

Executive Insight >> Thought Leaders

Coaching For Executive Presence

The call came in at 8:15 a.m. on a Monday morning. I thought it strange; there must be some urgency here. “Dominick, would you be able to get down here in the next day or so to talk to one of our sales people? Chris has a fine sales record and is up for promotion to sales manager but most of senior management is hesitant about his ability to lead. He has been through most of our leadership courses and he knows the concepts, but he just doesn’t seem to “take charge”. It’s difficult to imagine putting him in command of a major corporate initiative or even have him be our lead representative at a trade show. When we were preparing our annual reviews on Friday, it dawned on us that we need to do something here. Actually, are you available for later this afternoon?” It sounded like Chris was another case of a person having leadership knowledge, but missing another key element—executive presence.

Chris’ organization, like many others, places a high priority on developing the leadership skills of their managers. His company spends considerable time and money on leadership workshops and programs. These programs are generally focused on developing single, concrete skills such as conflict resolution, decision making, or performance management. However, there is another side of leadership that is seldom, if ever, addressed in these programs. That critical aspect focuses on the “soft” skills and behaviors that convey leadership. Perceptions regarding an individual’s soft skills derive from how an individual appears, including grooming, dress, posture; how the person sounds—voice projection, accent, energy level; and the substance of the person’s words and ideas. This side of leadership—the *look, sound and content*-- is called “executive presence”. In the past, the themes of “dress for success”, “killer presentations” and “20/20 vision” were used to address some aspects of executive presence. Today, executive presence is being considered in a holistic, strategic sense and viewed as an important component of leadership.

Once again, I was reminded that the field of executive coaching is shifting. Coaching had originated a number of years back as an intervention for people who were in trouble or had some problem behavior. More recently, it evolved into a development tool for high potentials or integrating new hires and even for helping leaders cope during organizational transitions such as new business start-ups, mergers and acquisitions. But increasingly, organizations are using one-on-one coaching to enhance executive presence. Coaching is ideally suited for this assignment because the development of

executive presence requires 1) very specific tailoring to the individual's needs, 2) privacy in confronting some of the more personal issues and 3) longer timeframes (6-12 months) to make the new behaviors stick.

So how does one establish the coaching relationship for developing executive presence? Basically, the same way as any other coaching assignment, using the following five steps: 1) contracting, 2) assessment 3) planning, 4) implementation, and 5) integration. However, the emphasis throughout the process is on the *look, sound and content* of the individual, as they operate within and outside the organization.

1. **Contracting** - usually, the coach needs to gain agreement on the goals of the engagement from the individual, the boss, and H.R. To determine Chris' executive presence goals, the senior managers were asked to identify a look, sound and content representing a generalized norm for their organization. This same group agreed to meet periodically both to refine the behavioral goals and measure Chris' progress.
2. **Assessment** - the coach gains a thorough understanding of the individual through interviews and instrumentation, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. However, a focus on executive presence means that the most critical information will come from the subjective interview information, usually involving a 360^o feedback process.

The coach gathers insight into the individual's look, sound and content from peers, subordinates, managers and sometimes clients, and then uses this information to set a base line that can be used to assess progress. Chris chose 10 people who gave very explicit behavioral examples of his executive presence.

Those in positions senior to Chris described him as reserved and fairly quiet in meetings, hesitant to speak up but having very insightful ideas when he finally contributed. They described him as speaking in a soft tone and a bit physically 'pulled back' (rounded shoulders, little eye contact). Interestingly, based on interviews with Chris' boss and peers, these behaviors did not seem evident in other situations where senior managers were not present. Chris acknowledged that he was somewhat intimidated by senior management. He was much younger than most of them and felt that he was not as well educated or as articulate.

3. **Planning** - Chris and I used the assessment information to create a disciplined "project plan" with goals, milestones and timeframes. This planning was critical for a successful engagement. We exchanged expectations for how we would work together, how hard Chris was willing to work on these issues, how open he was to feedback and how hard I could push him to change. This plan formed the core of our relationship over the life of the contract.

4. **Implementation** - implementation involves anticipation, preparation, experimentation, reflection, and iteration. This phase is the heart of the coaching process.

During implementation, Chris and I anticipated upcoming meetings with senior managers where his new behaviors could be practiced and reinforced. We agreed to experiment with and practice options and alternatives to find the most suitable approaches.

We met every three weeks for a three-hour session and critiqued the effectiveness of his behaviors since our last meeting. I also asked Chris how comfortable he was with his new behaviors and whether he had received any comments from others during or after the meeting(s). Then we repeated the process of anticipating upcoming meetings and planning his approach.

Throughout implementation, Chris learned I could be empathetic to his difficulties in meetings, yet tough enough to keep him in front of a camera as he role-played to prepare for situations requiring his executive presence.

5. **Integration** - eventually, new behaviors begin to become automatic as the client internalizes the implementation steps. Over time, Chris was able to consciously anticipate, prepare and reflect on his own; therefore, my role diminished. This internalization is the sign of a successful coaching intervention! In Chris' case, the development of executive presence led to a managerial promotion six months into the coaching process. Chris is now Regional Sales Manager with a stellar performance.

Although executive coaching has many valid uses, its application to executive presence seems particularly appropriate. Coaching is the one delivery method that provides the required trust and collaborative working alliance where clients can feel safe addressing areas—their look, sound and content--that they usually do not feel comfortable exploring in a business environment.



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