

Own the room

Own the room explores why and how commanding a strong leadership presence is critical in navigating career transitions effectively. Career progression is always associated with changes in your key audiences. And so success in a new role is heavily dependent on influencing how you are perceived by these new audiences.

The phrase *owning the room* was first used over a century ago to describe someone who drew positive attention to herself socially because of her manner speech and body language. Amy Jen Su's and Muriel Wilkins' *Own the Room* is a first-class book; I have used the title and some their ideas in this post.

assertiveness
integrity
conviction
authenticity
empathy
confidence

To 'own the room' is to exhibit leadership presence by confidently, clearly and consistently articulating an opinion that commands attention by resonating deeply with your audience. How well you communicate through your inner conviction, authenticity, voice, posture and self-assuredness says how important you are – and how important the message is you wish to convey.

Presence comes in different shapes and sizes and its effectiveness depends on you, the players and the situation. It can be dominating, energetic, even loud, but it can also be quiet, deliberate and forceful – and equally effective.

When professional capabilities are equal, it is presence that sets a leader apart. It gives them authority and the power to influence how others think, the making of important decisions, and how creative ideas are accepted and acted upon. Leadership presence is engaging, compelling, inspiring, subtle and dynamic – all at the same time. And it can be learned; no matter how good a leader you think you are, you can always improve your presence.

To understand how to improve your leadership presence, we must first debunk the myths about it. These myths are the legacy of folklore and people relying on them to explain away shortcomings. These are three of the major myths.

Myth #1. I am who I am

This is destructive belief that you have to born with presence or you don't have it. This myth suggests you can't learn leadership presence. *Own the Room* is full of evidence to the contrary and many of my own clients attest to the fact it can be learned. Saying '*I am who I am*' is sad testimony to the convenience of an excuse and a lack of will to learn. Undoing habits of many years or fixed beliefs is always a challenge, but the prize is significant in determining your career success.

Myth #2. One size fits all

This myth is the opposite of #1, but is just as pernicious. Instead of trying and giving up on the prospect of improving themselves, those who succumb to myth #2 look outside and try to emulate someone they admire. They try to speak like the CEO or smile like the Mona Lisa or walk like Denzil Washington. This is futile and – worse – lacks authenticity. The '*One size fits all*' approach is doomed to failure. You can't fake it, no matter how good an actor you think you are. Great leaders are authentic. They build on who they are, how they behave and what they value. Being authentically *you* makes *you* distinctive. Your leadership presence opportunity is to do it *your way*.

Myth #3. If it's not broken, why fix it

Having an effective leadership presence is a dynamic process. As you progress in an organisation, what's expected of you changes – and your presence is no exception. You have to adapt and evolve the ways in which you express your presence as your career progresses. This plays out in major career transitions and critical turning points such as: In a professional services firm, stepping up from senior associate to owner/partner. In a corporation, moving from functional head to an enterprise leader or from an executive director to a deputy secretary in government.

How you can own the room

First, you need to reflect on the nature of presence. Ask yourself 'Who do I know who has great presence and what do I observe about them?' Chances are you'll be saying 'She sets a vision and inspires action', 'Without appearing stressed, he conveys tough messages to multiple stakeholders', 'She's comfortable saying *I don't know*', 'He remains calm and statesmanlike under pressure' and 'She truly walks the talk'.

When Steve Jobs delivered news about the latest Apple technology you knew you were experiencing a presence that was unique. How did he do it, time and again? And how has Tim Cook succeeded without copying Steve Jobs?

Most authors propound unidimensional ways of developing this elusive trait. For example, by learning acting skills and voice projection techniques, by emulating the physical behaviours of role models, dressing according to the part, boosting your self-talk, telling stories and dramatising your presentations.

The authors of **Own the Room** acknowledge the efficacy of all these techniques. However on their own, none is sufficient, because the essence of developing leadership presence lies in a holistic, integrated approach. They write 'What makes presence is not *just* your clothes, the words you use, or how you think. Rather, presence requires aligning your mind, body and words'.

To do this, Amy and Muriel explain you have to pull three levers in a congruent manner, i.e. so they work harmoniously. These levers are your assumptions (A), your communication skills (C) and your physical energy (E). Together they project a **Signature Voice** that is powerfully, uniquely and authentically you. I'll expand briefly on each of A, C and E in the **ACE model**.

The **Assumptions** you make about a situation, the audience and yourself are crucial to your messaging and tone. If you are not convinced of the integrity of your message, you will confront destructively rather than challenge constructively. Or if you lack confidence in the importance of your message, you will come across as tentative. Your skill in using the tools in your **Communication repertoire** determine the degree to which inspire or bore and influence or turn-off. These tools include your choice of words, the structure of your sentences, your stories, your use of humour and your slides. And of course, how well you listen is part of your communication. Finally, your **Energy** comes from how your physical presence sends clues and cues to others. It flows out of how you modulate your voice, your posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, dress and grooming. Your energy projects your passion and enthusiasm; it is contagious.

By continuously developing your Signature Voice and applying the ACE model you will strengthen your leadership presence. It's like an athlete preparing for a competition by training mind, skills and body.

To reach and maintain your desired level of leadership presence you need to work on your whole self as you progress from one career stage to the next. It's dynamic and you should never assume your leadership presence is good enough.

More on this topic

- ✓ My post on **Executive presence** is a handy complement to Own the room
- ✓ And also my post on **Personal power through rapport**