

Chapter 2

Leadership Presence: The Three dimensions of a Sought-after Leadership Quality

Dr. Katja Kruckeberg (MBA)

Objectives

In this chapter, I explore the three dimensions of leadership presence – emotional, physical, and mental presence – and show how a leader can develop this capacity by providing insights into concepts, practical examples, and easy activities.

Marilyn Monroe, New York, 1955

When Olivia Fox Cabane, an international keynote speaker and a lecturer at Stanford University, speaks about leadership charisma, she often refers to an incident that occurred in New York during the spring of 1955. The 29-year-old Marilyn Monroe, who had just landed a cover shoot in the then famous *Redbook Magazine*, is at the center of this story. Marilyn hoped that this shoot would help her establish herself as a serious actress.

On the day, Marilyn sought to prove that she could decide what people saw in her: Norma Jeane, the girl next door, or Marilyn Monroe, the movie star. She claimed she could effortlessly switch between these roles. Switch on: Marilyn Monroe, world-famous superstar in the spotlight; switch off: Norma Jeane Baker, the lovable, but somehow less imposing woman, appears.

And this is exactly what happened: No one noticed her when she walked to Grand Central Station, where part of the shoot took place. She walked through the station, but the commuters seemed not to care. On the train, nobody looked at her. Once back on the street, she turned around and asked the now famous question, “*Now* do you want to see her?” Within a split second, she had transformed into the radiant, recognizable star. Her facial expression changed, her eyes shone more brightly, her body adopted a new posture, and she had the magnetizing presence for which she became famous. A large group of people gathered around her immediately and cheered loudly.

Finding the Light Switch

This story very impressively shows that we can change the intensity of our presence within seconds and whenever we want to. Other people will then take notice of us, even if our light might not shine quite as brightly as Marilyn Monroe’s. However, most leaders I have worked with are surprised at the degree to which they can intensify their presence. If taught how to do this, they can do so with very little effort. In fact, unconsciously we do this quite often: Imagine sitting on your couch at home after a not very good day. You are feeling sub-optimal, not completely satisfied with yourself and the world. Your partner is also late for dinner. The phone rings. You rise from the sofa

somewhat reluctantly, wondering whether your partner is calling to say that he or she will be even later. You pick up the handset without looking at the display. It is not your partner, but your best friend from school, whom you haven't spoken to for years. Within a split second everything about your appearance changes. You greet your friend energetically. You add, "I'm well. Couldn't be better!" and also feel this. You radiate presence and energy, just like Marilyn Monroe did that day at Grand Central Station. This is one form of presence.

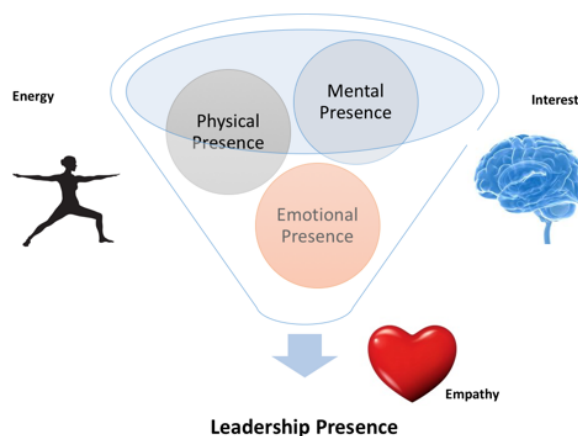
Leadership Presence

True leaders are present. After more than a decade of working with top executives, I am convinced that developing leadership presence is about the ability to pay undivided attention to the situation in which people find themselves. It's not so much a human trait as a skill that leaders can acquire. Leaders who are not distracted and give us their full attention are perceived as being present. Unfocused leaders might have the formal power, but you may not recognize them as leaders.

The Three Dimensions of Leadership Presence

Leaders who are present exude calm and authority. This makes others want to follow them.

Thus, being truly present is a basic requirement in order to successfully lead oneself, one's team, and the organization. The key to greater presence is attention — to oneself and to others. Ideally, presence means that leaders are in the here and now with their heart (empathy), mind (interest), and body (energy). Here, I distinguish between emotional, physical, and mental presence. When these three attention types are present, a leader will feel highly active and will act charismatically.



To describe these facets of presence, meet Jason Smith, MD of a business unit of a multinational electronics company. Jason, who had entered the company as an IT specialist, was appointed MD due to his outstanding cognitive abilities. When I met Jason at a leadership workshop in Paris, we agreed that I would work with him and his team as an executive coach, consultant, and facilitator. Jason's initial goal was for us to work on his effectiveness as a top manager. He believed that when he participated in worldwide upper management meetings some of his less experienced colleagues

were listened to more than he was. In addition, aspects of his leadership were criticized in his 360-degree feedback. His team members asked him to take more interest and to be more involved in their work. Jason was very surprised by this feedback. If anything, he was overcommitted to his work. Why did his staff not realize how important his work was to him? During the coaching sessions and the off-site meetings, I noticed that Jason lacked presence on all three of the abovementioned levels.

Mental Presence

“One of the reasons why we so rarely find sensible and competent partners in a conversation is that there is hardly anyone who does not prefer to think about what he wants to say next, then to respond exactly to what has been said to him.”

Francois de la Rochefoucauld

When I first read this quote, I felt I had been caught out. As leaders, we are sometimes trapped in our reflections, instead of listening to others. In conversations with Jason, I quickly realized that his mental presence worked as “digitally” as the computer systems that he had learned to control so skillfully. When he expressed his – very elaborate – thoughts, he came across as very present and alive. However, when he was not ‘on stage,’ i.e. not speaking, his facial expression changed. He seemed absent and slightly negative, which was also why I was initially surprised that he wanted to work with a business coach. He had given no indication that he was interested in the services I provide.

This was also the problem Jason had with others, including his team, the top executive he was struggling with, and the other stakeholders he was dealing with. It wasn’t that he was not interested in what others had to say. The rapidity at which his brain operates simply did not allow him to be in the here and now. Once he had picked up new information, he would immediately process it and would seek to incorporate it into his way of thinking, which prevented him from truly listening.

However, this is a killer for developing and radiating leadership presence. Having presence is not mainly about being interesting oneself, which many leaders mistakenly believe, but about being interested in others. Those who are always ‘on stage,’ entertaining others, may initially come across as present. But this kind of presence is short-lived. People don’t want to merely be an audience. They want to actively participate and to be regarded as important. If you want to lead others, you need to convince them that you do take them into consideration. Why should educated and experienced people want to listen to and follow a leader who is not interested in what they have to say?

Let us turn our attention to Bill Clinton, who is known to have an exceptional charismatic presence. Experts agree that one of his strengths is to make others feel really listened to regardless of their social status. I once had the pleasure of hearing Mr. Clinton speak at a conference in Geneva. Whatever one may think of him as a person or a politician, he is a fascinating and charismatic speaker. During the speech, I was convinced he had several times addressed me personally. Afterwards, when talking to other people, I realized that many of them thought the same, which amused

us. Olivia Fox Cabane (2012) once related what a Republican congressman had said about Mr. Clinton: “I hated him before I met him – I hated him after I met him – but while I met him, MAN, I LOVED THE MAN.” He too was captured by this leadership presence.

But let us return to Jason, who struggled with the concept of leadership presence. Jason was not an egocentric, uninterested leader. All his life, he had been accustomed to convincing others with his logical and astute arguments. His analytical intelligence had allowed him to progress. Were he not an exceptionally talented and strategic expert, his one-sided leadership behavior would have affected his career much earlier. A board member, who had long supported him, said that Jason had a reputation as a smartass; a brilliant one, but a smartass nonetheless. According to this board member, this was why the top managers from diverse cultural backgrounds with whom Jason was dealing, found it hard to connect with him. Full presence, and its absence, can be read across cultures; this does not require cross-cultural training.

The Enemies of Mental Presence

Being present is becoming increasingly difficult. The emergence of new, always-on technologies makes us hope that we can become more efficient. Instead, we are becoming increasingly absent. Ironically, our quest for efficiency ultimately undermines our capacity to be fully involved in what we do. Even as we work harder and improve our performance, we are undermining our capacity to create the trust and confidence required for sustainable success (Helgesen, 2016).

Three Steps to Create Mental Presence

1. We need to be intentional about how we use our time and attention. By respecting boundaries regarding *how* and *when* we respond, we diminish stress, improve our capacity to be thoughtful, and create the conditions needed to manifest an engaged presence. This is not easy, and might require leading upward. Regaining control of *how* and *when* we communicate *with whom* is an essential first step.
2. To avoid mistakes, we need to avoid habitual multitasking. While it’s probably impossible to avoid multitasking altogether, it often becomes compulsive, even addictive.
3. We need to recognize that presence requires a purposeful decision and practice (Helgesen, 2016).

Mental Presence in a High Performing Team

I work with top management teams from different industries and cultural backgrounds. During their off-site meetings, which I help facilitate, the top executive leading the team is often the most focused person in the room. However, if you want to turn your management team into a high-performing one (see Chapter 6), the team members’ lack of focus is unacceptable. In a high-performing team there are only leaders – everyone should be equally present and focused, not just the person at the top.

Physical Presence

If circumstances permit, I try to integrate Tai Chi lessons into my leadership workshops. While not everyone loves Tai Chi, it's a proven method to hone one's physical presence. During a Tai Chi session, I instinctively knew how Jason, whose physical presence was very low, would come across. One moment was especially memorable. The Tai Chi teacher urged us to adopt the warrior pose. This requires you to direct your attention to the middle of your body and to place your feet wide apart, thus stabilizing your body. Your back and head are upright and your arms are stretched out to the sides.



Figure: Warrior Pose

I couldn't believe my eyes: For a moment, I saw Jason's alter ego shining through. His outer appearance changed completely. He looked present rather than distracted, and came across as confident and relaxed rather than overly serious and lost in thought. His facial expression was positive rather than skeptical. He exuded both calm and confidence, a winning combination for a leader. It was as if he had briefly flicked the switch, just as Marilyn had done. Switch on: Jason's leadership presence is visible; switch off: Jason's usual serious and skeptical self emerges. Later, Jason, like many of the executives I work with, made it a personal development goal to integrate similar moments of presence into his business life.

The Three Anchors Exercise for Greater Physical Presence

A very effective way to change your physical presence is to direct your attention, via the three anchors exercise, to your body several times a day. This is simple to do and can be done wherever you are. Sit or stand upright. An upright posture is a first step towards greater physical presence.

The three anchors exercise consists of three steps:

- 1 **Grounding:** Ensure you stand on both feet and feel gravity working on your body. If you're seated, feel your bottom touching the chair and your feet resting on the ground. Briefly concentrate on these contact points.
- 2 **Breathing:** Now concentrate on breathing in and out naturally. Can you relax and breathe in and out with ease? This step is more effective if you combine it with part one of the activity. When exhaling, feel gravity working on your body.
- 3 **Centering:** Concentrate on the center of your body. Try to breathe from there – just below your belly button.

People will unconsciously notice if you inhabit your body, if you are physically present, or if you just consider your body a vehicle to transport your brain from one meeting to the next. If you experience the inner states of presence, you will also experience a new form of inner balance and wellbeing. Presence is sustainable energy for well-being, since is known to be a regenerative state. Presence increases your leadership charisma, and has overall relaxing effects that are unlike a state of high concentration or focus. Presence is created in the mind, body, and heart. The more you are in the here and now on all three of these levels, the more leadership presence you exude. It also leads to better decision-making and better leadership.

Emotional Presence

Do you remember August 31, 1997? Many people do, perhaps especially women. I too remember what I did that day. I was in Conil, a small Andalusian town on Spain's south coast. When I went to buy a bocadillo (snack) at a kiosk that morning, I was told that Lady Diana Spencer had died the previous night in an accident. This news touched me, as it did millions of people around the world.

Diana's death received the kind of attention that only exceptional people who have done extraordinary things would have received. Like Nelson Mandela, whose political commitment changed the world's political landscape and whose courage touched people.

But what did Diana do that transformed her, the world's most photographed woman, into the queen of hearts after her death? Her charity commitments alone were not the reason for this gigantic wave of sympathy. As laudable as her commitments were, other prominent people have made similar efforts, leading to far less public affection and interest. In Diana's case, the reason for this adulation was of a different nature: She had a personal appeal that very few people possess to the extent that she did. This appeal is closely linked to leadership presence. What fascinated people so much about Lady Diana was her extraordinarily warm aura, which was evident in her radiant, sympathetic gaze. Her son William seems to have inherited this talent from his mother. They both have an exceptional emotional presence.

Insights from Neuroscience

Let us explore the concept of emotional presence from a scientific point of view. Research shows that emotional presence is based on a mixture of empathy and sincere compassion, two interlinked concepts. Matthias Bolz of the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences notes that empathy — the ability to perceive emotions in others and to reflect on them — is the prerequisite for any kind of compassion. In this context, he distinguishes between cognitive and emotional empathy. Prof. Tanja Singer, another expert on empathy at the Max Planck Institute, mentions cognitive empathy, which is when one knows that another person suffers, regards this suffering as bad on an abstract level, but does not empathize emotionally. Emotional empathy refers to the emotional resonance when those neural networks on which the other person's feelings are based, are also activated. This is true compassion, which leads to an associated physical response (Singer and Bolz 2013).

What happens in the brain during this process was almost accidentally discovered during an experiment with a macaque. Since this experiment, we have known that our empathy and our compassion depend on the number and the functioning of our brain's mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are those that trigger similar feelings in us as the feelings we believe we see in the persons we interact with. This empathy and compassion are present on our face, body language, and voice. In combination with personal confidence, strength, and power – the second behavioral quality of charisma – this leads to a powerful charismatic appearance.

However, compassion can also be faked. Prof. Singer describes an extreme case and refers to a specific type of psychopath – one with a capacity for cognitive empathy, but without the corresponding emotional empathy. These people are sometimes very good at understanding what others need and want. Armed with this presence, they can manipulate others extremely well. These people don't empathize with others and can therefore cause others pain and suffering. Interestingly, these two types of empathy also differ visibly on brain scans. Emotional empathy only arises if one really sympathizes, because it simultaneously creates the motivation to help others and not hurt them (Singer and Bolz 2013).

The capacity for empathy is genetically determined. However, like other leadership skills, leaders can nourish and develop their ability to empathize. Although this ability may vary, we can expand the capacity to feel empathy during our life. I recommend the book *Cooperation. How Empathy Makes Children Strong* by the bestselling author Peter Høeg. He discusses how we can foster empathy in our children, but the book is just as helpful regarding how to foster empathy between educated and experienced adults.

Leading with Empathy

Empathy is critical to leadership development. It is a tool that can lead to hard and measurable results. Daniel Goleman (2004), the author of several best-selling books on emotional intelligence and leadership, identifies three reasons why empathy currently matters for leaders:

1. the rapid pace of globalization (which leads to cross-cultural challenges in the workplace)
2. the abundant deployment of teams (see Chapter 6)
3. the increasing drive to retain talent.

Goleman points out that Leaders with empathy “do more than sympathize with people around them: they use their knowledge to improve their companies in subtle, but important ways.” Bruna Martinuzzi, an expert on leading with empathy, shares practical ways in which leaders can nourish their ability to empathize and increase their emotional presence when communicating with their stakeholders:

6 Recommendations how to Increase Your Emotional Presence

1. Truly listen to people. Listen with your ears, eyes, and heart. Pay attention to others’ body language, tone of voice, the hidden emotions behind what they say, and to the context.
2. Don’t interrupt. Don’t dismiss their concerns out of hand. Don’t rush to give advice. Don’t change the subject. Allow people their moment.
3. Be fully present when you are with people. Don’t check your email, look at your watch, or take calls when someone talks to you about their report.
4. Encourage people, particularly quieter people, when they speak up in meetings. A smile can also boost someone’s confidence.
5. Give genuine recognition and praise.
6. Take a personal interest. Show people that you care and are interested in their life (Martinuzzi, 2009).

Summary

Being present is the basic requirement for successful leadership. If managers know how to increase their leadership presence, others will be more inclined to follow them. Leadership presence is initiated within a person and can manifest itself at different levels. Ideally, a leader should be present with his mind (interest), his body (energy) and his heart (empathy). Being mentally present is not mainly about being interesting oneself, which many leaders mistakenly believe, but about being interested in others. Emotional Presence refers to a leader’s ability to show empathy and sincere compassion. We differentiate between cognitive and emotional empathy. Physical presence requires a leader to inhabit his body. Presence is sustainable energy for a leader’s wellbeing.

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