

# McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

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## Managers' Toolkit Series: Crafting Your Leadership Presence

John D. Rockefeller once said; "I will pay more for the ability to deal with others than for any other ability under the sun." In business, the gift of relating to diverse groups of people is invaluable. Leadership presence is not about impressive credentials and technical skills; rather, it's how we project our personal message and how we engage others. Some may call it executive presence; others have defined it as charisma. It's that combination of personality, experience and values that marks an individual as an effective and credible professional. For most of us, our leadership presence is not a trait that magically evolves overnight. Developing a "personal brand" requires attention and dedication.

What is "presence" exactly? Presence is a clearly recognizable existence in a social or organizational setting. We've all witnessed individuals with presence enter a room. There is an aura around these folks. It's a dynamic that's interesting to watch: the attention in the room visibly shifts to these people when they walk in. They tend to carry themselves with pride and hold their heads up. They are well groomed, look others in the eye, and they appear to be prepared for anything!

And therein lies the key. Preparation. A credible leadership presence is not like a hat we cram on our heads as we head out the door in the morning. A leadership presence is established by our actions and the reputation we build which is supported by our daily choices. Oh yes, having a leadership presence is a conscious choice. We build it. It's not a perk we receive along with the title and the office.

There is no cookie-cutter approach to attaining a leadership presence. Every successful leader has a unique style and method. A leadership presence should fit like a well tailored suit. It can be worn by you, and only you. No one else can wear it, and you can't squeeze in to someone else's. Personal style is important. However, there are common traits that we all recognize as the foundation of a leadership presence.

- **Self-confidence.** Now none of us are supremely confident in all situations. (That would be reckless and foolhardy!) Basic self confidence is being comfortable in our own skin and believing in our ability to navigate most situations. It's being confident in our ability to stand by the principles we believe in. It's the self-assurance we have in our knowledge base with which to defend our decisions. When we project self-confidence we invite others to believe in us.
- **Passion.** Having passion for what we do ensures we will never view our jobs as "work." Individuals who bring a high level of passion to their roles serve as an inspiration to others. Their level of caring is contagious and so is the energy they create around projects. People are naturally attracted to this type of positive energy. They want to be around it because on some level they recognize it is good for them. If you are a leader who can instill passion in others, you will never be without a dedicated team.
- **Openness.** None of us has all of the answers. Being open to viewpoints and opinions other than our own will ensure that our outlook never becomes stale. To remain accepting of other people's opinions is an inclusive way to live. If you have a reputation for being willing to listen to all sides of an issue, you will retain a global perspective. This is essential for good decision making. Don't cut yourself off from information. Be open to and solicit the opinions of your colleagues.
- **Physical image.** What message does our physical self present to the world? Never underestimate the power of the physical image. Until others get to know us, our appearance is the only calling card we have to offer. Perception based on physicality is primal in humans and first impressions are difficult to re-engineer. Pay attention to your physical presentation.
  - Do you stand tall and walk with pride OR do you tend to slouch and shuffle along?
  - Do you look others in the eye OR do you avoid eye contact and look at everything else in the room?
  - Do you project an energized focus OR do you appear listless and ready for a nap?
  - Is your appearance well groomed OR do you dress as if you could care less?

Projecting a positive physical image will engender confidence in your abilities. Do not allow physical distractions *which you can control* to detract from your overall leadership presence.

- **Communication.** It is important to develop a speaking style that has authority. The information we have to impart may be important, but will not carry the weight it deserves if our delivery is weak or lacks clarity. Lower the register of your voice and do not rush your communication. Plan your message in concise sections. Avoid detail – share main concepts only. If you have the habit of using “connectors” such as “Umm” and “Well” train yourself to replace them with pauses in speech instead. You will want to distinguish your message from all of the other “noise” that people encounter each day.
- **Discretion.** We all participate in social discourse while in the workplace. After all, human beings love to talk! However, you will want to ensure that you are not viewed as one who habitually recounts details about family, friends and other non-work related subjects. Use discretion when deciding what to share about your personal life. Stop and ask yourself if the story you’d like to share may be more appropriate for the barbecue on Friday night. If you really must share what Junior accomplished in daycare, ask yourself if the whole office needs to hear about it – or perhaps just a few close friends.
- **Thoughtfulness.** For those of us who are action oriented, waiting to think a problem through can often seem like avoidance or a waste of time. It can be tempting to drive forward with the answer when the solution appears obvious to us. The truth is, most problems do not need to be solved in an hour or less, and should not be. Self control is strongly linked to careful decision making. Make sure you invest sufficient time – and review all information – before presenting solutions. Some of the most successful business leaders in the U.S. employ a minimum 24 hour rule to offering solutions. Experience has taught them the big picture often takes an entire day to completely develop. Practice the habit of restraint. Important decisions deserve the best of your thinking.
- **Honesty.** We’ve all been tempted to soft-sell a difficult communication in order to spare ourselves the reactions of others. Better to engender a reputation for fair and honest dealings, than to participate in creating positive illusions. People will surprise you in their ability to deal with the truth, even when it’s bad news. Respect that. Align your reputation with honest communication. Don’t avoid the tough stuff and don’t make promises you cannot keep.

What is your leadership message? What do you want to project about yourself? The time you dedicate to crafting your personal brand of leadership will positively impact your career and the relationships you encounter along the way. A leadership presence is a powerful tool. Take the time to develop yours.

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McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations’ life cycle. MKS&H’s organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Melissa McDaniel at 301-662-2400 or via email: [melissa@mksh.com](mailto:melissa@mksh.com).

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