

10 Warning Signs Your Leaders Lack Executive Presence

Future business success depends on having leaders who can drive change. If you observe any of these signs, your top team is probably under-performing and it's time to take action.

Executive presence is the hallmark of every successful leader. The ability to think, act and communicate like a leader is grounded in polished communication skills. Executives with presence deliver higher performance. They are vital to the leadership team. People want to work with them. Through enrolling and engaging the best resources, **they deliver superior results time and again.** Consider successful executives such as John Chambers, CEO of CISCO since 1995. Chambers overcame childhood dyslexia and today his enthusiastic communication style, which conveys can-do optimism, has helped lead CISCO to the top of a tough, fast-changing industry and Chambers was selected in Harvard Business Review's Top 5 most valuable CEOs in January 2010.

Executives without presence fall short as leaders. Their low-energy performances display a lack of confidence and cause audiences to tune out within minutes. They can't think on their feet or compose clear, compelling and motivating messages. Their communication style frustrates senior managers, so their ideas are ignored and resisted. **Without**

executive presence their credibility suffers. They are less effective in their role as they struggle to get buy-in from important stakeholders. They must work harder to make change happen. Doubt, frustration and insecurity creep in.

Look for these 10 warning signs. When leaders lack executive presence, they:

1. Are nervous and shaky in front of senior managers

People judge you when you speak. They make assumptions about your capabilities based on how effectively you express yourself.

While this may not seem fair, it's a fact of life – even more so at the executive level. Executives who seem nervous are labeled less effective. How many times have you seen someone with superior communication skills promoted ahead of a peer who has better technical knowledge? Giving halting and uncertain answers to senior managers impacts credibility, while confident executives who rise to the occasion of a high-pressure meeting are marked as future leaders.

A recently-promoted general manager of a technology firm found it difficult to hold his own with overseas managers in management review meetings. The managers started to question his promotion. By arming him with several quick-thinking tools, we enabled the executive to become better prepared, thus increasing his confidence.

2. Speak without a clear message

Executives from technical disciplines, such as finance or engineering, often have a misconception that technical ability is more important than communicating effectively. The very skills that make technical experts successful actually prevent them from being promoted to senior management. They focus too heavily on process and

small details when the situation requires something more concise. Unlike junior managers, a senior executive's main role is to communicate a clear and compelling message.

Executives with presence understand how to tell the story behind the numbers, correctly balancing big-picture with small details. The best executives, such as Steve Jobs, communicate effectively using simple and concise language that conveys powerful and memorable messages. Jobs has honed this skill over the years and his product launches contain such gems as, *“Today, Apple reinvents the phone”* from the 2007 iPhone launch. This ability to express a situation in its simplest terms is often overlooked by technical executives. However, all effective executive communicators have mastered this art.

3. Put audiences to sleep

Voice makes or breaks a presentation. A monotone voice puts people to sleep and a whispering voice is a liability when attempting to persuade senior managers. Great presenters have honed their vocal variety. They are able to attract an audience's attention and keep it with a full range that combines pace, tone, resonance, rhythm, emphasis and pause to add impact to their messages.

Many senior executives are introverted and reluctant to speak out, like a recent banking client who had a limited vocal range. After working through a range of exercises, her vocal range expanded and she began to make a better impression on conference calls and in presentations.

4. Dump data rather than connecting

Facts are interesting, but they don't motivate anyone to change. But many executives still think data wins the day. Despite almost one hundred years of research into what motivates people, many executives

still blast their audiences with data-heavy presentations. Then they are surprised by the lack of engagement and change that results. Executives with presence are able to connect and engage people on multiple levels by understanding why people are motivated to act.

A CEO of a fast-growing retailer was missing opportunities to get buy-in on strategy from his more than 500 senior managers at quarterly meetings. Using a three-step process, we helped him identify the underlying message beneath all those facts and figures and he delivered a memorable talk that stuck with the management team long after his speech. This was a great improvement from his previous approach of reading statistics from index cards.

5. Think presenting *is* PowerPoint

Many executives waste time making weighty slide-decks instead of the one preparation tool that's truly effective: rehearsal.

Executives who rehearse by making and reading slides at their computer deliver dull, mundane and forgettable presentations. The best executives combine whole-brain thinking in their presentations with story-line, flow and anecdotes along with appropriate facts, figures and slides.

A general manager with a strong technical background realized he needed to break bad habits built up over decades. He stopped using slides for three months— a major leap of faith. Then he focused on his message and got comfortable speaking with just a few well designed slides that were visual and memorable. The change was dramatic and he became a role-model for other managers.

6. Appear evasive and uncertain when asked questions

Some executives tend to ramble around a topic before expressing their opinion. This propensity gets worse when faced with a very direct,

aggressive questioning style designed to intimidate the executives, who are often answering in their second language. Executives who cannot handle this pressure suffer from stress, anxiety and a breakdown in confidence. Executives with presence are able to handle difficult questions and deliver sharp, concise and punchy answers to even the toughest questions.

A finance director at a leading specialty chemicals firm, despite being an expert in his function and industry, was overwhelmed when global executives fired questions at him. Using media techniques, we helped him stay calm and composed while in the spotlight.

7. Choke during important presentations

Executives are expected to step up and perform during important meetings. Unfortunately, many executives let stage-fright drag them down. They forget their message, hesitate and stutter through their presentation, and freeze while answering questions. In the eyes of their senior-level audience, they come across as unprepared, unconvincing and uncertain.

A CEO recently used one of our rehearsal techniques, which shifted him away from what could go wrong and allowed him to focus on his key purpose. This enabled him to better cope in high-pressure meetings and stay on track.

8. Blame culture and language too often

Even successful executives make excuses. Common excuses among China-based multinational executives are that cultural differences and language ability cause ineffective communication. Without doubt, culture plays an important role in communication. However, it is often overused as the cause for misunderstandings among senior managers.

Executives with presence are able to weigh the cultural aspects before a presentation and allow for them without diluting their message or tone.

As China-based specialists, we frequently support executives, such as country managers, in getting out of this rut. Many of them humbly believe that their language ability or lack of overseas study is the main reason why they cannot get their message across to senior managers, but often have similar issues in their native language. We then focus on the underlying communication skill that can help the executive become more vocal and proactive.

9. Are unaware of their communication impact

When executives are unaware of their communication style, they are deaf to the world. They come across as rigid because they stick to one style for all settings. This causes friction among the leadership team and delays important decision-making. Executives need to be versatile to the subtleties of each occasion.

A CEO for a manufacturing multinational used to turn his back to the audience during important presentations while he read his slides. This lowered the executive's credibility among senior managers. Intense feedback and video work helped the CEO become more aware and adopt more effective speaking postures.

10. Are low-key to the point of invisibility

Senior executives can underestimate the power of meetings to enhance their credentials. Executives' days are full of meetings; regular weekly calls with line managers, monthly conference calls with senior management, and quarterly business reviews. These are often missed opportunities to showcase their potential as a high-performing executive with the capabilities to drive the business forward. Successful executives

take every chance to enhance their reputation in the eyes of their peers and superiors.

A senior partner in a professional services firm needed to increase his visibility in important meetings with the global management team. His qualities were not coming across clearly during these meetings and, although a capable executive, he was unable to project his opinions with confidence. We helped him adopt a more assertive role which improved his reputation. His ideas got more air time and his recommendations were more quickly accepted.

If you have read these warning signs and thought “*that sounds like an executive on my team*”, then it is time to contact us. We specialize in supporting senior executives in overcoming these and many other challenges as they learn to speak with executive presence. Give us a call so we can help you find the best way forward.



About Warwick John Fahy

I support senior executives working for multinationals in Greater China who lack the executive presence to effectively influence key stakeholders. While these executives are very smart, very knowledgeable and highly capable, a key piece missing. Their executive communication skills need polishing.

I help executives build a strong foundation in executive communication so that they are able to better think, speak and act like a leader to set and implement strategy.

Our Speak with Executive Presence Program which systematically helps executives think, speak and act like a leader, can be found on www.warwickjohnfahy.com under “Services”.

To see if this program is for you, call Warwick to book a complimentary Executive Presence Strategy Session on +86 21 6101 0486. The purpose of this session is to help you gain more clarity on where you want to go and challenges you are having getting there. We'll also discuss the services I have to offer and determine if what I do can help you get you where you want to go.