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To develop “executive presence,” observe and learn from the best

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Some presenters have it. Most do not. “It” is an executive presence – a certain something that captures an audience’s attention, sustains it, and leaves a lasting impression. It also helps the speaker achieve that all-important communications objective – getting the audience to listen to, understand and act on what was said.

How do you develop an executive presence and join the ranks of top-tier communicators? If you observe these talented individuals carefully, here’s what you’ll see:

High energy: Your “business poker face” – that unemotional, inexpressive persona that may serve you well during an intense negotiation – prevents you from connecting with your audience. Just as people naturally gravitate to individuals with outgoing personalities, they are inclined to listen to ideas presented with energy and conviction. Communicating is selling, and successful selling involves transferring energy and enthusiasm from speaker to listener. To help sell your message, increase your normal energy level 50 percent when presenting.

Everyday language: Great communicators sound conversational. They speak plainly, avoid jargon, and use simple words, contractions and uncomplicated sentence structure. This kind of language resonates with people who are fed up with “corporate speak” and words and phrasing that sound like they came from speechwriters.

Minimal reliance on notes: Although it often appears that skillful presenters are “winging it,” this is rarely the case. To paraphrase from a Rod Stewart song, “Their ad-libbed lines are well rehearsed.” The paradox of successful public speaking is making prepared remarks seem spontaneous. Strive to look at your notes no more than 15 percent of the time while presenting. Fluid delivery comes from knowing your material cold. And that means practice – preferably, three times, aloud, on your feet, into a video recorder.

Storytelling ability: Human beings – regardless of culture – are storytelling creatures. Presenters who tell stories are making an important leap from the abstract to the concrete. Remember Ronald Reagan’s “hero in the balcony” technique where the President would tell a brief story about a real person sitting in the balcony at the state of the union address? Who among us wasn’t fully engaged (and often moved) during that portion of the speech?

Sustained eye contact: Most business situations call for “involvement.” And one of the best ways to show it is through eye contact. When we’re excited and fully

engaged, we tend to look at someone for about 5-10 seconds. Great presenters have mastered this skill, and deliver one complete thought to one pair of eyes. In large-group situations, they focus on several individuals who serve as proxies for the entire audience.

Limited use of PowerPoint: Although PowerPoint is ubiquitous in the business world, top-level executives use it sparingly. They know that no visual can compete with the ability of a human being to make a personal connection with an audience. Other than using the occasional pie chart, bar graph, diagram or photo, powerful speakers rely on themselves rather than on projected images to reach an audience.

Q&A savvy: Most speakers dread the Q&A portion of a presentation. Accomplished presenters don't. They prepare by anticipating the questions they'll likely get, and by asking themselves, "What questions do I hope no one asks?" Then they prepare answers. If the audience is silent, they jump start the Q&A process by planting a question or two with a colleague, or by saying something like, "One question I'm asked most frequently is ..."

The ability to deliver an effective presentation is an essential skill. Business deals, employee support and professional reputations can be damaged or lost by sub-par communication. Yet, most business presentations are poorly crafted and delivered. Since most of us acquire our platform skills through observational learning, it's critical that we observe and learn from the right people – those talented few who can get up before a crowd and dazzle them.