

SoftEd

A SOFTED POWER SKILLS SERIES

Executive Presence

Elevate your brand. Influence outcomes.

People judge in minutes, and credibility is never static. This guide covers how you look, how you speak, and how you act — on stage, on camera, and in the room — so your ideas get the hearing they deserve.

Contents

Executive presence is built from three elements: how you look, how you speak, and how you act. The chapters follow that arc, from the judgments people form in the first two minutes to the business-leader mindset that keeps you credible for years. Read it through once, then work the audit at the end with a pen.

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THE THESIS

People judge. Accept it, plan for it, and understand your audience before you open your mouth — because **everything is a presentation**: one to one, one to a few, and one to many.

What Executive Presence Is — and Why It Pays

Say "executive presence" and people picture the buttoned-up suit, the articulate speaker, the polished profile. There is judgment baked into the term, and yes, some of it is judging the book by its cover. But pair strong presence with real content and you become a powerful influencer. Presence and influence go together like two peas in a pod.

Four things it does



Inspire outcomes

Drive your ideas into the sphere you work in: team, department, association, home.



Demonstrate credibility

The core element. People must believe you before they buy from you.



Influence outcomes

Presence exists to move decisions, not to decorate them.



Business mindset

Condense the complex into the simple, tied to business outcomes.

The trap for technical professionals: you know how the sausage is made, so you talk about how the sausage is made. Executive presence is proving you know the making **and** the business value of the sausage, while speaking only to the value.

The proof: style moves money

24

business angels evaluating live pitches

32

factors scored, presentational and non-presentational

15min

pitches, with decisions often made during them

The presentational factors carried the most weight. In a peer-reviewed study of investor screening, how entrepreneurs delivered their pitch influenced investor interest more than the underlying company, product, or market factors. The money followed the presentation.

Source: Clark, Venture Capital: An International Journal of Entrepreneurial Finance (2008).

And the judging starts long before minute fifteen. Experiments show people form trait judgments like trustworthiness and competence from a face in a tenth of a second, and 30-second "thin slices" of behavior predict how people rate you months later. Psychology finds two universal dimensions behind these snap judgments: warmth (can I trust you?) and competence (can you deliver?). Our brains lean pessimistic as a protective mechanism, so the judgment starts skeptical and stays skeptical until you show proof. The first proof offered is how you look and how you talk.

Sources: Willis & Todorov, Psychological Science (2006); Ambady & Rosenthal, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (1993); Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, Trends in Cognitive Sciences (2007).

Presence is not personality

Presenting well is not an extrovert-introvert thing. Introversion and extroversion describe where you get your energy, not how well you communicate. Introverts can command a room; they just recharge elsewhere afterward. And there is a promotion angle too: meta-analytic research finds emotional intelligence predicts job performance beyond cognitive ability and personality, which is part of why the person with presence and EQ gets the nod over the person with only a skill set.

Credibility Is Not Static

It is conferred by listeners — and it moves every time you communicate.

Credibility does not live in you. It is granted by the people listening, and they can grant more of it or take it away in a single meeting. Think of it as a running score with three readings.

Three readings on one score



Initial credibility

What they grant before you speak: titles, positions, known accomplishments, your LinkedIn page, your bio, recommendations.



Derived credibility

Earned in real time: the evidence you present, clear organization, your connection with the topic and the listeners.



Terminal credibility

Where the score lands when you finish. It can end higher or lower than it started.

Level one: your paper trail

Before anyone meets you, they meet your profile. Partners, new hires, and clients all check LinkedIn and make judgment calls. Two quick wins: keep the page current, and collect recommendations. Having **given more recommendations than you have received** is itself a presence signal. It shows a willingness to give more than you get.

Level two: what happens live

Then they show up, and the score moves. Late arrival. A poor virtual setup. Weak answers. A flood of filler words. Picture the credentialed professor whose projector fails and who falls apart on stage: the resume was excellent and the credibility went in the tank anyway. Real-time evidence now outweighs the paper trail, and in a VUCA world it keeps gaining weight. People fear you will carry old baggage into new problems, so modern presence requires live proof that **you can learn and you can adapt**. Honesty helps here too: naming a bad day or a hiccup out loud usually costs less than pretending.

THE TWO-MINUTE WINDOW

First impressions form in roughly **two minutes**, sometimes faster. Your best insurance: dress to match the audience, set the environment before they arrive, and make the first minutes relevant, timely, and simple.

Rebuilding after a bad first impression

Reshaping a formed perception takes time, and there are only two levers. First, **execute**: visibly get things done, because delivery rewrites stories faster than words do. Second, earn short, well-timed slices of that person's attention and make every one count. Five elements guide those touches: stay relevant, get the timing right, keep it simple, elicit trust, and show unselfishness. Move toward the person rather than away, work in their time slices instead of yours, and let outcomes do the talking.

Once trust is established, people judge you more on what you get done and less on the surface signals. But do not get lazy. Comfort is where presence quietly erodes — and virtual environments have made a lot of us comfortable.

Know Your Audience

Most presence failures are audience-analysis failures.

A lot of people walk in thinking about themselves: their content, their slides, their nerves. Presence starts from the other direction. Plan ahead, profile the audience, and match it — because you will be judged before you open your mouth.

The questions to answer first



Who are they?

Role, culture, formality level, dress code, decision style.



What do they know?

Their level on the topic sets your depth and your vocabulary.



Why are they here?

Motivations and interests. What outcome do they want from you?



What's in it for them?

The question behind every other question. Answer it early.

This applies one to one just as much as one to many. Walking into a review with someone you have worked beside for five years? Still profile them: their goals, their growth, what they need from the conversation. Showing that level of understanding and care is itself credibility.

Purpose, then main idea

Every communication has a general purpose: **to inform** (status updates, briefings, teaching), **to persuade** (selling an idea, seeking approval), or **to inspire** (building morale, leading change). Some meetings need all three; most reviews under-invest in inspiration. Then compress your message to its essence: if it had a headline of one or two sentences, what would it be? Decide what you want them to **know, feel, and do**, and do not fear repeating that main point. In a believability crisis, consistent repetition is a feature.

One warning: informing is now the hardest purpose, especially with data. People are primed to poke holes in numbers. Expect it, do not get defensive, and have your walk-through ready. Knowing in advance that an audience will contest the data is exactly the kind of intelligence audience analysis exists to gather.

The chameleon effect

Formality is a dial, not a setting. Wear the jacket to the project management chapter; wear the collared shirt or the T-shirt to the founders' meetup. Suit at the gym, jeans at the bank — both read wrong. Miss high and you come across as hard to read, impersonal, even condescending. Miss low and you signal it is not important and you did not prepare. Adjusting to the room is not fake; authenticity survives a wardrobe change. It is a matter of what you are trying to achieve with the audience in front of you.

REMEMBER

The mix that builds presence: **how you look** and **how you speak** carry the early judgments; **what you get done** carries the long ones. A reputation for getting things done in complex environments is the strongest presence asset there is.

How You Look

Appearance, posture, devices, and the room itself.

Sixty seconds of visual information arrives before your first sentence does. Most of it is controllable, and most of it gets ignored.

Appearance: match the audience

- **Dress to the room.** No jeans at the bank, no suit at the gym. When unsure, overdress slightly — to a point.
- **No wrinkles, no stains.** Fair or not, wrinkles read as lack of care and lack of detail. You are managing triggers of judgment, not defending your laundry.
- **On camera:** solid colors beat busy patterns; skip large reflective jewelry.

Posture and body language

Most of the emotional message travels outside the words. Classic experiments on inconsistent messages found that when words and nonverbal signals conflict, listeners weight tone and facial expression far more heavily than the words themselves. Your body is always broadcasting:

- **Stand to present.** Never sit down for a presentation, and never leave part of the room behind your back for more than a few seconds.
- **Sit like you mean it.** Leaning back, folded arms, and slouching read as disinterest or tension. Lean in.
- **Leaders are watched constantly.** Run a team and your unconscious body language becomes the company weather report. People will ask if the business is in trouble because your shoulders said so.

Source: Mehrabian & Ferris, Journal of Consulting Psychology (1967), on the relative weight of vocal and facial channels when communicating feelings.

Devices: the credibility leak

Phones and laptops are perceived-interest killers. Presenting to a group? The phone should be nowhere on your body. Taking notes on a laptop? Make sure it is **perceived** as note-taking. People hear the keys and see your eyes drop. Even a glance at a phone below the camera line gets caught, and the message it sends is "you are not worth my attention."

The physical environment presents too

- **Where you sit matters.** The head of the table is not always the power move. Position yourself to create connection: beside the nervous interviewee, across from the partner.
- **Bring backup.** A spare cable, the deck on a drive, and the ability to present with no projector at all. The professionals who survive equipment failure planned for it.
- **Comfort is cognition.** Cold rooms, bad chairs, poor lighting, and thin hospitality hijack attention. A person thinking about being cold is not thinking about your proposal.

The Virtual Stage

We have gotten comfortable. Comfortable is where presence leaks.

Virtual meetings have their own physics, and familiarity has made us lazy about all of them. People on the other end are straining to read your body language through a webcam; every degraded signal degrades trust.

Background: the three-setting test

Backgrounds get judged in one glance. **Too personal** says this is not a business call. **Too sterile** reads cold, like an office nobody moved into. Aim for **warm and professional**: clean, well-appointed, a touch of personality. Virtual backgrounds remain risky; pixelation around your outline can undo the polish you were reaching for, green screen or not.

Camera: eye level, eye contact

- **Raise the laptop.** A laptop camera at desk height shoots up your nose. Use a riser or a stack of books; the most flattering angle sits a touch above eye level.
- **Frame yourself** about an arm's length away: full head, half torso, expressions readable.
- **Look at the lens.** Move the video pane under your webcam so watching people and "eye contact" point the same direction. Glance away naturally; resist watching yourself.

Lighting: light the face, lose the shadow

Brightest light from the front, never intense backlight, and be suspicious of overhead lights that carve shadows. A darkened face is not a style choice: viewers are hunting for facial expression to build trust, and shadow starves them of it. Trial and error is the method; a ring light is the shortcut.

Sound: the biggest problem you cannot hear

THE #1 VIRTUAL FAILURE

You cannot hear your own mic cutting out. Bad microphones, bandwidth drops, and audio pixelation quietly delete words from your sentences — and your credibility with them. **Use an external headset, and test it.** This upgrade pays for itself in every meeting, not just presentations.

The "what's not working" gallery



Camera too high or low

Looking down on people or up your own nose.



Messy office

A stranger reads a messy desk as messy execution.



Wrong background

Doesn't match the situation. Instant judgment.



Poor lighting

A face in shadow reduces trust. Full stop.

None of this is vanity. Words, tone, and body language together carry your message, and on camera two of those three channels are already compressed. Protect what is left.

How You Speak

Your voice is the most important element of your personal brand.

What does your voice say about you? Six dials shape the answer: volume, rate, articulation, intonation, fillers, and pauses. Work them deliberately, because getting comfortable is how bad habits start.

The six dials

DIAL	HOW TO WORK IT
Volume	Project to be heard, then vary it for interest, meaning, and emphasis. One loudness is one note.
Rate	Target 120–150 words per minute, and vary it. Slow down to land a point; people process faster than you speak, so do not crawl. Time yourself against a 130-word passage.
Articulation	Form the sounds cleanly. Practice tongue twisters daily: "Irish wristwatch," "I slit a sheet, a sheet I slit, and on that slitted sheet I sit."
Intonation	Let content guide the voice: soft, swoosh, smooth. You are singing a little when you present; avoid the one-note song.
Fillers	Um, ah, like, you know, right? Replace the filler with a pause or an inhale — you cannot make noise while inhaling. Record yourself, then practice.
Pauses	Pauses create interest, emphasize points, and give processing time. Silence feels awkward to you long before it feels awkward to them.

Why fillers happen: they are thinking noises. Your mouth outruns your processing, and the filler buys time. The fix is building processing speed: pick a topic cold and speak on it, stopping silently to think instead of bridging with sound. Practice narrows the gap between how fast you think and how fast you talk.

Silence is a power tool

In negotiation, silence is not dead air. Peer-reviewed experiments found that silent pauses of just three seconds or more led negotiators to more deliberative thinking and measurably better value creation. A bad-faith negotiator tries to force you to fill the silence, because emotion talks first. Let the pause sit. It is doing work.

Source: Curhan, Overbeck, Cho, Zhang & Yang, Journal of Applied Psychology (2022).

Fluency builds credibility

Fluency is articulating your material smoothly: numbers without hunting through papers, transitions without hemming. Fluent command of bad news beats fumbling command of good news; people trust the person who clearly has a handle on it. And a confident "good point — let's parking-lot that and I'll come back with the analysis" outperforms three minutes of paper shuffling every time. Message right, say it right, show it right, and avoid the derailers.

The words that derail you

Watch your ABCs: **acronyms** (define them or drop them), **buzzwords, jargon, and clichés** (nobody is inspired by moving needles), and **complex language**. A big vocabulary deployed on the wrong audience reads as arrogance, not intelligence, and it costs credibility. General-audience writing lands around a sixth-to-eighth grade reading level for a reason. Match a scientific audience at their language; match everyone else at theirs. Just because a word is technically correct does not mean it buys the outcome you want.

The Business Leader Mindset

They want the outcome of your work, not the output.

Most executive-presence problems for technical professionals come down to one crossover: communicating with business leaders in the language business leaders actually think in.

How leaders think



Return-focused

Stock value, revenue, cost savings, productivity. Their compensation usually rides on one of these.



Outcome over output

What will happen, not how it was done. Unless they specifically ask, they do not care how.



Compliance counts

In regulated industries, staying operational and out of trouble can supersede profit. Speak to that value.

The translation layer

You live in complexity: the analyst, the project manager, the accountant, the clinician. The executive-presence skill is compressing that complexity into a simple statement tied to a business outcome, without dragging the room through your methodology. When a leader gets comfortable that you understand where your work fits in the total system — how it touches value, productivity, revenue, or compliance — something specific happens: **more trust, more freedom**. Trust is built from seeing business mindset plus execution, and it buys you autonomy no title can.

Solutions, not problems

Leaders value getting things done and want solutions over problems. Bring the issue with the recommendation attached. Fluently command the numbers, even bad ones; a leader trusts the person who clearly knows what is happening more than the person with better news and worse command of it.

THE ONE-LINE TEST

Before any leadership conversation, complete this sentence: "The outcome of this work is **business result**, and the decision I need from you is **one thing**." If you cannot fill it in, you are about to present output, not outcome.

Presence at every scale

One to one, one to a few, one to many. Internal, external, partners, customers, staff. Reviews, briefings, negotiations, hallway conversations. They are all presentations, and the same engine runs them all: know the audience, control how you look and speak, and anchor everything to outcomes. That consistency, sustained over time, is what people end up calling executive presence.

Making It Stick

Presence erodes in comfort and grows in deliberate practice. Learning to be comfortable being uncomfortable is the VUCA-era skill underneath all six chapters. Two tools to close: a pre-meeting prep card and your start-stop-continue plan.

The five-question prep card

Before any meeting that matters, answer these in writing. Two minutes of prep beats twenty minutes of recovery.

- **Audience:** Who are they, what do they know, and what is in it for them?
- **Purpose:** Am I here to inform, persuade, or inspire — or which combination?
- **Main idea:** What is my one-or-two sentence headline? What should they know, feel, and do?
- **Match:** What formality, dress, and language does this room expect?
- **Environment:** Camera, lighting, sound, seating, backup plan — checked?

YOUR PRESENCE AUDIT

1. Which credibility reading is weakest for you right now: initial (your paper trail), derived (your live delivery), or terminal (how meetings end)?

2. Which vocal dial costs you the most — volume, rate, articulation, intonation, fillers, or pauses?
Record ten minutes of yourself this week and check.

START · STOP · CONTINUE

START — one presence habit you will begin this week (raise the camera, buy the headset, run the prep card)

STOP — one derailer you will drop (a filler word, the phone in meetings, the jargon)

CONTINUE — one thing already working. Do more of it.

This week's homework

- **Fix the virtual stage once.** Camera at eye level, front lighting, external headset, background that passes the three-setting test. One hour, permanent return.
- **Refresh level one.** Update your LinkedIn and bio, and write two recommendations for people who earned them.
- **Rehearse fluency.** Pick your key numbers or talking points and drill them until you can deliver without hunting. Then practice one deliberate three-second pause per meeting.

SOURCES

References & Further Reading

Claims in this guide that go beyond the session material rest on peer-reviewed research. Full citations below.

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How the research maps to the method

CLAIM IN THIS GUIDE	SUPPORT
Presentational factors influenced investor interest more than the underlying business factors	Clark (2008)
Trait judgments of trustworthiness and competence form from a face within a tenth of a second	Willis & Todorov (2006)
Brief "thin slices" of behavior predict later evaluations of a person	Ambady & Rosenthal (1993)
Warmth (trust) and competence are the two universal dimensions of social judgment	Fiske, Cuddy & Glick (2007)
When channels conflict about feelings, tone and face outweigh the words	Mehrabian & Ferris (1967)
Extended silence (3+ seconds) in negotiation improves deliberation and value creation	Curhan et al. (2022)
Emotional intelligence predicts job performance beyond cognitive ability and personality	O'Boyle et al. (2011)

This guide is developed from the SoftEd session "Executive Presence," facilitated by David Mantica. Session frameworks: initial/derived/terminal credibility, the look-speak-act model, the six vocal dials, and the business leader mindset. A note on the nonverbal research: the Mehrabian findings describe how listeners resolve conflicting signals about feelings and attitudes; they are not a formula claiming words carry only a fixed share of all communication.

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People judge in minutes. Credibility moves every time you speak.

Know the audience before you open your mouth. Control how you look, on stage and on camera. Work the six dials of your voice. Speak in outcomes, not output. And never get comfortable — comfort is where presence leaks.