

NOT GETTING PROMOTED?

IT MIGHT BE TIME TO EXAMINE YOUR
EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

PART 3: GRAVITAS

By Gina Riley





CONFIDENCE & "GRACE UNDER FIRE"

I was conducting a CEO search for a large healthcare provider of a vulnerable patient population. The board of directors were deeply committed to the mission of serving people with high-quality, affordable care. They sought a caring leader who not only embraced their compassionate mission but also brought strength of conviction to speak hard truths, or as they would say, “truth to power.”

What actions and characteristics would they look for during the interview process?

The top candidate would need to project the ability to calm people down and gain their support despite differences of opinion. They would concurrently bring authority, sensitivity, and emotional intelligence.

This board of directors was seeking a leader with executive presence and the universal dimension of gravitas or possessing key qualities and behaviors people want to follow. While EP is subjective, it is a powerful concept for aspiring leaders to understand if they want to attract and keep people’s attention. EP is about building trust in one’s ability to lead during trying times and is a significant element of career

transition success. The BOD’s careful process gave candidate’s ways to showcase the perception of their executive presence, ability to build trusting relationships, and ultimately their leadership abilities. This is last 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 is based on a national survey and the agreement of 4000 professionals (including 268 senior executives) on the crucial aspects of EP that determine the strength of our ability to influence others and the way people perceive and subconsciously respond to us.

As Hewlett describes in her book, our ability to lead and persuade others depends on a combination of three universal dimensions of executive presence, however, they do not carry equal weight. The first two dimensions of EP are Appearance (how we look) and Communication (how we speak). The most important element of EP is **gravitas** or “how we act”.

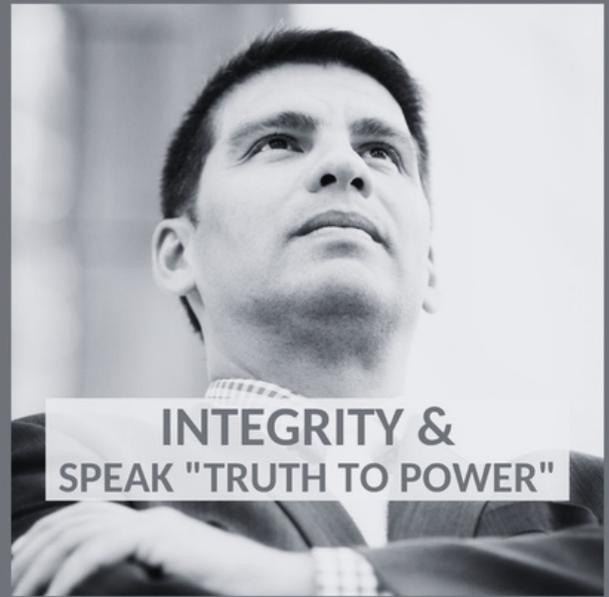
There are six key behaviors that comprise gravitas: confidence and grace under fire, decisiveness, integrity, emotional intelligence, reputation and standing, and vision and charisma.



Confidence and “grace under fire” ranks the most important at 79%. It is about composure while facing a crisis and confidently knowing you can do the job without projecting conceit. On one hand, “you will make mistakes and suffer the mistakes of others,” according to Hewlett, but on the other you earn trust of followers by “falling on your sword” and admitting mistakes.

A core aspect of showing gravitas, ranked at 70%, is **decisiveness and “showing teeth.”** It is not about making difficult decisions; it is about taking a stand when those around you are unwilling to pursue a risky course of action. The behaviors that showcase decisiveness may be seen as stereotypical male characteristics, such as assertiveness, aggression, and toughness.

Women have a double-edged sword here. They have a harder time appearing to be decisive. If a woman confidently delivers a decision, she can be seen as insensitive, aggressive, unfeminine, and unlikeable. On one hand, they can come across as overbearing. Yet without the confidence to



**INTEGRITY &
SPEAK "TRUTH TO POWER"**

decide, she risks being perceived as unsure and not viewed as executive level material.

It is important to discern when to “show one’s teeth” and chose the right time and place to insist on a course of action.

Integrity or “speaking truth to power” was rated at 64%. People look for honest leaders who have the courage to take an opposing view and share their thoughts candidly. We respect our leader when their values shine through as they call things as they see them and engage with intellectual integrity.

You’d have to be living under a rock if you haven’t realized the importance of **Emotional Intelligence**, which is the ability to gain people’s trust by reading them correctly. Rated at 61%, the most effective leaders understand people’s feelings and show compassion by reading the room and helping them move forward when they are stuck. In fact, Hewlett writes, “acting insensitively actually compromises your ability to gain buy-in from employees.”

As Jeff Bezos famously said about one’s reputation, “Your brand is what other people say about you when you’re not in the room.”



**DECISIVENESS &
"SHOWING TEETH"**



EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



REPUTATION & STANDING



VISION & CHARISMA

In today's time, everything we say and do publicly is discoverable. It is up to us to manage our brand reputation, otherwise, you allow others to fill in the gaps for you. At 56% importance, your **reputation and standing** are a key contributor to one's perceived gravitas.

Finally, the last element of gravitas, rated at 50% importance, is transmitting **vision and charisma**. An aspiring leader needs to project a vision people rally behind.

There are many ways people damage the perception of their EP and gravitas, which impacts their ability to lead. A few blunders Hewlett draws attention to are:

- Lack of integrity
- Sexual impropriety
- Flip flopping
- Inflated ego or bullying
- Shallow or light weight
- Off color or racially insensitive jokes

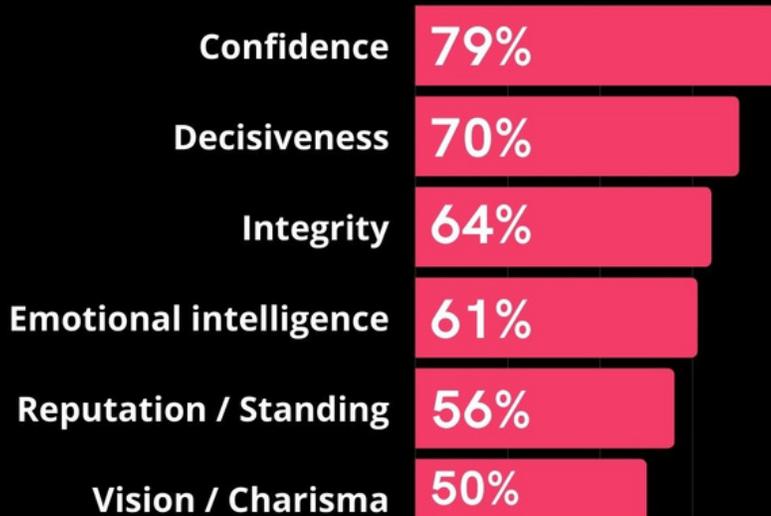
On a positive note, there are many ways to deepen your gravitas. At the top of the list is the ability to show humility. One way to broadcast humility is to surround yourself with people who are better or more skilled than you at their respective jobs. If you couple humility with generously giving others credit, then you have made a powerful step in amplifying your executive presence. While you are at it, empower others to build their own EP! Other ways of boosting your gravitas and EP are sticking to what you know, smiling more and projecting happiness, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, and driving change rather than be changed.

To secure and keep the top CxO spots, you need to have executive presence in addition to the core functional expertise and essential talent to perform the job. As Hewlett says, is it any wonder "that we're drawn to leaders who keep their promises, keep their cool, and show compassion as well as courage in making the truly hard choices?" Every year it seems we say,



EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

CRITICAL GRAVITAS FACTORS



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“these are unprecedented times” – but if history tells us anything, we should expect worldwide events to continue impacting us personally and professionally through our businesses, governments, world health, and climate.

On a final note, my experience conducting executive searches for Talence Group has given me opportunities to help our client companies build interview processes and train interviewing teams how to create effective skill-based questions. Effective questions are the key to giving candidates ways to showcase their executive presence. In my opinion, those who earn top CxO positions should strongly demonstrate they have developed the six critical aspects of gravitas.

As Hewlett writes, “If you have that depth of experience and those vital skills, gravitas is all that between you and that top job. It can’t be faked, but it can be cultivated.”

If you missed the first two articles in the series, feel free to send me a personalized connection request on LinkedIn to connect – and mention the Executive Presence series. I would be happy to share a copy with you via LinkedIn messages.

CONTRIBUTING WRITER'S PROFILE



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