



Powered By *Indianapolis Business Journal*

[Home](#)

FELLA: Let's take the executive out of 'executive presence'

March 9, 2018



SHERI FELLA
IN THE WORKPLACE

I grew up with two strong grandmothers and one equally strong mother. I am fairly confident that, if I had told any of them they had “impressive executive presence,” they would have looked confused, then asked a lot of questions.

My grandmothers each had a unique presence. Just as my mother does. We all do. Our true presence typically shows up when we are in our most comfortable contexts — with our kids and best friends, families and teams.

So I don't know when “executive presence” became a thing to pursue, but it is currently one of the most common pieces of feedback women leaders are getting — without a lot of explanation or definition.

Most of the executive women I have coached began our journey together with a desire to increase executive presence. I would guess that sounds familiar to many of you. My response to this request is to ask: What does executive presence mean to you?

If you are also interested in increasing your executive presence, I challenge you to explore that and other questions, including: If you had increased executive presence, what would be different about you? What would you be able to do tomorrow that you cannot do now? How will you know you have increased executive presence?

Often, the answers that come back are, “I don't know,” or, “I was told by my boss or a male counterpart that I need it.” I encourage my clients to go back to the people who cared enough to give them the feedback and get their help understanding what they meant. More often than not, when my clients gather that next level of data, they return with answers like, “I don't know. It is just something you know when you see it.”

Executive presence is not defined in the dictionary, and it is not consistently defined for any one person or organization, so it makes sense why it is so elusive. I have been in the field of human development and coaching for decades and I must confess I have no idea how to build “executive presence” as a general concept. What I can do for myself and others is to build presence. Each person has a unique, authentic presence inside of them.

Authentic, unique presence comes from the inside out, not the outside in. In other words, it can't be created by someone else telling you how to act; it must be an expression of who you are at your core. Presence is the foundation for confidence and clarity, so perhaps this is what people mean when they say "executive presence."

For now, let's assume presence is defined as the ability to be confident and authentic in the current moment—in the sales presentation, in the parent/child discussion, in the first big speaking event. In other words, presence gives you the ability to show up in your own confidently authentic way no matter the context or situation.

I ask you to explore what it feels like for you to be confident and authentic. What does that look like? What gets in the way of your owning the room right now? In what situations do you feel most confident? All of these questions are an exploration of your emotional self-awareness, a cornerstone for presence. Exploring your emotional self-awareness is the start of the inside-out work, and this process of exploration will develop authentic presence. It is a practice, not a process or training event.

Certainly, there are external factors that require exploration and preparation. But these external factors become more surmountable and less important when your internal clarity and confidence is grounded in consistent presence.

My grandmothers had a clear sense of themselves and their presence was consistently confident. My mother displays that same presence today. So maybe we can start by dropping that word "executive" and just strive for presence. Let's be focused and clear on what we are trying to develop and why we want or need to develop it.

Changing behaviors and mind-sets is hard enough, so let's be OK defining that in a way that is uniquely ours. •

Fella is a certified executive coach and co-founder of Bloombase LLC. She can be reached at sheri@thisisbloombase.com.