

# POWER TRIP

Wondering how to get that X factor that all great business leaders possess? It's time you found out about **Executive Presence** and how to channel it, says Marie Claire

TEXT RENYI LIM



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*The secret to developing presence is first to understand and appreciate how others experience you.*



When it comes to developing proper leadership skills, Executive Presence – or ‘E.P.’ for short – has very much become the new buzzword in business circles. But what is it, exactly? E.P. experts Suzanne Bates, the CEO of Bates, a global coaching and consulting firm that helps leaders influence the world, and Kelly Decker, President of Decker Communications and Head of Decker’s Program Development and Training, give us their take:

#### **Which qualities are essential for creating Executive Presence?**

**Suzanne:** People mistakenly equate executive presence with appearance and presentation skills, but after extensive research into leadership theory, we’ve defined it as a three-dimensional set of qualities that enable leaders to engage, motivate, inspire and influence. These qualities describe who we are as people (character), what we’ve learned as leaders (substance), and the way we influence action (style). Character is made up of qualities such as humility and authenticity that tend to inspire trust and goodwill; Substance – practical wisdom and vision that speak to gravitas. Style – interactivity, appearance and inclusivity that enable us to get work done through others and inspire their commitment.

**Kelly:** Lots of people talk about executive presence, but not that many people have it. There are four components to executive presence, and it’s easy to remember them, because they all start with the letter P: you must be polished and passionate, persuasive and plainspoken. On the behavioural side, Polish includes a confident display of all your behaviours and it’s where you get your credibility, while Passion is enthusiasm, that natural energy that we have that drives us everyday – show that energy, while being polished at the same

time. In terms of content, be Plainspoken by avoiding over-complicated explanations of things (be clear and direct, get to the point), and be Persuasive by taking that opportunity to move from information to influence. Drive your team, your initiative, your product forward. Give clear recommendations. Have an opinion – and share it.

#### **Can shy introverts channel E.P. too?**

**Kelly:** Some of the great leaders of the world are introverts and extroverts. We demonstrate presence through our words and actions. All of us have strengths and areas where we can grow. In our research, we found that introverts may sometimes be less inclined to speak up and share their practical wisdom, but when they do, people listen. Their area of growth is to learn to be assertive in sharing their ideas. An extrovert, on the other hand, may not come across as having humility if she is too quick to discount others’ ideas before sharing her own.

#### **Do women have to establish E.P. differently compared to men?**

**Suzanne:** Demonstrating polish and passion with confidence is incredibly hard to do – and it’s even harder to do it at the same time. This is true for men and women, alike. Fundamentally the skills are the same, and there is a broad spectrum of how we show these things. For women, specifically, we usually need to be more direct. That means, get to the point faster. Be more specific. Say it without so many qualifiers. On the behavioral side, we often need to work on showing more confidence in our stance, with our eyes and in our voice – specifically working not to end sentences on a higher pitch.





**KELLY DECKER**  
 President of Decker Communications  
 and Head of Decker's Program  
 Development and Training

**Kelly:** We haven't yet found in our research that there are necessarily differences in the way leaders are viewed by gender. This isn't to say that very often, it's 'code' in a company to talk about a woman's executive presence when you may be referring to issues that tend to get called out, such as appearance, assertiveness (too much or too little) or confidence. There are women leaders who need to find ways to express their confidence, and others who may need to learn to include others, interact with more of their peers, and take other steps to appear inclusive. So from the standpoint of measuring presence, both men and women have strengths and areas where they can develop. What is most important is to understand how you're viewed by others as an individual.

**Are there any tricky factors when it comes to developing Executive Presence?**

**Suzanne:** The secret to developing presence is first to understand and appreciate how others experience you. If you are aware that people perceive you are talking at them, rather than listening, then you can address that by asking more questions, allowing people to complete their thoughts, responding in a way that lets you know they've been heard, and appreciating their contributions. However, you can also be judged to lack presence even if you're a good listener, if people don't see you as an inspiring, visionary leader who is aligning people around a common purpose and energising them to take action. So if you're wondering how people see you, you need to ask, and of course, an assessment can be a very valuable tool.

**Kelly:** It's all too easy to sacrifice connection for content. We think if we say all the right things, it will resonate with others – but we have to connect first. As Harvard Business School researcher Amy Cuddy advocates, 'Connect, then lead.' This is how we think

of skills for executive presence: make the connection, be present, then lead by demonstrating competence, credibility and the 4 Ps. It's easy to think we need to start with leadership – confidence and credibility – but first, we have to connect. Another key part of executive presence is being fully present – we all have distractions plaguing us every day, from our clients to the chime of our inbox. One of the ways to demonstrate polish is through actively listening. It's an executive level skill that many of us don't take the time to develop, but it's so important. You need to establish that connection first.

**WALK THE TALK**

Ready to get started? Try working on your Executive Presence with Kelly Decker's training exercises.

**RECORD YOURSELF ON VIDEO**

This is the number one thing you can do to see how you really come across. It will give you a baseline knowledge of the experience other people get from you.

**CONFIDENT, ASSURED EYE COMMUNICATION**

Practice holding your gaze in a restaurant, at a sporting event, or on the subway. Instead of scanning the room or the crowd, hold your eyes in one spot. Be intentional.

**OWN THE ROOM WITH YOUR STANCE**

Stand tall, feet positioned shoulder width apart. Lean slightly forward (what we call a 'forward lean') to really demonstrate poise and confidence.

**MASTER THE PAUSE**

Be aware of your filler words – um, uh, like, so, you know, and practice replacing them with a pause. Filler words are a huge detractor for executive presence and they are the number one killer of credibility. Be confident, even when you're not.