

Presence: Balancing warmth and strength in banking



Our latest Business Brain event in London explored ‘Executive Presence For Women’ with Templar consultant Janie Van Hool sharing insights and practical tips during a sit down breakfast.

Attendees from across the baking sector, were encouraged and challenged to explore aspects around executive presence including their physical, vocal and personal presence.

Business Brain is a think tank that we’ve been running for the past two years in London, New York and now Sydney where we discuss and explore topics on leadership, diversity, performance and neuroscience.



Templar consultant Janie Van Hool has worked with successful senior women in financial services over the last 18 years coaching them on executive presence, personal impact and influence.

She is an impact and presence coach, voice and accent specialist.

Getting the balance right between warmth and strength matters because any overplayed hand will limit your opportunity for impact and, significantly, affect your reputation as you aim to progress in the organisation.

From my observations, women sometimes tend to **overplay** 'strength' and at senior levels in organisations, they can be labelled with male-oriented language. This labeling can become something of a **self-fulfilling prophecy** and I've seen plenty of young women deterred from progressing in an organisation because the female role models seem both **unapproachable** as mentors and **unattainable** as people to aspire to become.

Culturally, we are raised to recognise male traits and behaviours as leaders and figures of authority. Men display qualities that are inherently dominant and this association is repeatedly reinforced. We are hardwired to attend to male voices over female voices.

Studies on presence, voice, physical posture etc suggest our biases and associations are inclined towards men as examples of excellence. And perhaps most amazingly of all, women are shown to be naturally critical of other women. We compete at an evolutionary level, expecting and demanding more of women to prove their worth than we do of men.

Arming ourselves with awareness of the challenges we face – both internally and externally – affords us a great opportunity to create a unique, individual executive presence.

Presence is a balance between warmth and strength. Like any balancing act, this can be tricky -

easy to tip in favour of one aspect or the other. Indeed, it depends on the situation, the context and the personalities involved. Planning and preparation will play a part, but so does agility, flexibility and the confidence to adapt in the moment.

For women whose warmth / strength balance is weighted on warmth will probably not, currently, be seen as natural leaders. They might fall victim to the WOW or 'Women are Wonderful' effect (Eagly, Mladinic & Otto 1991), which proposes that female characteristics are hugely appreciated as nurturing, warm, maternal qualities *until* a woman becomes a leader where these characteristics are not recognised or valued enough as leadership qualities.

Language, non-verbal communication and representations in films, art and literature tend to be biased towards traditional, male-dominated models, which favour 'strength'. It can be tempting, therefore, to play the 'strength' card to demonstrate leadership quality but, in truth, this swing can be detrimental, leaving a woman with the emotional labour of 'faking it' to make the right impact for her role.

Balance is the key – enough warmth to create followership, enough strength to raise the bar...to challenge, to motivate, to stay the course. You can be liked and likeable...but with enough 'edge' to keep people on their toes. That's powerful.

An essential place to start is by being authentic. We must be true to the person we really are – aiming to strike the balance, but in our own way, with our own style and individual voice.

Start with self-awareness

Start to notice which of these two qualities feels the most accessible to you in your work environment.

Example: if you work in HR, and are used to coaching conversations in which you invest in relationship building, what are the opportunities for you to experiment with saying no; challenging in meetings; being assertive; expressing ambition etc?

Similarly, if you are a banker and your role involves tough negotiation, challenging colleagues, driving projects forward, what are the opportunities for you to deepen your workplace relationships, be curious about colleagues and take time to invest in a personal conversation; express (but not necessarily demonstrate) an emotional reaction; open-up about your life etc.?

Get feedback

Aside from noticing your own impact, you might want to solicit feedback from colleagues, bosses or your mentor. Ask them what the 3 x word labels they might use to describe you are – and when they are offered to you, seek balance in what you hear.

If you constantly hear biases towards words like ‘tenacious, determined, tough, resilient’ or ‘approachable, friendly, generous, nice’ etc. grouped together, you are overplaying one side of your presence balance. That would be an indication that it’s time to build up the other side to balance the scales. A coach or mentor might be useful to help you achieve this and since impact is often the difference between securing a promotion or not, that’s time and money well spent.

Finding a female sponsor

A female sponsor can be helpful. First-hand knowledge of the politics in the organisation and the key players to influence might be an advantage in choosing a communication approach. The female perspective and experience of influencing in the environment may add a layer of insight and wisdom that could be overlooked in a male / female mentoring role.

Simple questions (simple on the surface, at least) about image, impact and style may provoke useful discussions and build confidence, where a male sponsor might find it difficult to comment objectively and may not have encountered the need to think about such considerations themselves. But there is a ‘watch-out’...Research tells us that women can demonstrate an innate bias against other women.

We can be quick to judge each other for evolutionary reasons – we compete. We can be critical, question more, impose extra criteria when looking for evidence of excellence. Nonetheless, if we are aware of this, we may find that this additional challenge raises the bar in our relationships with female colleagues – that we push each other to achieve more, aim higher, be better than we thought possible making a broader and deeper impact in our careers.

There has never been a better – or more significant – time to seize the opportunity to redefine the models of what executive presence is.