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PRESENCE-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP:
The Missing Ingredient from Executive Leadership

*Donn LeVie, Jr. / Donn LeVie Jr. STRATEGIES, LLC*

There’s a villain lurking in the halls of companies and organizations everywhere. It creates uncommitted employees, causes higher turnover, and lowers morale. Out on the street, it lowers stock prices, decreases earnings, and leads to shareholder or customer issues — or worse: media frenzy at the first hint of bad news from the C-Suite.

That culprit is ineffective leadership, and often results in what I call “leadershipwrecks.”

The power of presence is THE big thing in executive soft-skills development today. C-Suite executives want fast-track leaders to possess the soft-skill attribute of presence more than any other, yet ask those same executives to define presence, and no two definitions sound alike. Each observes the *result* of presence through the filters of their own experiences.

Over my 30-year career, I’ve spoken with fellow Fortune 100 managers and leaders about finding stellar talent. Repeatedly, when asked to name the one characteristic of potential strong leaders, they talked about “presence”— that seemingly intangible quality that defies empirical quantification.

 “You just know presence when you see it and hear it,” these leaders told me. “It’s a feeling you get from watching how someone interacts with people and situations with seemingly no effort at all.” Those who have presence have that certain *je ne sais quoi,* as the French say — that “something inexplicable.”

What struck me was how they described presence as a feeling they get from observing how someone else moves through the world. It seems, therefore, that leadership presence is recognized by others according to how one positively and efficiently interacts with people and situations with apparent, carefree (perhaps enviable) ease.

Howard Gardner, developmental psychologist and Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, offers a compelling statement that gives us a glimpse of what presence looks like through the haze:

Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand other people; what motivates them, how they work, how to work cooperatively with them . . . Intrapersonal intelligence . . . is a correlative ability, turned inward. It is a capacity to form an accurate . . . model of oneself and to be able to use that model to operate effectively in life.

But all too often, the idea of leadership presence is tossed into the salad bowl of ingredients for “cultural fit,” those shared assumptions that lubricate the work environment to keep it running on all cylinders. Cultural fit is also an important consideration for executive succession planning as more baby boomers exit the workforce.

However, most of the soft skill components underlying cultural fit are acquired, such as collaboration, solving problems, communication and conflict management, while others reflect more innate qualities, such as strong work ethic, empathy, social awareness, emotional intelligence, and clear self-expression. Such acquired and innate skills represent core values and help drive organizations to achieve financial and transformational objectives in the long term.

Since we’re speaking of a quality that is “something inexplicable,” here’s my definition for leadership presence: It’s a personal quality that enhances emotional intelligence (the arbiter between the rational brain and emotional brain), and evokes in others (subordinates, stakeholders, peers, potential clients, customers, etc.) a mostly voluntary desire to comply with, to follow, or to align with that person’s vision, position, beliefs, or policies.

That begs the question: Is presence innate or can we acquire it through new behaviors? No doubt, all of us can enjoy greater presence in our lives by studying the habits, traits, and behaviors of great contemporary and historic leaders. However, certain qualities of presence are innate to a person’s personality.

*Sophrosyne* isan ancient Greek concept of an ideal of excellence of character and soundness of mind. When combined in one well-balanced individual, sophrosyne leads to other qualities, such as temperance, moderation, prudence, purity, and self-control. It can also be thought of as a solid foundation upon which to build Presence-Driven Leadership.

“People skills” just doesn’t cut it any longer as a catch-all category for aspiring leaders because it implies an ability to address relationship and communication interactions with others. “Self skills” (self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-regulation, etc.) are critical for Presence-Driven Leaders that allow them to interact with people and situations with that “seemingly no effort at all.

Leadership Presence is too often confused with power and position when, in fact, it is the beneficial, positive, and intelligent application of engagement, influence, and persuasion in stewardship roles.

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*Engagement and positioning strategist, leadership platform expeditor, author, and speaker Donn LeVie Jr. has 30 years’ experience leading people and projects for such Fortune 100 companies as Phillips Petroleum, Motorola, Intel Corporation; government agencies (NOAA), and academia (Department of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, University of Houston Downtown College). Donn specializes at the intersection of leadership, communication, and performance, which means he works with organization leaders and executives through the doorway of coaching and consulting. Contact Donn at* *donn@donnleviejrstrategies.com**.*