



## **The X Factor: How to Create Executive Presence** by Sally Ward, Ward Leadership [www.leadership.com](http://www.leadership.com)

*"Maturity includes the recognition that no one else is going to see anything in us that we don't see in ourselves. Stop waiting for a producer. Produce yourself."*

Marianne Williamson

Susan is a mid-30's woman whose career seems to have stalled. Regardless of how hard she works, she is passed over for advancement. She's particularly threatened because Sarah, who joined the company at the same time, has just been promoted again and will be her boss.

Susan lacks the X Factor, executive presence. You know it when you see it: it's when someone walks into the room and owns it or offers an opinion which immediately carries weight in a meeting. Others grind away day after day, doing perfectly fine work, but are not rewarded or thought of as the Go-To People.

The X Factor is an amalgam of vital personal attributes and skills:

**Confidence.** People with executive presence have a positive, can-do attitude. They are not ruffled or unduly discouraged by setbacks. Their confidence shows in their upright posture and skilled use of body language including direct eye contact, appropriate facial expressions, and active gestures to punctuate their points.

**Communication that is timely, direct and succinct.** In an effort to be tactful and not offend anyone, Susan's communications are sometimes ambiguous. When she does speak up, she tends to preface her remarks with qualifiers or disclaimers such as, "I'm not sure this would work, but I think we should try\_\_\_\_." Whereas Sarah, in a similar situation, interjects, "There's a real opportunity here! I suggest we \_\_\_\_."

Communicators with the X Factor know the value in delivering pithy presentations. They net their message down to 3-5 main points. They plan and rehearse so that the delivery is natural, flows without rambling, and can be done without over-reliance on notes or Powerpoint. They may provide an executive summary to be sure that their main points and conclusions are easily accessed and will remain front and center.

**Engaging voice tone, inflection and modulation.** Emotions color the impression you make when you speak. If you're stressed, discouraged, annoyed or distracted, it comes across. Center yourself and focus on how you want to be perceived.

To build executive presence, ask someone to video you speaking. Notice where you can improve, and practice until you're pleased with the result. Check your phone message also to be sure that it creates a good impression. If you're a woman who has a "little girl" voice, consider hiring a vocal coach to help you bring down the tone and be taken more seriously.

**Wardrobe, grooming and health.** Dress and groom yourself for the part. Like it or not, appearance counts heavily. Please guys, don't neglect things like trimming the hair on the back of your neck and polishing your shoes. Women should go with moderate makeup and strive for a wardrobe that is updated without being flashy or overly trendy.

Finally, nothing conveys the energy and vitality associated with the X Factor more than good health, so make it a priority to take care of yours.

**Visibility.** Don't wait to be asked. Instead, volunteer for a high profile assignment or role. Take credit for your work. Seek advice from a mentor who is listened to and respected. Offer to be a coach or mentor to someone else. When a meeting agenda is posted, study all advance materials and prepare thoughtful questions and input so you're ready to contribute.

**Authenticity.** Men don't need to act like gladiators and women don't need to act like men to have executive presence. A combination of masculine and feminine skill sets is very powerful: decisiveness, authority, charisma, warmth, deep listening, and connection.