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Strategies to Increase Your Executive Presence

How to develop and nurture an aura of authority as an EHS and sustainability leader



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Publisher

The National Association for environmental, health, safety and sustainability (EHS&S) Management (NAEM) empowers corporate leaders to advance environmental stewardship, create safe and healthy workplaces and promote global sustainability. As the leading business community for EHS&S decision-makers, we provide engaging forums, a curated network, peer benchmarking, research insights and tools for solving today's corporate EHS&S management challenges. Visit us online at naem.org.



About This Report

What does it take to drive organizational change within a corporate setting? How, exactly, do you earn a coveted seat at the decision-making table as an environmental, health, safety and sustainability (EHS&S) professional?

The answer, according to those who have risen to the ranks of EHS&S leadership, is "executive presence."

Succeeding in the EHS&S field takes more than technical expertise, NAEM's research has shown. To make an impact, EHS&S leaders rely on a combination of communication skills, business savvy and the ability to influence others without direct authority.

These soft set of skills, or "executive presence" create an "aura of authority" around those who actively practice these leadership habits; it is the hidden attribute that distinguishes candidates for succession, as well as the secret to embedding EHS&S principles into the culture of an organization.

If you're looking to unlock your professional potential, this report was designed for you. Inside, you'll find insights from experts, practical advice from accomplished EHS&S leaders and actionable strategies you can put in place to strengthen your leadership acumen.

In a time when companies are actively transforming their operations to realize the opportunities of sustainability, it's never been more important for EHS&S leaders to be equipped to lead that change.

We hope this report offers you fresh ideas you can use to fuel your own career journey.

Acknowledgements

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Why Executive Presence is a Key Component of EHS&S Leadership Success



When executives at companies like Danone North America gather to discuss EHS&S succession planning, they consider more than just the potential leader's qualifications, experience and performance.

It's ultimately the candidate's executive presence that has the power to make or break a promotion, according to Paul Robbertz, Senior Director of Environmental Health and Safety.

"Executive presence isn't about pounding your fist and raising your voice to get people's attention; it's about being calm, concise, and positive so folks understand what you want to do...whether that audience is other executives, folks on the shop floor, your peers, or people in the local community," he said.

According to those who have committed their time to developing these skills, executive presence requires a focus on personal mannerisms, routine behaviors, communication skills and mental attitude.

"Although we don't use an exact definition, everyone in the room seems to agree when someone has, or needs to work on, executive presence," explained Megan Lum, Director of Environmental Management for Gas and Electric Transmissions at Pacific Gas and Electric Co.

In her words, people with executive presence "come into a room with an aura of confidence, knowing they can guide the conversation, take charge of the situation, and make a decision if needed."

Because so much of an EHS professional's role involves influencing others, executive presence is a key skill aspiring leaders need to master, as well as a career catalyst for those who seek new opportunities.

What is executive presence?

What exact behaviors, attitudes, and actions add up to executive presence? The seminal research on the topic was published in 2013 by the New York City-based Center for Talent Innovation (CTI).

Based on a survey of nearly 4,000 professionals in large corporations, CTI determined that executive presence accounts for 26% of a promotion-related decision. Drilling down further, CTI identified three core components of executive presence—also known as the “aura of authority” that sets effective leaders apart:

Gravitas

Cited by two of every three executives (67%) surveyed by CTI, this component encompasses behaviors such as exhibiting grace under pressure, acting decisively, showing integrity, projecting vision, and demonstrating emotional intelligence.

Communication

In addition to excellent public speaking skills, this component includes the abilities to read an audience and command a room.

Appearance

According to CTI’s research, good grooming contributes significantly to looking like a leader. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of survey respondents said unkempt attire detracts from a person’s executive presence.



“At first executive presence may seem somewhat superficial, such as having good posture and meaning business when you speak,” said Amy Tez of Radical Collective, who is a London-based executive coach. “In truth it’s more akin to an emotional strength, one that enables you to withstand the self-doubt that comes whenever you have to present something or convince someone. No matter how straight you stand, executive presence isn’t believable unless you have that strength in the moment.”

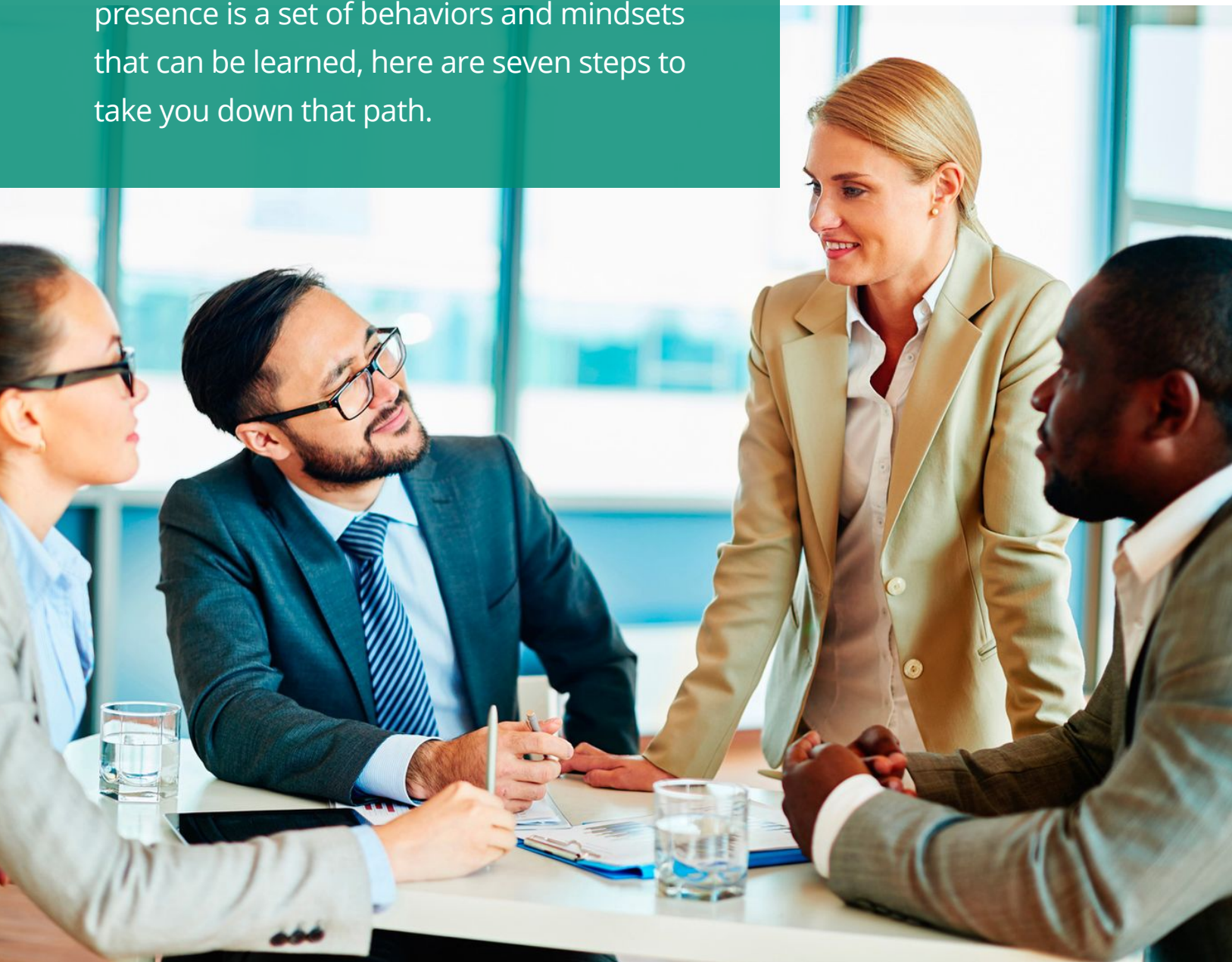
That inner strength comes from a self-confidence that no one is born with but can develop, added Tez. When coaching executives who wish to have a greater impact in their workplaces, for example, she often begins by asking questions that encourage the executives to know themselves better: What are your strengths? What current weaknesses would you like to improve upon? What are you capable of doing? Where in the workplace can you add value?

“To have other people take you seriously,” Tez emphasized, “you have to add your own self-belief that your voice matters.”



Strategies to Increase Your Executive Presence

Operating on the assumption that executive presence is a set of behaviors and mindsets that can be learned, here are seven steps to take you down that path.



Rock-solid technical skills and stellar on-the-job performance will get you noticed in the workplace, but you'll need that something extra—executive presence—for your name to come up in conversations about potential leaders and possible promotions. Here are several tips to cultivate it.



Understand your organization

Tim Murphy, Vice President of Environmental Performance for Walker Industries, said a good share of self-confidence comes from knowing a lot about your company and the people who lead it. He advocated reading the annual report and the sustainability report, reviewing financials, and staying up to date with the trade press to know what trends and topics are influencing corporate decisions and directions.

"It's easy for us in the EHS world to get siloed and not have perspective, which can leave us wondering why we can't get the resources to support our plan," observed Murphy. "A broader and better understanding of the company's interests and the issues it's dealing with will give you valuable context and enable you to go forward with a more thoughtful and focused executive presence."



Learn from role models

Who comes to mind as exhibiting executive presence? It might be a colleague, a supervisor, a mentor or coach, a public speaker, a politician, a celebrity, or even a YouTube personality who demonstrates that coveted calmness and confidence. Become a student of how those role models dress, hold themselves, present information, handle questions, and react to challenges—not so you can become a cookie-cutter version of them, but as a means of motivation and inspiration.



Develop a brand statement

If you're just getting started, a good first step is to articulate your personal brand. Think about who you are, what you want to achieve, and what you'd like people to say about you as a leader if you weren't in the room, such as being trustworthy, dependable, inspiring, thorough, empathetic, passionate, purposeful, poised and well-spoken. "Putting your brand statement in writing helps you visualize it, live it, and breathe it," observed Janet Evans, Manager of Process Safety at CF Industries. "That way, whether you're talking to leadership or front-line personnel, everyone will have a consistent experience with you."

"Who you are, the way you work, and the quality of your executive presence all make up your brand. Just make sure your brand is natural and genuine and that you're not managing it to be or do something you're not," advised Paul Robbertz. As an example, he said telling jokes when making a presentation doesn't come naturally to him; to remain true to his personal brand, he prefers telling stories.

Tips for Writing a Personal Brand Statement

A personal brand statement is a 1-2 sentence description that answers three core questions:

1. What value you provide (What problem do you solve?)
2. How you do it uniquely (What is your unique value proposition?)
3. For whom you provide value (Who is your target audience?)

Source: www.theundercoverrecruiter.com



Obtain honest feedback

For starters, said Paul Robbertz, you need to be brutally honest about your own performance and presentation style. “Do a critical analysis and decide what you should do differently or how to prepare differently,” he advised. A sincere self-assessment can help you identify nervous tics or bad habits to address through self-coaching or personal development initiatives.

More important is learning the impression you make on other people and how they perceive your executive presence. This is best done by finding an executive coach, consultant, or even a colleague who won’t mince words about how you dress, act, speak, present information, communicate verbally and nonverbally, and interact with others.

Tez, for example, often draws on her two decades of experience in professional theatre to act out real-life scenarios with her coaching clients. She shares her observations on how clients might be sabotaging their executive presence and suggests alternative behaviors. The role-play is then repeated, providing the clients an opportunity to put Tez’s recommendations into practice.

“If someone is always interrupting or not giving anybody else the opportunity to ask questions, for example, maybe no one has ever told that person of how intrusive or annoying the behavior can be,” she said. Tez counsels such clients to slow down their interactions, consider how other people feel when they’re cut out of a conversation, and listen more attentively.

“Some people keep speaking because they feel a bit vulnerable at the moment and don’t want anyone to know that. Then they discover that listening makes them appear stronger,” Tez reported.

Getting to Know Yourself: An Executive Presence Self-Assessment

Brenda Bence, an executive coach and author (www.brendabence.com), developed this self-assessment to help identify the key facets of executive presence; it should be taken with a healthy dose of honesty and scored on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 representing the lowest rating and 6 the highest.

Rating	Attributes of Executive Presence
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I have a strong positive influence on my family, team, co-workers, colleagues, and superiors. 2. I manage my emotional reactions well at home and in the workplace, and I stay calm under pressure. 3. When I need to let someone know I'm unhappy with a situation, I speak to them calmly and assertively. I don't express my feelings in a passive-aggressive way. 4. I am resilient when pressure builds at home or on the job. 5. I speak up in very important meetings and when in the presence of more senior leaders. 6. When I am attending a gathering or a meeting, I am able to focus 100 percent on the topic at hand, without distracting thoughts or checking my phone for messages. 7. Based on the way others relate to me, I believe I exhibit charisma both at home and on the job. 8. I have inner self-confidence, and I believe in myself. 9. When team members and others push back on my decisions, I manage the situation in a professional, balanced way so that the best choice is made without harming workplace relationships. 10. I'm capable of thinking on my feet when under pressure. 11. When conflict arises, I manage it steadily, without damaging personal or professional relationships. 12. I am aware of and effectively manage my personal brand, not just within my organization but also externally within my industry. 13. I know how to maneuver office politics, as necessary. 14. When I'm called upon to make a presentation, I do so powerfully, engaging my audience from beginning to end. 15. I use storytelling as a means of engaging others when I communicate. <p>After reviewing your scores, identify your current strengths (rankings of 5 or 6) and a specific aspect that you'd like to improve (rankings of 3 or lower). Bence recommended working with a mentor or coach to craft a plan that addresses that specific aspect of Executive Presence.</p>

Max Rutz, Managing Director, Safety Strategy and Optimization for Delta Global Services said he received useful and honest feedback from an executive coach when he first moved into a corporate leadership position several years ago.

“It can be rewarding to hear how someone sees you in ways that you didn’t expect—but also a little soul-crushing to hear perceptions and observations about behaviors you had no idea you were doing,” he recalled. “The key is to accept that feedback and take action on it. That’s the only way to get to the place where people trust you and you have that thing called executive presence.”

Rutz also recommended requesting a 360-degree assessment. This typically entails a consultant or coach sending a questionnaire to a cross-section of the people with whom you frequently interact—colleagues, direct reports, and higher-level leaders—and conducting in-person interviews to gather their impressions of you as a potential leader.

Years later, Rutz said, he still remembers several anonymous comments from his assessment and uses them as motivation to continue enhancing his executive presence.



Communicate the part

“Executive presence starts with the look, but once you start talking it’s all about your speaking voice and what you’re saying,” Rutz said. “People with executive presence don’t tell everyone what to do, but make a point of listening and respecting others’ opinions and time. They tailor their messages for their audiences.” You might, for example, look for patterns in the types of questions certain people ask so you can prepare answers for them in advance.

Good communication extends beyond in-person conversations, observed Rutz, who works from a home office and frequently interacts with colleagues via email and phone. “Effective leaders quickly respond to emails and say thank you. Even when there’s a huge volume of emails or calls, they find a way to make all the people they work with feel listened to and cared about,” he said.

On the Path to Leadership, Preparation Paves the Way

Amy Stelling didn't set out to become a CEO. Like many software coders, her lifelong passion for using software to solve business challenges started with early experiments on a Tandy 1000. Over the course of the last two decades, though, she has distinguished herself in a competitive field thanks to her meticulous preparation, business insights and humble leadership style.

Today, she leads the team at Enviance, a role that both challenges her to bring her best self to work each day, while also offering new opportunities to grow. We spoke with her to learn more about the professional habits she credits with her success and the advice she offers to those who aspire to follow in her footsteps.



What is it about your career field that you love so much?

In my early days, I spent a lot of my time developing software and working with code, which continues to fascinate me. But when I got into consulting after college, I discovered that I love working at the enterprise-level to figure out how software can be an effective tool for addressing process issues or solving complex organizational problems.

Where do you have a single point of failure? Where do you have something that's not easily repeatable and takes immense amounts of time? Where do you have a problem scaling? It's these types of challenges that I really like to tackle.



What are some of the strategies or professional habits that you think make you effective in your role?

Many jobs ago, I once asked a peer, "Why do you think I got this job?" And he said, "Because you really dig in to learn the business, identify what things can be fixed and put a plan in place to fix them." So one of the things I stress to those I mentor is to show more than just tell. Get in and find out what the problems are.

At the end of the day, we're running a business. We need to understand what the problems are in the business, whether it's employee turnover, customer turnover, brand awareness or product performance. You have to dig in, know what the problems are, clearly articulate them, and then build a plan to act on that knowledge.

The second strategy I rely on is preparation. Whether it's a speech or a meeting with the board of directors, it's important to rehearse the interaction, know what could come up, anticipate the reaction and know how you'll respond to questions before you even walk in the door. I try not to get surprised in a meeting, so it is not uncommon for me to speak one-on-one with key contributors and decision-makers prior to a big meeting.



What were some of the skills you invested in as you transitioned to being business leader?

Communication skills is one that stands out. And it is a skill. I have really worked hard to be conscious of what I am saying as well as how I frame it.

I remember one class in college where we had to write a paper on a negative topic without using words such as "unfortunately," "however" and "can't." The exercise was a real eye-opener for me in that it showed me how you could craft your message to be positive even in a negative situation. I still use that lesson every day.

As the leader, you have to motivate your team to help them do things well, but you also have to be that coach who understands where they need to improve and how to do that is always a balance. Communication skills is the place where that lands.

The other part of communicating well, of course, is listening well. One of the best mentors I've ever had did this whenever we were approaching a new client project. At the outset of the initial meeting, he would say, "We're not coming in with a presentation; we're going to ask a lot of questions and take a lot of notes."

Showing up at a newly acquired site or a newly acquired company is a perfect example of that. Don't come in and say you know exactly what you will do when you show up. Take the time to listen to the employees. A lot of questions and unique characteristics of the company culture will come out in that conversation. You can ask questions that stir that conversation, but a lot of times, people have the answers in their mind. They want somebody to listen to them, understand their perspective and come back with a plan for how to smoothly integrate the two teams.



Why do you think executive presence is an important focus for EHS leaders?

I think it's such an important time to be an EHS professional. These issues are now high on the radar at the C-suite level because investors are asking questions about EHS performance in the same way they do financial performance. Understanding how to communicate EHS performance to executives in material financial terms and risks is critical to your executive presence, and that begins with listening. Take note of how your executives discuss EHS and use that as a guide to better frame the conversation.

My advice to those EHS leaders we work with day in and day out is to share your impact. Don't be quiet about your vital contributions to your company's success. So often in the past, EHS was thought of as "just compliance," but today's EHS leaders need to step outside of their function to educate others on why their work is so important to the business.

In order to communicate EHS performance, you need facts. Just like your financial counterparts, data is the key to communicating to executives. How will you communicate EHS performance metrics if you're not measuring and setting goals across all levels of the organization? How will you accomplish that if EHS isn't integrated into the operational ecosystem? Now is the perfect time for EHS leaders to take a proactive step in communicating the outcomes of their work to the C-suite.

One sure-fire way to boost your executive presence is to go easy on the technical talk whenever you're communicating with someone from outside of your function. Because EHS is a technical field, the natural inclination is to delve into a project's or proposal's nitty-gritty details and supporting data—but not every audience has a corresponding interest or need.

According to Megan Lum, some EHS&S professionals believe their work is so important that they need an hour to explain every detail.

"They need to get out of that mindset," she emphasized, "and, the next time they meet with a senior director or vice president, remember that person doesn't have a lot of time to talk." Lum's usual advice: Stick to two PowerPoint slides with no more than five bullet points on each one.

"Other people need information explained in laymen's terms, so you need to get rid of the tech jargon and turn your explanations into simple metaphors or analogies," Amy Tez recommended. Another option is to tell a story that helps the audience make an emotional connection to the information presented. "Rather than just information-dumping, be inspiring and move listeners into feeling something," she added.



Dress the part

Like it or not, the old adage remains true: Dress for the job you want, not the one you have. Depending on a company's culture, that may mean donning a tailored suit or separates every morning or remaining careful to stay on the "business" side of business casual.

"Even in a casual environment, you want to elevate your wardrobe a bit because appearance is always going to be a factor in how people perceive you," noted Janet Evans.

You don't need to hire a stylist to have executive presence, but managing your appearance with the same care you give to your other work performance reflects on your personal brand. Getting a good haircut, being well-groomed, and wearing occasion-appropriate and well-fitting clothes will help others stay focused on what you're saying and suggesting rather than becoming distracted by your appearance.

If you're not sure how you're doing in this area, ask for feedback from someone you trust, or hire a consultant to give you an objective assessment. Another shortcut to making sure your attire conforms to your ambitions is to simply emulate your boss. If you one day aspire to his or her job, you can start on that path by looking the part today.



Putting Executive Presence into Action

Megan Lum, an EHS Director at PG&E, remembered one direct report with all the technical and managerial skills needed to step into a bigger role with the company. But one piece was missing.

“The big ding on this person—we’ll call him Michael—was that he didn’t have the executive presence. People just couldn’t see him as a director,” she recalled. Most of the comments related to Michael’s seeming discomfort when interacting with PG&E leaders; his voice, body language, and presentation style did not convey confidence.

After sharing the feedback with Michael, Lum contacted PG&E’s development group to obtain recommendations for an executive coach. The executive coach conducted a 360-degree assessment of Michael’s performance, integrated the feedback into an individualized development plan, and advised Michael for about eight months. In this case, the plan emphasized improving communication skills—primarily becoming more cognizant of what a particular audience wants—and gaining more visibility within the company.

“Michael gained confidence alone by us acknowledging he had a lot of potential, wanting him to get to another level, and investing in a coach to help him,” Lum noted. “And, given opportunities, Michael got more comfortable talking to people higher up in the organization.”

On her end, Lum appreciated that her direct report was not only was open to receiving feedback on his executive presence, but also embraced the support offered. Michael earned a promotion to interim director, which Lum counted as a success for him as well as the company.

“Retention is key for us,” she said, “and by making investments in people, we hope they’ll choose to stay.”





Practice

Developing executive presence isn't a one-time exercise. As Rutz said, "It's not as if you go to a coaching session and suddenly everything you needed to address is fixed. It's a process of internalizing the feedback and continuing to work on certain areas." The best places to do that work are on the teams or in the rooms where you can influence others in your company and drive change. While managers often initiate such development opportunities, the confidence inherent in executive presence should run in both directions.

As a vice president, Tim Murphy appreciates EHS professionals asking for opportunities to get involved in a corporate initiative, serve on a task force, or take on a special project that may be languishing because of a lack of resources or time. Participating in or leading such activities can set you apart from other employees and boost your executive presence and visibility within the organization. In return, Murphy asks for honesty about why the opportunity is being requested and a genuine interest in the issue being addressed.

"Many of us shoot ourselves in the foot by racing to put up our hands and demonstrate we want to make a mark in an area that's a bit beyond our comfort zone," said Murphy. "That's fine as long as we work through it. But if we freeze and fall short of the executive objective, or look for someone else to step in, we're not doing our executive presence any favors."

Even when other people say you've achieved a very good or excellent executive presence, you can't rest on your laurels, said Megan Lum. Every time she enters a room, often as the most senior person present, she consciously models the behaviors associated with executive presence and refrains from offering opinions or recommendations until she has listened to what others are saying.

Lum also relies on a personal board of directors to periodically provide objective feedback on her performance. Like a corporate board of directors, Lum's informal board includes members from different backgrounds and with varying perspectives; some are former co-workers, while others are entirely outside Lum's professional sphere.

Six Practical Tips for Increasing Your Executive Presence

Would you like people to listen more attentively or take your ideas more seriously? Small behavioral changes can have a surprisingly big impact on your executive presence, noted Amy Tez, a communications trainer and executive coach (www.amytez.com).

She suggested following these steps whenever you're called upon to present your opinions, observations, or recommendations to others in the workplace:

- 1. Stand up straight.** "Even if you're not walking onto a real stage, you're entering the business stage—so make it a leading role," Tez emphasized. That means pulling your shoulders back, looking up, and not slipping into a slouch.
- 2. Take several deep breaths.** Exhale slowly after each breath, letting go of any nerves or anxieties in the process. Taking a deep breath but not expelling it places more strain on your nervous system and triggers your body's fight-or-flight response.
- 3. Smile and make eye contact.** Look at the other people in the room as equals, even if they hold more senior positions. "Remembering that everyone else in the room is human levels the playing field," Tez noted.
- 4. Pause before beginning your remarks.** Take a few seconds—or even a half-minute—to collect your thoughts. "One of the biggest mistakes people make is rushing into their remarks without giving themselves time and space to think," observed Tez. "The audience can wait while you compose yourself."
- 5. Slow down.** Nerves or high anxiety typically prompt people to race through information they're presenting, which can leave the audience baffled and confused. To defuse internal tension, make a conscious effort to speak slowly and continue breathing.
- 6. Keep hands loose at your sides.** Tez often works with executives who clench their hands behind their backs or keep their hands stuffed into their pockets. Her advice to them: literally shake off such mannerisms. "Letting go of your hands helps you relax and gives you more freedom to express yourself. That physical release could add some dynamism into your voice and help you project more confidence—because you're not standing there like a robot but becoming much more yourself," Tez said.

"It really served me well a couple years ago when a board member pointed out that I had been focusing on one project so much that I hadn't been thinking about the care and feeding of the broader team," Lum recalled. "That couldn't have been an easy conversation to have with me, but it was a really good learning experience for me.

"Executive presence is about being confident and self-assured, but you can't be arrogant. Transparency and humility are so important," she concluded. "Especially in a time of crisis, you can't be afraid to say you don't know the answers to some of the questions."



Learn more at [NAEM.org](https://naem.org)



Planning for a Sustainable Future

NAEM's 2018 trends report identifies the initiatives and emerging ideas that are shaping the EHS&S agendas of companies today. The report provides a behind-the-scenes look at the latest ideas companies are putting into practice to advance their EHS&S programs.



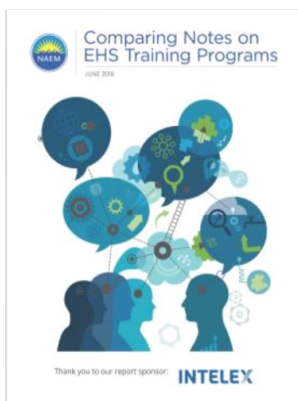
Why Companies Replace Their EHS&S Software Systems

Adopting an EHS&S software system is a significant investment that takes months of planning, implementation and training. So why do companies return to the market for a new one? This report details why software customers replace their systems and what they have learned that can help you avoid a costly replacement.



The EHS&S Tech Transformation

At companies of all sizes, across every industry sector, the internet of things (IOT) is revolutionizing how the environment, health, safety and sustainability (EHS&S) function collects data, designs programs and manages the impact of operations in real time. This report provides a roadmap of the key technologies that are influencing change.



Comparing Notes on EHS Training Programs

What are the strategies your peers are using to engage employees and build EHS culture? What training methods are the most effective? And how do you measure whether your training is working? Download the report today to find out how your programs stack up.