly 11% higher than the price that would be expected based on fundamentals alone.'

Communication is central to establishing an air of integrity. Fillers such as 'like', 'umm' and 'err' chip away at your authority by suggesting hesitancy and a monotone delivery can also make you seem disengaged or disinterested. So try to vary your tone and speak smoothly without verbal tics. Confident and clear diction will [help you sound like a CEO](#).

Get training

Executives work through influence, persuasion, presence and example: the behaviour of a leader rather than a manager. These are learned skills. We know because we help individuals and businesses around the world develop them.