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## Why Should You Care?

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Lydia (not her real name) told a different story from what I'd heard from the senior partner in her Washington D.C. law firm. "I feel as though I'm pushing against that proverbial glass ceiling," she said. "I just don't get the plum assignments. I put in the hours. On performance reviews, my director has given me the highest marks for attitude, legal competence, that sort of thing. But I'm just not getting the opportunities to network and deal with clients to bring in the business. Sure, I'm on the 'team,' but I'm never the *lead* counsel. That's what you have to do to make partner—bring in the business. And if I don't make partner in the next year or two, I'm out."

She paused reflectively before concluding, "Most all the partners in the firm are male. Whether intentional or not, I really think there's a bias there that's keeping me from getting in front of clients. It just has to be the gender thing."

It was not the gender thing.

The senior partner of the law firm had called a week earlier with his feedback on Lydia and his goals for our coaching session

together. The upshot of his call was this: “Lydia’s very competent legally. And she’s very willing to put in the hours. But to date, we’ve been hesitant to put her in front of our clients or in the courtroom. I can’t put my finger on what it is exactly, but she just lacks presence and polish. That’s what I’m hoping you can accomplish with her.”

He proceeded to describe several symptoms, including this particular comment that stands out in my memory: “Even the way she introduces herself when she and the team meet clients or prospects for the first time minimizes her experience and our expertise as a firm. I’ve tried to give her a few pointers myself, but she doesn’t take feedback well.”

Although dressed in a business suit as typical for her profession, Lydia arrived looking at least a decade out of step. In addition to the cold-fish handshake, her energy level seemed no higher than thirty watts. Her voice, too, lacked intensity. A permanent furrow seemed etched across her forehead. As I introduced her to others on my staff, she had difficulty chatting with them as they gathered for morning coffee. When I asked about interactions with clients and other executives in the firm, she rambled and lacked a strategic focus about the organization’s goals. To most of my suggestions, her responses were “yes, but . . .” followed by a justification.

The first few minutes into our coaching session, I arrived at the same conclusion as her boss: Lydia lacked presence, and unfortunately for her future with the firm, she didn’t take feedback well. Typically when clients leave a coaching session, they comment on how they plan to put the new skills and ideas into practice and promise to call back with the results.

I never heard from Lydia again.

On the other hand, Jon, CEO of a major aerospace defense contractor, profited handsomely from feedback. At the end of one of our coaching sessions, Jon said to me, “Okay, so tell me how to dress. I’m an engineer and I don’t usually pay attention to that sort of thing. I’m divorced. Don’t have a wife to give me opinions anymore. But I know it’s important. And Kathryn, our VP of

Communications, told me I need to get your opinion on dress for my first all-hands meeting and my speech for the conference in Germany. Colors? Button jacket or leave it open?”

We worked on his opening, a personal anecdote, for the all-hands speech for almost two hours, because his goal was to set the tone for the new direction for the company and inspire confidence in his ability to chart that new course.

Seemingly small things can make a big impact.

The “little” things can make a big difference in landing a job, getting a promotion, winning a contract, or leading an organization through change—as Jon, the new CEO, understood in successfully leading his organization to regain its position as industry leader. He won the hearts and minds of his organization with his first “state of the organization” speech to employees after assuming his office.

For the next six months as I was in and out of the organization, other executives commented on Jon as if he’d become a celebrity after his debut address. He had developed presence, and it had a huge impact—on him and his organization.

Personal presence may be difficult to define, but we all know it when we see it. Someone walks into the room and people step aside. Heads turn. Conversation opens up to include them. When they speak, people applaud or chime in. When they ask, people answer. When they lead, people follow. When they leave, things wind down.

People with presence look confident and comfortable, speak clearly and persuasively, think clearly even under pressure. They act with intention. People with presence reflect on their emotions, attitudes, and situations and then adapt. They accept responsibility for themselves and the results they achieve. People with presence are real. They present their genuine character authentically. What they say and do matches who they are.

Mother Teresa was as welcome and comfortable in the world’s boardrooms as the most articulate CEO, the best-dressed movie star, or high-earning sports celebrity. At just five feet tall, dressed in her traditional habit, with few earthly possessions to call her own, Mother Teresa had at least one secret that many imitators

lack. And unfortunately, this one—or its absence—takes a while to surface: character.

For forty-five years, armed with little but her integrity, her tongue, and her ability to make CEOs feel the plight of the poor, Mother Teresa persuaded them to finance her goals: orphanages, hospices, leper houses, hospitals, and soup kitchens. By the time of her death, 123 countries on six continents had felt her personal presence.

Presence can help you get a date, a mate, or a sale. Presence can help you lead a meeting, a movement, a revolution, or a nation. Presence appears in all segments of society and all levels of an organization.

Presence may be used for noble purposes or selfish goals. When politicians, athletes, movie stars, or managers slip into crass or manipulative behavior, we boycott their events, bad-mouth their leadership, and say they have no class.

Wherever you are and wherever you want to go, presence can help you get there.

I'm convinced that Mother Teresa had studied Aristotle. Back in the fourth century, he identified three essentials of persuasive communication—another big component of personal presence:

- logical argument (the ability to articulate your points clearly)
- emotion (the ability to create or control emotion in your listeners)
- character (the ability to convey integrity and goodwill)

Times haven't changed all that much. Being a skilled communicator—a huge part of personal presence—still grants social status and influence. In fact, communication makes leadership possible—in politics, in the community, in the workplace, in the family. Think how often pundits and voters alike point out a candidate's speaking ability and social skills—or lack thereof. Not only do we expect our presidents and celebrities to speak well, but also that has become the expected norm for CEOs, system analysts, sales professionals, and soccer moms.

As I mentioned in the Preface, you can never measure presence in the same sense that you can measure someone's heart rate or their running speed. Measuring someone's presence falls more along the lines of measuring their health. Generally, physicians can check reflexes, do an EKG, give a stress test, check cholesterol levels, do a blood and urine analysis, give a vision and hearing exam, and then certify that someone is free of disease and physically fit or unfit. Beyond that baseline of health, subjectivity comes into play. Individuals compete among themselves and against their own personal standards for healthy living according to the energy levels they want and lifestyles they want to lead.

But there are substantive core concepts involved at some point as well as subjectivity.

The same holds true for personal presence. This book aims to capture these core concepts about presence. Beyond these, what you see and hear comes down to others' perception of your presence. The book will also delve into the subjective realm—what affects others' subjective perceptions about your presence and credibility.

At work, the limiting label generally comes down to some supervisor's statement on a performance appraisal or around a conference room table that the person under discussion lacks "polish."

Often we hear entire groups of rising superstars in an organization categorized and set aside for special mentoring or training this way: "These are the high potentials. We've identified them early on for key projects and high-visibility assignments in front of the executive team. We need you to help them add the finishing touches."

Although they are technically competent, someone at the top has decided that they need more presence to make the next career jump. Certain commonalities always surface—common traits and attitudes among the candidates, as well as similar remarks from the executives sending them for the coaching.

- "Brilliant. But not well liked. Just doesn't connect with people."
- "Doesn't always use the appropriate language—too flippant, too laid back."