

NOT GETTING PROMOTED?

IT MIGHT BE TIME TO EXAMINE YOUR EXECUTIVE PRESENCE



PART 1: APPEARANCE

By Gina Riley

One of my clients missed out on an important internal career move last year. When she asked for constructive feedback from the interview team, she was told she was lacking in Executive Presence.

EP is a subjective and powerful concept because it impacts others trust and perception of our leadership abilities. This perception of us plays a significant role in our upward mobility and career transition success. The good news is we have the power to shape and change our Executive Presence!

This is one of a three-part series based on the works of Sylvia Ann Hewlett, author of *Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success*.

The book centers around the three universal dimensions of Executive Presence, which are Appearance (how we look), Communication (how we speak), and Gravitas (how we act). These dimensions underpin the strength of our ability to influence others and the way people perceive and subconsciously respond to us.

This article tackles the importance appearance plays in people's perception of our Executive Presence. In subsequent articles, I'll cover Communication and the most important element of all, Gravitas.

The information about the three elements of Executive Presence is backed by research from the Center for Talent Innovation (now Coqual). They ran a national survey of 4,000 professionals, which included 268 senior executives and found leaders have agreement on what matters most when it comes to our ability to persuade others through our EP. The study also indicates the three pillars do not carry equal weight.

Let's cover appearance, or "how you look".

On one hand, only 5% of those surveyed identified appearance as being of highest in importance. On the other, it is the first critical filter that can be an initial hurdle impacting our subsequent interactions. How we look impacts others' perceptions about the **confidence** we have in ourselves, our **likability**, and our **trustworthiness**. According to a Harvard Medical School study, people will size up another person and make their first judgement in just **250 milliseconds**.

Think about this. If you could control just one thing and immediately improve others perception of your Executive Presence, you could adjust your appearance. But what aspects of your appearance should you be paying attention to?



According to Hewlett's research, it is a function of, "what you do with what you've got" and "looking the part" above anything else. Here are the aspects of appearance that matter in rank order:

With a rating of 35% importance, **being polished and groomed** stacks the highest. It is a signal to your competition you are in control.

Second, is **physical attractiveness** at 19%, which is a signal you take care of yourself. When you take care of yourself, you are telling the world you will take care of what matters. The research finds this can be unfairly correlated with weight, particularly for women.

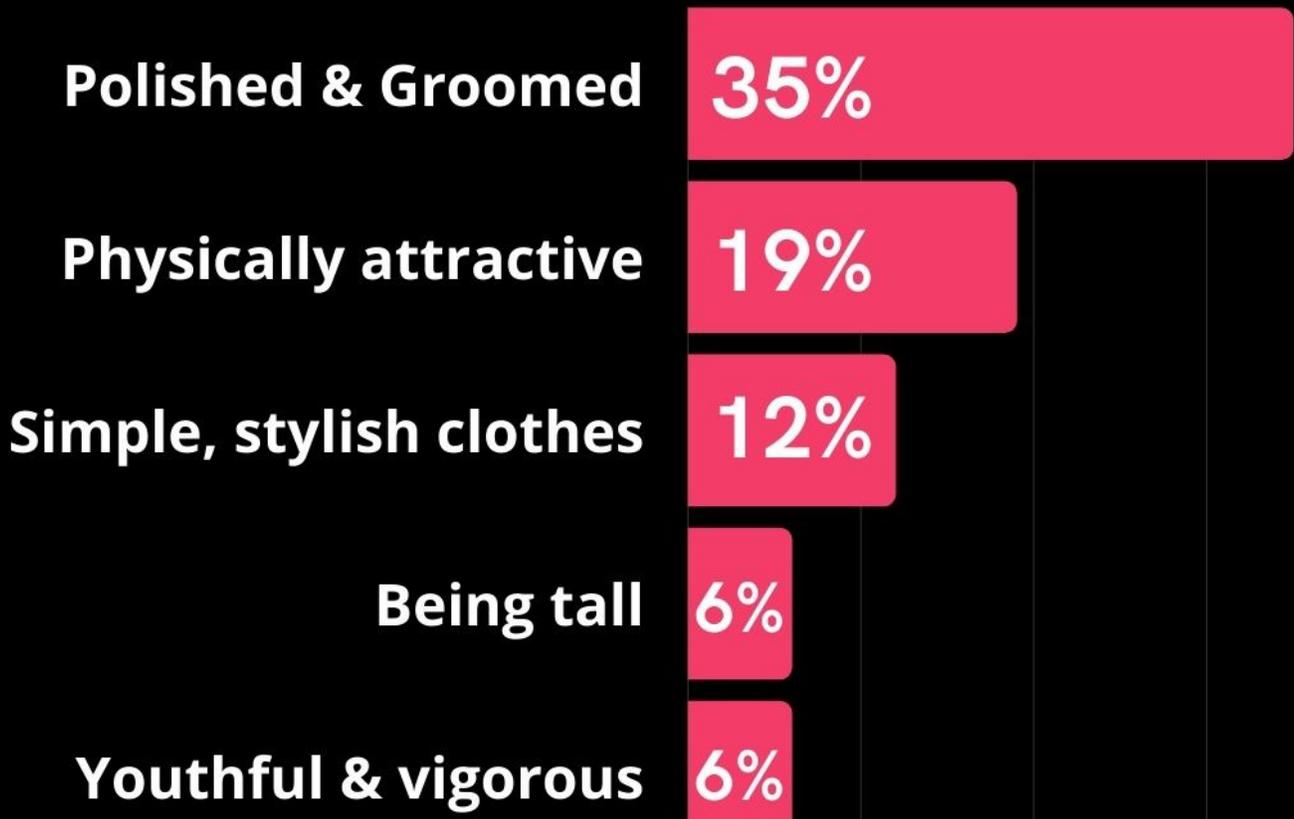
Dressing for the job you want, not the one you have, falls under the next category rated at 12% which is wearing simple, stylish clothes. This is about using your body as an extension of your brand by appropriately showcasing your individuality. Next, **being tall** was rated at 6%. For men, however, their leadership potential based on height is unfairly rated at 12%.

Finally, the sixth aspect of appearance was rated at 6%, **being youthful and vigorous**.

For the ladies out there, you'll find it interesting the two aspects of appearance that rate more important for women than men are **physical attractiveness** and

EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

CRITICAL APPEARANCE FACTORS



REFERENCE: CENTER FOR TALENT INNOVATION / COQUAL



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vigorous. According to the research, women have a shorter window of “age acceptability” and need to be seen as “vital” or youthful. Hewlett’s qualitative research shows the most important aspect to this is signaling your fitness and wellness and that “looking well put together demonstrates respect for yourself and the organization.”

There are appearance blunders people make that impact their Executive Presence. What is particularly disheartening is the respondents in the CTI’s survey generated a list of blunders and unwritten rules twice as long for women than for men! For women, it ranges from sporting a bleach blonde hairdo, flashy jewelry, over-the-top makeup, plunging necklines, bitten nails, and many more. For men, its discolored or crooked teeth, unkept clothes, dandruff on the shoulders, obvious hair piece, obesity, and visible piercings or tattoos.

What we wear and how we wear it communicate how

earnest we are about our mission, shows we have good judgement, and discipline. It signals we are confident and in control. What we wear should attract attention to our professional abilities versus sidetrack or derail them.

There is good news here. To be considered a leader, one can diligently create an appropriate image. You could even enlist help! One way to do this is to tune in to the leaders in your own organization. What are they wearing? How do they stack up against the top aspects of appearance?

Reflecting on a time when I worked at Intel over twenty years ago, I remember a respected senior HR leader who was always elegant and put together in an appropriate way for the high-tech environment. One day, she was in a rush to drop her kids off and get to work on time. She laughingly showed us the paint job on her toenails.

She wanted to wear open-toed sandals but didn't have time for fresh polish to dry, so she only painted the toes showing at the top and left the rest bare. Her attention to detail sticks with me to this day.

If you are not sure how to evaluate your Executive Presence and how it stacks up against the research, start by asking trusted leaders in your organization and remain open to constructive feedback. Those who demonstrate willingness to modify their appearance while remaining authentic to themselves may receive a visual edge not previously enjoyed in the past. What you wear should enhance how you feel about yourself and boost your confidence, so make sure the changes you make are right for you and appropriate for your audience.

I recommend you check out Hewlett's book and the appearance strategies that build confidence in yourself and trust from others. As you tune in to what your appearance is projecting about you, you'll earn latitude to create a signature style that helps you stand apart from others down the line.

In the next article, you'll see how Communication plays a role in Executive Presence.



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