

Powerful Communication for Top Leaders

Do you dream of climbing the career ladder and communicating like an outstanding leader? Then you need to inspire others using only your voice, appearance and body language. You need the x-factor known as Executive Presence.

It may sound grand, but don't worry; it's straightforward – and trainable.

"It was a big step in terms of communication – but also personally. I have to behave and look differently and think about how I want to be perceived when I enter a room".

– LENA



EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

Meet Thomas

Thomas wants to make it to the top of his company. On paper, he has all the right qualifications: strategic thinking, financial flair and deep insight into the business. And yet, Thomas has been told he lacks the finishing touches to be in the running for a top job, especially when it comes to his presentations.

What Thomas lacks is Executive Presence, the ability to use language and his body to step up to the plate as a senior leader by conveying composure, strength and energy. This magical mixture – a symphony of dynamic body language, powerful narratives, catchy messages and the gift of the gab is called Executive Presence. Two senior executives may be just as competent as each other, but while one struggles to get a message across, the other mesmerises audiences with their magnetism, a few well-chosen points and memorable delivery.

Lena learned Executive Presence

Lena Hinløv is a prime example of a manager who needed new tools for a new role. Previously a Director at Novo Nordisk, in January 2023 she was made Head of Digital, Data & IT Product Supply Production – a business unit that supports the company's production facilities.

"The old job involved communicating with about 60 employees in a narrow area. The new one involves addressing assemblies of up to 400 people at a time, both staff and external partners. Six directors report directly to me, and I often attend meetings with much older colleagues. It calls for a completely different skill set."

Lena was used to communicating top-down, telling people what to do. Now, she has to inspire others to follow a strategy while exuding energy and composure.

"I went from a very protected position to a very exposed one. It was a big step in terms of communication – but also personally. I have to behave and look differently and think about how I want to be perceived when I enter a room. I have to think about

Some of those who lack Executive Presence come to me for training. It can be on their own initiative, but usually, it is at the behest of their line manager or somebody higher up the chain. It is important to remember that the visible part of any individual's leadership power is always evaluated by other people. We are incapable of honestly assessing our impact – in person, on screen or on a stage. It is something that other people sense. And that's precisely why what you say and do in the few moments you have at your disposal is so important.

It is obvious right away when a leader lacks Executive Presence. The board and management team start to doubt the strategy; the staff don't understand what they're supposed to be doing; the spirit isn't right within the organisation, and so on. In other words, Executive Presence is a crucial component of good leadership because your mistakes and shortcomings are scrutinised just as much as your magnetism and impact.



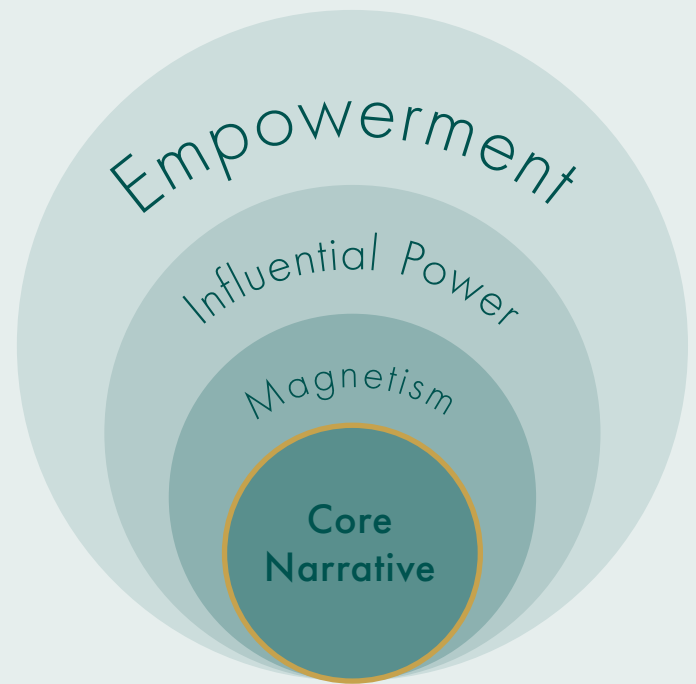
my body language, how I speak, how dark or light my voice is, how many pauses I take, and so on."

One change is that Lena has stopped delivering long monologues at meetings and settles for one sharp point delivered with precision. She has built a strong, personal narrative that mirrors the strategy but doesn't instruct people how to execute it. The teams have to figure that out for themselves. She has also treated herself to new clothes and shoes, a new hairstyle and new jewellery to make her look more serious.

"A lot of them are simple techniques. I just didn't pay attention to them before. I'm still me, still Lena, but I'm a more confident version of myself. And I can see that it works. I can see that my words are being received differently and that my teams reuse the points I make in their presentations."

The model for Executive Presence

People interpret Executive Presence in different ways. Here are the four parameters I highlight in my model.



1. Core Narrative

When you move up from operations to a senior leadership position with responsibility for strategy, you have to get used to speaking a different language – the language of power. You no longer tell people how to behave and execute a plan. You plot a course and articulate yourself in a way that fires up the parts of the organisation that implement the strategy. You must look composed at all times so there are no doubts about you or the strategy. You must be able to deliver the company or department's core narrative – the elevator pitch that sets the direction in which the business is heading – and inspire others to make that journey. You have to boil a compelling core narrative down into a couple of sentences so the whole organisation gets it.

2. Magnetism

In big companies, it can take time for a new senior leader to make their presence felt. So, first impressions are crucial. Body language and tone of voice are key markers of trust. Once you have the right tools, your hands, eyes and voice will underscore your natural, deeply personal, confidence-inspiring qualities. You will begin to communicate clearly and come across as charismatic. Practical considerations such as your clothes, hair and smile are also crucial to the first impression you make. Nor is it enough to have a forceful presence in the room – these days, you have to be just as effective in virtual meetings.

3. Influential Power

Leadership is about using your position to persuade people to do things. I call this "influential power". You exert it by alternating between hard and soft modes of communication – combining ultra-short, fact-based messages with personal anecdotes and by enhancing logical arguments with visual metaphors, examples, and stories. You appeal to both hearts and minds, which I call the 'balancing principle' and is a fundamental communication strategy for senior leaders.

4. Empowerment

You do not do the work that turns the vision into reality and implements the strategy. The management team and staff do that, and your ability to motivate them is critical to success. You must be able to give a short inspirational speech that makes people think, "Yes, we can!" You must be able to facilitate a dialogue that encourages them to buy in and gives them a sense of ownership. You also have to provide feedback and act as a strategic sounding board for the management team.

"The visible part of any individual's leadership power is always evaluated by other people".

You can and must train Executive Presence

As an executive coach, I analyse body language, language patterns, tone of voice, communication and facilitation skills and then equip people with the techniques and tools they need to take it the next level.

It takes training to make the breakthrough. If you've made it this far, you can also take the next step and learn to use the tools in the senior leaders' communication toolbox.

After that, it is just a matter of practice, practice and more practice – until you no longer even think about how you deploy your leadership power. You exude it subconsciously whenever you speak.

If you are in line for a promotion and want to train your Executive Presence, you can start with these four exercises.

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Core Narrative – set out your vision

Top leaders rarely drive home their point by drilling down into details. They rise above operational matters and present ambitious visions – where the company is heading and how to generate results.

WHAT TO DO

Develop a helicopter perspective by writing a strategy manifesto. Set out your vision and a single focus for your department/company.

What does everyone need to understand and prioritise to get there?

What should team leaders focus on when turning the vision into actions?

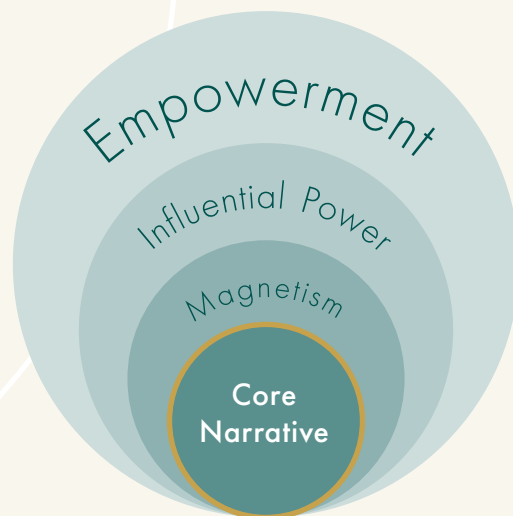
Articulate the vision and focus as 3–7-word soundbites to inspire the management team.

EXAMPLE

If the company’s strategic goal is to improve competitiveness, your vision and focus might look like this:

- Vision
“Shaping up to make us stronger.”
- Focus
“Skills enhancement makes us more competitive.”

Full stop. It’s then up to the management team to translate your words into actions.



Magnetism – command the room

A top leader's presence comprises gravitas, composure and confidence, qualities expressed via purposeful looks and impactful movements.

WHAT TO DO

Consciously use your hands to endow your movement with an air of calm and gravitas.

Imagine they are heavy, almost as if you are holding weights or moving them through a jar of honey.

Make your gestures longer and slower, but keep an approachable, welcoming look in your eyes and insert pauses into your speech.

This makes your message sound well-considered.



Influential Power – keep it brief

A top leader's messages must sound definitive, so formulating closing sentences is an important skill. The closing sentence is the last word in a discussion or a powerful way to conclude your contribution to a meeting.

It is succinct and presented as a statement of truth. Most people find making these sorts of statements quite difficult.

We are used to explaining, defending opinions and seeing things from multiple perspectives so tend to use too many words.

WHAT TO DO

When planning a closing sentence, using the rhetorical format "A results in B" is helpful. Full stop.

EXAMPLE

You are in a meeting and need to express your opinion on how to address a challenge. Devise a closing sentence that sums up your preferred solution. Using the "A results in B" format, it might sound like this:

- "Consistent standards mean efficient processes."

Repeat it out loud a few times. Get used to the idea that the closing sentence is all you need to say.



Empowerment – an inspirational speech

Imagine you have to give an ultra-short inspirational speech about a new initiative. Think of a “hook” that will grab the audience’s attention and encourage them to buy into your vision.

For example, you could share a story, a metaphor or a drawing to make them feel involved.

Your pitch must be both relevant and recognisable within the first 30 seconds.

WHAT TO DO

The easiest way to involve the audience is to describe an everyday problem and ask who recognises it, e.g. “How many of you ...?”

EXAMPLE

“How many of you have found yourself about to do something at work only to realise you’d done it before?”

How many of you have duplicated work unnecessarily?

How many of you have had an idea what to do about the problem but felt you didn’t have enough time to change the way we work?”

Once enough people are nodding in agreement, present your vision for how to put an end to the duplication.

