

Executive Presence—Do You Have It?

By Dianna Booher

Executive presence may be hard to define, but most people know it when they see it. Do you have it?

If you think it may be lacking, or if you'd like to increase your credibility and confidence, consider the following tips:

Be Aware That Gestures and Mannerisms Either Support or Sabotage What You Say

Gestures and mannerisms can either convince your audience of your sincerity or antagonize them. Imagine yourself in an airport, with conversations going on all around you, and you yourself engaged in a farewell to a friend. All of a sudden, the man and woman sitting next to you begin to wave their arms dramatically, their fingers urgently punching the air. Immediately, your attention is diverted from your own conversation to this couple. Why do their words not distract you, but their gestures do? That's the power of gestures and mannerisms; often, movement speaks louder than words.

You may be completely serious, passionate, and confident about what you have to say, but your audience may perceive you as insincere because of poor eye contact, slouched posture, a bored expression, or weak gestures.

Become Conscious of What Your Body Language Says When You're in Front of a Group

Your upper-body posture is controlled primarily by what you do with your arms. Your posture and your gestures are difficult to separate. They make a total statement.

I work with many people who are completely unaware of their body language until they see themselves on video for the first time. For example, some people stand with their head intensely protruding forward as if they are about to scold the audience. Others stand in a slouched position as though they are exhausted from marching through the desert for days without rest. Others hug, pat, and squeeze themselves when they speak. Still others either stand rigid as if locked in a straightjacket or sway back and forth as if they are a shy teenager about to ask their first date to the prom.

Look at yourself in the mirror and see how it feels to stand with your arms relaxed loosely at your side or with your elbows slightly bent. It may feel awkward, but it does not look awkward. Simply stand there, looking in the mirror, and get used to the various postures that both look and feel appropriate so that you do not feel awkward with that same natural posture, gesture, or stance in front of a group.

Add Volume to Increase Authority

In our society, little girls are taught that loud voices are not feminine, whereas little boys learn no such inhibitions. As a result, women often have problems with speaking loudly enough. In today's business arena, wimpy voices get little attention. Consider the extreme. When someone shouts, everyone turns to look—regardless of what's being said. Volume gets attention.

Remember that your voice always sounds louder to you than to anyone else. Take another person's word for it when he or she says you need to speak up. Also remember that your voice is an instrument; it needs to be warmed up, or it will creak and crack at the beginning of your presentation. If you warm up with a high volume, as though projecting to those in the back row, your volume also will improve your vocal quality.

Volume adds energy to your voice; it has the power to command or lose listeners' attention.

Lower the Pitch to Increase Credibility

Pitch, the measurement of the "highness" or "lowness" of your voice, is determined largely by the amount of tension in the vocal cords. When you are under stress, you may sound high-pitched; when you are relaxed and confident, you will have a naturally lower pitch.

Authoritative vocal tones are low and calm, not high and tense. Inflection is a pitch change—from "Stop!" screeched at an assailant to the haughty "Please stop" directed at a stranger using your department's copy machine. You can lower your pitch to some degree by practicing scales (as singers do, dropping the voice with each word) and by breathing more deeply to relax your vocal cords.

Remember that a lower pitch conveys power, authority, and confidence, whereas a high pitch conveys insecurity and nervousness.

To sum up: Your personal presence may make the difference in driving home your point—past the ears to the head and heart of those you want to influence.

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*Dianna Booher works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.