

The New Rules of Executive Presence

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Summary. Over the past decade, as a result of the pandemic, political and economic instability, social movements such as Black Lives Matter, and changing workplace technologies, what people expect from leaders has changed. Executive presence (EP) is typically perceived... [more](#)

Aspiring leaders have long been told that to be considered for senior management roles, especially those in the C-suite, they must demonstrate “executive presence” (EP). In most corporate settings, that has traditionally boiled down to three attributes:

gravitas, strong communication skills, and the “right” appearance. But what exactly constitutes EP now? After a decade marked by tumultuous economic, cultural, and technological change (think climate threats; the Covid-19 pandemic; war in Europe and the Middle East; the #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and LGBTQ+ rights movements; worsening political divides; and the rise of Zoom, Instagram, and other online platforms), how have expectations about ideal leadership traits changed?



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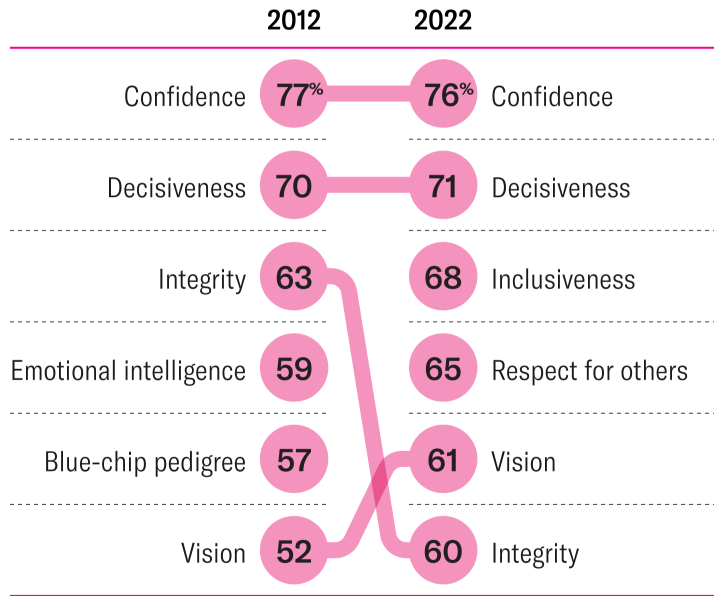
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Surveys I conducted in 2012 and in 2022 tell a story of significant shifts embedded within continuity. The 2012 survey targeted 268 U.S. business executives at the director level or above in various industries; the 2022 survey targeted 73. Both groups were asked to rank the importance of 25 leadership traits.

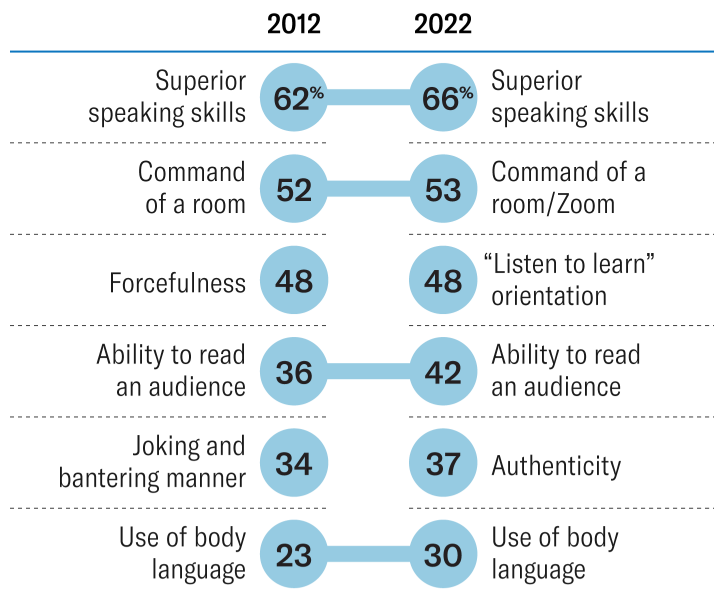
Redefining Executive Presence

Business leaders today, like their counterparts a decade ago, view EP as a combination of gravitas, communication skills, and appearance. However, there have been some striking changes in the specific traits in each category that survey respondents consider most important.

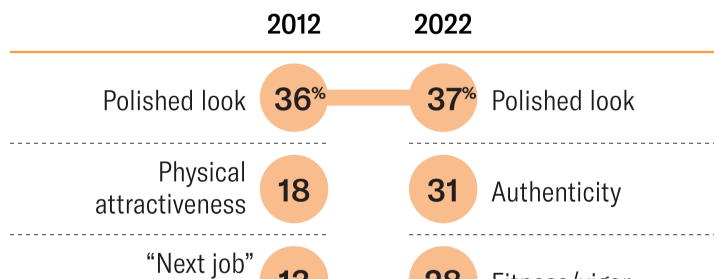
Gravitas Traits

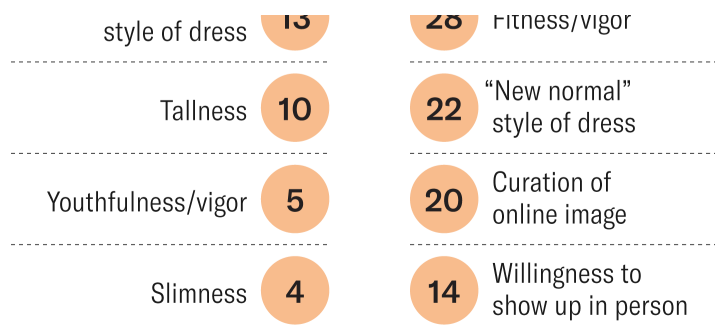


Communication Traits



Appearance Traits





Note: Survey participants—268 high-level U.S. executives in 2012 and 73 in 2022—were asked to select the six most important leadership traits from a list of 25.

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Confidence and decisiveness have not gone out of style; those are still the most-sought-after traits contributing to gravitas, which accounts for the lion's share of EP. However, inclusiveness, in all its manifestations—respecting others, listening to learn, telegraphing authenticity—has shot onto the list of the most-valued components of all three dimensions of EP. That change reflects the new weight of diversity, equity, and inclusion in business strategy.

The old ideal—shaped and embodied by white male CEOs who ruled the U.S. and European corporate worlds through the beginning of this century—has long been eroding. In sharing my latest research findings here, I aim to shed light on what the preferred leadership model looks like today. Women and people of color no longer have to fit into a mold not fashioned for them. But they must still cultivate a confident, decisive, polished, and commanding persona without running afoul of biased social norms that punish them for overstepping. Meanwhile, executives who neatly match the old profile can't rest on their laurels, assuming that the EP that once afforded them power will continue to do so. They must stretch themselves in new ways to meet evolving expectations for leaders to be "real"—online as well as in person—while simultaneously ensuring that team members feel seen, heard, and valued.

What follows is a guide to the new rules of executive presence—a look at the traits that increasingly matter, some ways to cultivate them, and a dozen people who currently exemplify them.

Gravitas

Trait: Inclusiveness. To be inclusive, you must not only hire people with diverse backgrounds and give everyone a fair shot at climbing the ladder. You must also ensure that all your employees feel appreciated and supported. In doing so, you will uncover value for individuals, your team, and your organization.

Tactic: Deliver informed empathy. When MGM Resorts International started to reopen its hotels and casinos in the winter of 2020–2021, CEO Bill Hornbuckle wanted to raise the morale of employees as they struggled to recover from the tragedies and disruptions of Covid-19. Hornbuckle had started his career as a room-service waiter at the Jockey Club, so he understood the demands on his people. He knew that MGM could improve their work experience while also setting itself up as an employer of choice as the hospitality sector ramped up and the labor market tightened. After much fact-finding and many focus groups, he and his team rolled out what they called a “culture of yes.” It was all about empowering employees to say yes to guests and authorizing managers to say yes to employees—whether they were seeking three-day workweeks, short shifts, or the ability to move from hourly work to the management track. “We’re giving them what they told us they most want—the ability to deliver excellence on the job and improve their own prospects,” Hornbuckle explained to me. “Employees now see us leaders as having more understanding and empathy.”

Tactic: Volunteer a “value add.” Back when he was an assistant vice president at Merrill Lynch, Todd Sears approached his mentor, managing director Subha Barry, with a business idea that focused on better serving the LGBTQ+ community. As an openly gay man, Sears knew that most wealth-management firms catered to straight people and had very few products or services tailored to

the needs of people like him. For example, since same-sex couples are much less likely than heterosexual couples to have children in their households (15% compared with 38%, according to U.S. Census Bureau data), they tend to be more interested in targeted philanthropy than in college-tuition savings accounts. Furthermore, Sears's activism on behalf of LGBTQ+ rights had made him a well-known figure in the gay community, and he was able to bring in partners eager to work with Merrill on this venture. Barry, who had none of those connections, was excited about tapping into a new market and making Merrill more inclusive. Over several years she and Sears built a team that managed more than \$2 billion in assets invested by LGBTQ+ clients.

Trait: Respect for Others. Being a respectful leader requires much more than treating everyone with dignity. It involves acquiring a body of knowledge that allows you to understand the lived experiences of those whose identity or heritage is different from your own. Consult experts, dig down into the research, and add people with diverse perspectives to your team. If you go beyond empathy and compassion, you may gain valuable insights that can strengthen your business.

Tactic: Hire and utilize diverse talent. Laura Garza, the chief people officer at Dyson, sees respect for others as vital to her company's success. The technology firm, known for its vacuums and other appliances, has made a point of hiring people who hail from different countries and have varied backgrounds. "There's a recognition here that global and diverse talent generates disruptive innovation," Garza told me. "I'm Mexican and I'm gay," she added. "That puts me in a position to 'get' the complexity of the global marketplace." She is not alone: These days half the members of Dyson's executive leadership team are women, 60% grew up outside Britain (where the company started), and all agree that having a multinational, multiethnic workforce has spurred the development of some extremely successful products.

Take hair dryers. In China and Japan, women typically wash their hair at night and use hair-care rituals to “wind down.” They’re looking for serenity. In sharp contrast, most British and American women wash their hair in the morning, when they’re racing to get to work or drop the kids off at school. They’re looking for speed. Dyson’s Supersonic hair dryer was developed to serve both customer segments. It has become a bestseller in Asia because it’s quiet and safe, with no blades or brushes, and in Europe and the United States because it’s the lightest and fastest dryer on the market. This smash success has contributed significantly to growth at Dyson: Company revenue surged exponentially in the first half of 2023.



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Tactic: Look beyond the pedigree. As the CEO of IBM from 2012 to 2020, Ginni Rometty committed to a suite of policies and practices designed to give a leg up to young people from less-advantaged backgrounds, helping them finish high school, earn two-year associate degrees in a STEM field, and find well-paid jobs at IBM and elsewhere. Part of the inspiration for developing

these “new-collar” workers was Rometty’s mom, who with four children and no education past high school had to figure out how to earn a living when her husband, Rometty’s dad, abandoned their family. It was tough going. “She wasn’t dumb; she just didn’t have access,” Rometty says. “And that has forever stayed in my mind.” Her efforts at IBM paid off. In 2020 new-collar workers constituted 15% of the company’s U.S. hires. They’ve helped IBM weather labor shortages and successfully transition to new technologies. This tranche of talent has also proved to be more loyal and more eager to stay at the company than recruits from elite four-year schools.

Communication

Trait: Command of Zoom. Covid-19 sped up the shift to virtual communication, and many of the executives I interviewed in 2022 told me that they struggled to master the art of leading on Zoom, Teams, Slack, and other online platforms. But doing so is key to EP today.

Tactic: Ace the visuals. The late Apple cofounder and CEO Steve Jobs had legendary command of what he called “the visuals.” This was the not-so-secret sauce that allowed him to inspire his engineers and stir the souls of millions of new tech users, whether he showed up in person or via video. He accomplished this by eliminating the superfluous: His speaking style was crisp, clear, and concise; he used blank backdrops; and he wore minimalist outfits that signaled edgy elegance but weren’t distracting. Most importantly, he dispensed with notes, lecterns, teleprompters, and PowerPoints, focusing instead on eye contact. Whether face-to-face or on camera, Jobs always looked directly into a person’s eyes. His visuals carried particular weight because they were grounded in the clean aesthetics and Zen values that were fundamental to who he was and what his company stood for.

Tactic: Proactively manage virtual meetings. As the chief financial officer of Reginn, an Icelandic real estate firm with clients around the world, Rosa Gudmundsdottir has become a whiz at staging

high-impact virtual meetings. She follows a few simple rules. First, she oversees a brief tech check beforehand to ensure no snafus. Second, she distributes an agenda and relevant pre-reads at least six hours in advance. Third, she starts meetings by introducing anyone new to the group, taking care to highlight a skill set or an experience that the person brings to the topic at hand. Fourth, during the meeting she solicits participation from everyone in attendance, encouraging those who've been quiet to share their thoughts on a key question. Finally, at the end of the meeting she asks a colleague to write and quickly distribute a summary of decisions made and next steps. She rotates this job so that her entire team gets a turn.

Trait: “Listen to Learn” Orientation. Although displaying forcefulness was high on the list of most-sought-after communication traits in 2012, it's less desired today. People now gravitate more toward leaders who listen and learn from others before they make decisions—a trait seen as critical to growing markets and retaining top talent.

Tactic: Engage eye-to-eye. When Jørgen Vig Knudstorp took the helm of Lego, the company was struggling. His theory was that it had strayed too far from its core mission by diversifying into Lego-branded clothing, theme parks, jewelry, and video games, but as a new chief executive coming in from the outside, he wanted to test that hypothesis before acting on it. Over a 12-month period he sat down with every category of employee at Lego—engineers in the design shop, workers on the factory floor, executives in the C-suite—seeking information and guidance. He also met up with external stakeholders, including customers, retailers, and specialists in early childhood education. He even spent three days at a Lego conference for adult fans in Washington, DC, mingling with attendees and paying attention to their concerns. This listening journey uncovered a groundswell of support for Lego to refocus on its signature building blocks, which are designed to nurture children's problem-solving abilities and

creativity. Knudstorp subsequently embedded listening “up close and personal” in the company culture. For example, every year Lego involves thousands of its customers as “volunteer designers” to advise on product updates. This ongoing consultative process is a large part of why the company is back on a growth path.

Tactic: Go beyond your comfort zone. Unilever, which makes and markets hundreds of consumer goods in 190 countries, takes listening seriously, asking selected current and future leaders to spend time outside the realm of their normal experiences in a program called GITS (Get Inside the Skin). GITS is designed to teach them how to better empathize with the company’s 3 billion customers, who come from all walks of life. Former chairman and CEO Niall FitzGerald helped create GITS and was also a participant, volunteering for the Salvation Army in Croatia, where he interacted with the homeless. He describes meeting one “unkempt, uncared-for man” who happened to be from his own hometown back in Ireland. “We were two people to whom fate had dealt very different hands,” FitzGerald recalls. “He taught me, in a way no other experience has, the power of generous listening—without judgment.” Other Unilever employees have spent time at a rural hospital in Mexico, an AIDS clinic in Ireland, and a prison in Germany. Like FitzGerald, those leaders are working hard to better understand all their customers.

Appearance

Trait: Authenticity. Appearance is the least-important EP bucket, but it’s the one that changed most from 2012 to 2022.

Authenticity, which didn’t register with survey respondents 10 years ago, is newly prized. Nowadays, to be seen as leadership material, executives are expected to reveal who they fundamentally are—not mimic some dated, idealized model.

Tactic: Showcase your roots and values. Throughout her long career in the U.S. finance industry—from intern at Fannie Mae to senior roles at JPMorgan Chase to CEO of TIAA—Thasunda Brown Duckett has shown up as exactly who she is: a Black

woman who experienced both racism and economic uncertainty growing up in Texas with a blue-collar dad and teacher mom. Because she understood her parents' powerful aspirations for homeownership, she was drawn to the mortgage and lending business, and she now leads an organization that offers investment, retirement, and banking advice to people in the caring sector (teaching, government service, health care, and the nonprofit world). She has always been clear about her background and values and offered several examples in a 2019 interview with the *New York Times*: the time she told a client that she had no intention of hunting or fishing with him but would happily go out for sushi; the conversation in which she accepted a big promotion only after reminding her boss that she was pregnant and would be taking a three-month maternity leave; her supportive response to an African American team member who wanted advice on styling her hair for a big presentation (Duckett, who is herself often in long braids, asked, "What would make you feel beautiful?"); and the way she kicked off an hourlong conversation with her coworkers about race, saying, "I'm an angry Black woman today" and explaining that her son had been called a derogatory name at school. As she told the *Times*, "I just bring the best version of Thasunda, all of me, to the table, because I want everyone else to do the same."

Tactic: Dress for the new normal. Figuring out what to wear in today's hybrid workplace is challenging for both seasoned and emerging leaders. Most white-collar professionals who worked remotely during the pandemic adopted casual, comfortable attire. However, "polished" still reigns as the most-sought-after appearance trait. One executive who seems to have a good handle on the new dress code is Alphabet and Google CEO Sundar Pichai. Silicon Valley types are well-known for dressing down, but Pichai sets himself apart with an approachable yet professional style that people in various industries can emulate. Often pairing a black leather bomber jacket or a track jacket with dark jeans, a T-shirt, and high-end sneakers, even for interviews and presentations, he

telegraphs a seamless interweaving of work and personal life. He's also savvy enough to adapt his attire for different settings, signaling that he's an aware global citizen who can bridge divides. For example, to testify before the U.S. Congress, he has worn tailored suits to fit in with the legislators questioning him. But when he met with Indonesian president Joko Widodo, he donned a shirt with an earth-toned print that resembled Southeast Asian ikat patterns—a gesture that was reportedly well received by the local audience.

Trait: Online and In-Person Presence. Being a standout leader in 2024 necessitates showing up both online and in the flesh.

Tactic: Use social media to shape your brand. Sheryl Sandberg isn't leaving the vital matter of her legacy in the hands of biographers and historians; she's shaping it herself. She wants to be thought of as the best-selling author of *Lean In*—someone who coached women on how to own ambition and shoot for the stars—rather than remembered as the hard-nosed businesswoman who spent 14 years growing and protecting Facebook. So since stepping down from the COO role at Meta in June of 2022, she has been using her social media presence to focus on women who have leaned in. Her recent Instagram posts, for example, celebrate the achievements of female business owners: a Black entrepreneur who runs a wildly successful dessert company in Tulsa, Oklahoma; a Lebanese restaurateur who's opened a chic café in Montreal that has become a go-to place and highly profitable.



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Tactic: Build relationships in person. Tiger Tyagarajan, the CEO of Genpact, a 115,000-person business services company, is much admired for his success empowering high-performing women. Between 2011 and 2023 he shifted the percentage of women in senior roles from 1% to 38%. In 2022, as the pandemic quieted down, he noticed that men were more willing than women to come back to the office. He didn't want to force everyone to return, but he worried that women who stayed fully remote might imperil their promotion prospects by being "out of sight, out of mind." Therefore, he began having executives pull their teams together every six weeks for two-day on-site retreats. "We meet in Genpact offices, stay in local hotels, and break bread together as well as dig down into next-gen challenges and opportunities," he told me. "Extraordinary exhilaration and energy come out of these office retreats, plus a host of new ideas, and on the relationship-building front, they're a game changer. They go a long way toward leveling the playing field for women who work from home."

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"The new rules of EP are both daunting and exhilarating," says Kennedy Ihezue, a rising star at the insurance giant AIG. To show confidence and decisiveness but also inclusiveness and respect, to balance powerful speaking and a commanding presence with listening and learning, and to project both polish and authenticity is a heavy lift. But leaders who manage it can inspire their employees to greater achievements and help their organizations truly flourish.

Given the high stakes, I want to offer an important piece of encouragement. My research in both 2012 and 2022 indicates that executive presence is learnable. You don't have to be some kind of genius to crack the EP code—you must simply act, speak, and appear in ways that set you apart as a leader. That starts with knowing what behaviors are most valued in your organization and industry, seeking guidance from sponsors, and then committing

to the hard work of embodying and displaying those traits in your own unique way. Remember, too, that you don't have to nail every prized leadership trait in the gravitas, communication, and appearance buckets. Ginni Rometty doesn't sweep the board, nor does Sundar Pichai. Success can come from simply developing your authentic strengths and excelling at two or three competencies in each EP category. But please, make sure to focus on at least one leadership trait that's in ascendance.

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