

# NOT GETTING PROMOTED?

IT MIGHT BE TIME TO EXAMINE YOUR  
EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

## PART 2: COMMUNICATION



BY GINA RILEY

# SUPERIOR SPEAKING SKILLS



## ACCENT GRAMMAR PITCH

In 1991, I forever changed the way I spoke. I was in college, interning for a top communication trainer who brought me on assignment for a day-long team leadership development consultation at Motorola.

“I don’t understand why I can’t get the men on my team to listen to me or give me respect when I speak,” a young female engineer painfully conveyed during the training. I still remember she spoke with a tight, high-pitched voice like Minnie Mouse. The way she spoke and communicated was blocking her ability to capture the attention of her peers and managers. It was most certainly obstructing

subjective opinions about her Executive Presence.

According to Sylvia Ann Hewlett, author of *Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success*, we can shape the way people see and respond to us and shape the perception of our Executive Presence. This article covers the second of the three universal dimensions of EP, Communication (how we speak). In part one, I covered Appearance (how we look), and in the final article I’ll cover Gravitas (how we act).

Based on Hewlett’s research, there are six important verbal and

nonverbal aspects of communication upon which we are judged. Communication is about engaging in a way that reduces listeners friction from absorbing your message. You may find it surprising the actual content of what you communicate is the least important aspect of communication.

It is inescapable. No matter where you sit in your organization, your communication and presentation skills are constantly being judged. Every single interaction is an opportunity to constructively create a positive impression on your target audience. Once you understand the elements of



## ABILITY TO COMMAND THE ROOM

communication you can intentionally and powerfully connect, engross, and persuade your target audience.

No matter where you sit in your organization or whether you manage a team, I believe everyone can be considered a leader. It is important to understand how verbal weaknesses come at a cost when it comes to people's perception of our EP. As Hewlett says, "It is not what you say but how you say it. And this you can condition and control."

According to a national study done by Hewlett's team of over 4000 professionals, superior speaking skills rate most important at 60%. There are three potential shortcomings to be aware of - your accent, grammar, and the timber and pitch of your voice.

If you are in a field where oral communication is of the utmost importance, you'll want to pay attention to whether your accent is impeding your ability to win people over. This is especially true if you are not working in the region where your accent is prevalent. It may not be fair, but regional accents can get in the way of your EP. As Hewlett says, "There are good ones and bad ones, and even the good ones can get you into trouble, making you seem snobbish or even out of touch."

Using poor grammar or the wrong word choice is a top communication mistake. An even uglier side to using poor grammar is people are reluctant to draw your attention to the proper word usage because it oftentimes correlates with touchy gaps between education, socioeconomic class, or ethnicity.

A high-pitched or shrill voice causes a poor perception of EP. Hewlett's research confirmed a 2012 study published in the Journal of Voice that the timbre and pitch of your voice are vitally important. Research also suggests, humans are wired to tune into lower frequencies and that we hold our attention longer when a person's voice is not grating. What is more, there is a correlation between a pleasing voice, landing top leadership roles, and a higher probability of making a significantly larger salary. Therefore, you want to strive for an optimum lower frequency.

Can you mesmerize your audience? If so, perhaps you've got the ability to command a room. This was rated at 49% importance. The first key to grabbing your audience's attention is to establish just enough of a



## FORCEFUL / ASSERTIVE



## CAN READ A ROOM



**SENSE OF HUMOR &  
ABILITY TO BANTER**

human connection to inspire listeners to root for you while giving off the impression you don't need to be liked.

In addition to commanding the room, you need to deliver your words as a musician delivers notes with appropriate phrasing, inflection, and pace. Those who speak too fast or end phrasing with an unsure uptick in tone decrease the perception of EP.

Another way to command your audience's attention is to sharpen your ability to tell a story with an attention-grabbing narrative and the avoidance of snowing people with data (lists, facts) ... think of the informative, short, and entertaining format of a Ted Talk.

To bump up your EP, you also need to impress your target by performing with a command of

your material without the excessive use of props. Instead, you need to have confidence and the ability to look your audience in the eye and read their reactions. Eye contact shows you are completely present, focused, and in control of your material.

Finally, get to the point! Your message needs to be succinct and brief. Long windups and explanations dilute your message and give room for your listener to check out. This is an especially damaging blunder many job seekers make during an interview process.

Research shows a core aspect of EP, rated at 48%, is assertiveness. A leader needs to bring with them the sensitivity to step back, respect, and read each situation. That said, women must find the delicate balance between assertive

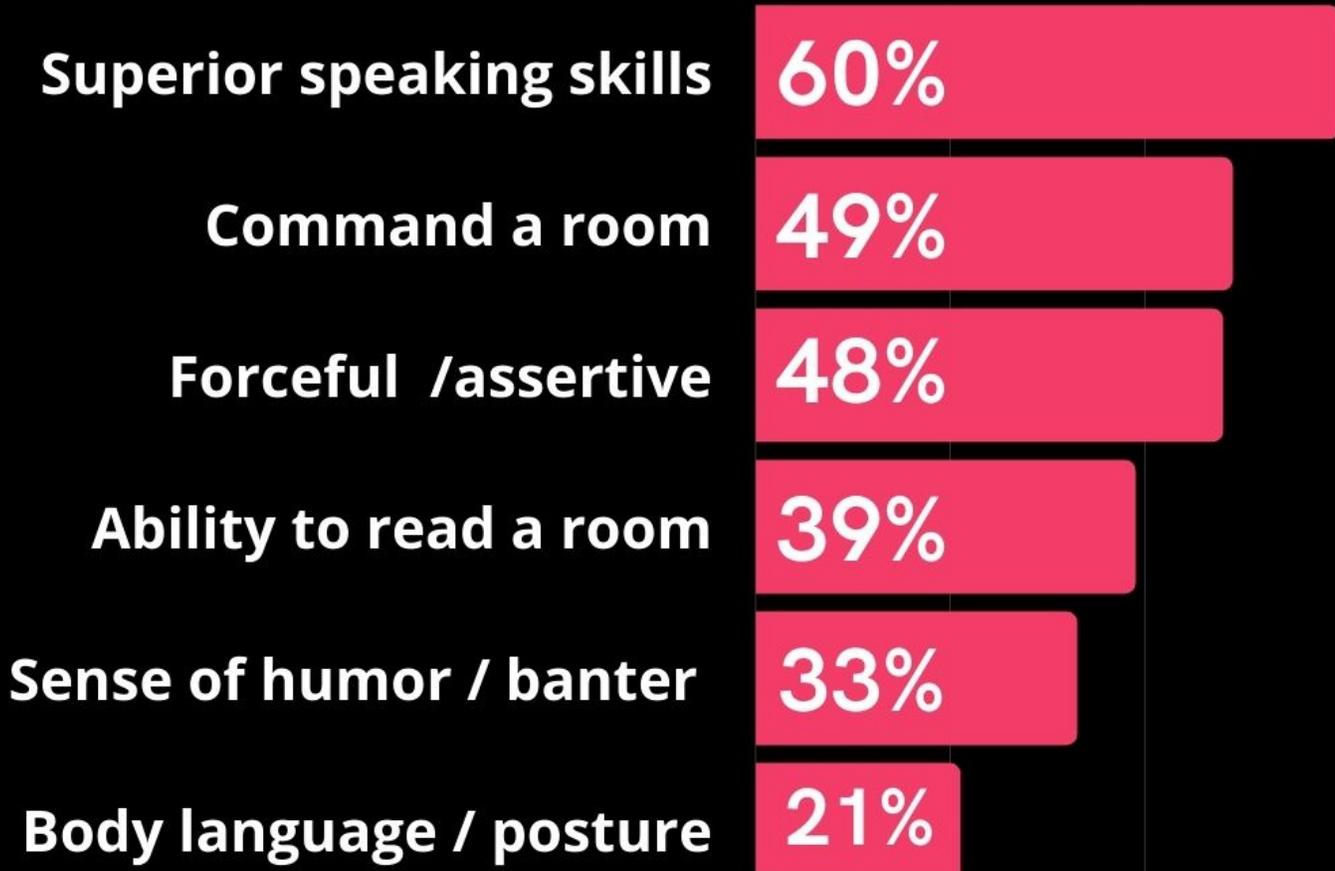
confidence and the perception of over-aggressiveness (think the B-word).

If you hope to command a room, you had better first read it. At 39%, one's ability to read clients, your boss, or the room will help or hurt your EP. Today, we read a lot about the importance of EQ (emotional quotient) or EI (emotional intelligence) and having the ability to adjust to people's cues. In Patrick Lencioni's book *The Ideal Team Player*, this is the "smart" of his "humble, hungry, smart" model.

Why is this important? Because it shows you have the adaptability to pivot as new information comes in and that you care about your audience. Hewlett provides a powerful description of what it takes to read a room. She recommends "tuning yourself out

# EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

## CRITICAL COMMUNICATION FACTORS



REFERENCE: CENTER FOR TALENT INNOVATION / COQUAL

to tune in to the needs and wants of others” and to showcase the command of your subject matter customized in a way your audience can grasp it.

At 33%, a person’s EP is rated higher with a sense of humor or the ability to banter. This has as much to do with tapping into larger cultural or societal conversations or know enough to add to conversations to bond with people as it does when you are in the room presenting.

Finally, body language and posture are rated at 21% importance and

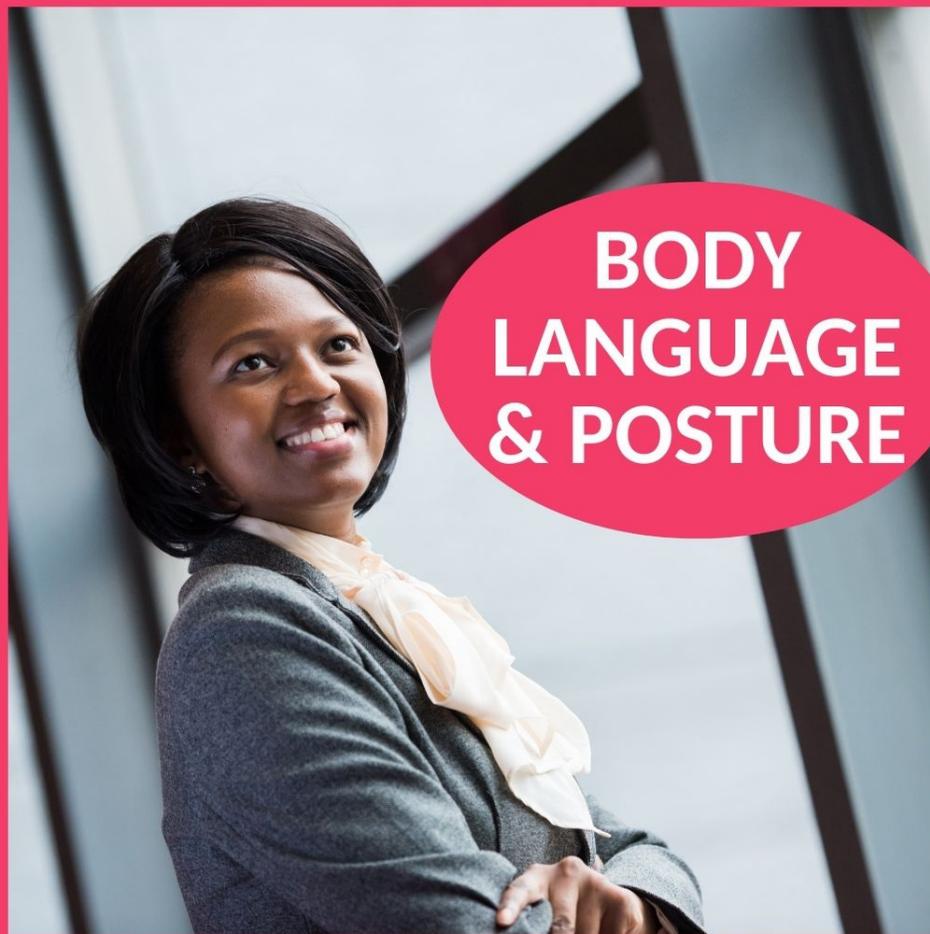
have a huge impact on the perception of your EP. You only have a few seconds to make an impression about whether you are engaged and listening. Both your appearance and the confidence with which you carry yourself are the very first things people will notice about you and make a judgment.

Communication blunders can take the wind right out of your EP sails. Things like checking your watch, clicking a pen, foot-tapping, and rustling papers are among the worst. What is the worst of the blunders? Checking one’s device.

It signals your time is more important than everyone else’s.

How do you know if the way you communicate is holding you back from achieving the professional success you desire? Hewlett suggests tuning in to what she calls the “fidget factor.” Are people clearing their throats or squirming in their chairs? Do they look like they wish they were somewhere else? One of the best things you can do is to maintain eye contact and ensure people know you are speaking to them.

People are very reluctant to offer



**BODY  
LANGUAGE  
& POSTURE**

constructive feedback when it comes to communication blunders. So, how do you find out if you are sending the wrong communication signals so you can polish them up?

- Record and listen yourself. Do you say “um” too much? Are you speaking and pausing at a tempo people can comfortably listen?
- Broaden your small talk so you can insert yourself into conversations.
- Control your voice so it is not shrill, raspy, or breathy.
- Confidently speak up by preparing what you want to say.
- Keep it brief and succinct!
- Maintain your posture.
- Don't allow challenges to your authority to go unanswered.

It was the communication blunder I witnessed by the young female engineer, a voice high in pitch, that made an immediate and life-long impact to the pitch of my own voice. I got to hear first-hand, the leadership coach kindly and directly address her voice as a key blockage in her ability to command the attention and respect of her coworkers.

As for me, I realized I'd succeeded in making this vocal adjustment when I attended my 10-year high school reunion and, an old friend exclaimed, “Wow, your voice is so much deeper!”

If you missed the first article in the series, feel free to send me a personalized connection request on LinkedIn and mention the Executive Presence series so I am prompted to send it to you. In the final article of the series, I'll review the most important dimension of EP, Gravitas.

## CONTRIBUTING WRITER'S PROFILE



*Gina Riley Consulting & creator of the CareerVelocity System™. She is a career transition coach who helps leaders customize their career stories to land jobs where they can leave a legacy. She is an Executive Search Consultant for Talence Group.*



**CONTACT  
GINA:**

[ginarileyconsulting.com](http://ginarileyconsulting.com)

 @ginariley