

Leadership Presence

If you've ever met a highly accomplished executive or business leader, you inevitably come away feeling like you've been in the presence of someone special or unique. Someone who can make things happen. As for whether they really are special or not, that depends more on their ability to deliver results than on presence alone. Still, leadership presence is a good thing to have.

Where do people get this attribute? Why do some people have it and others don't? Are they born with it or do they acquire it? Steve Tobak, a Silicon Valley-based strategy consultant and former senior executive in the technology industry offers some answers to these questions.

They're not born with it. Brains alone will only get you so far in the real world. More depends on the way you're brought up. Your experiences from early childhood through youth have a major and lasting impact on how things turn out for you. So does your experience in the adult world. That's where leadership presence comes from. Experience.

Being right a lot. Actually, it's more about your ability to reason effectively. To troubleshoot and make smart decisions. To digest lots of information and use it to solve difficult problems. To boil down complex issues to relatively simple concepts that people can understand. If you can do all that well, you're going to be right a lot. Which means people will look to you for answers.

Knowing your stuff. Have you ever watched a so-called expert fumble around for an answer or explanation when challenged? It makes you cringe and almost feel sorry for the person. It certainly doesn't inspire confidence or project strength. It doesn't come across as anything remotely like leadership. You've got to know your stuff, be sharp, and be prepared. That's what enables you to think on your feet and come across like you know what you're talking about. Like you know what you're doing.

Confidence. While it's great to be confident that you know your stuff, the most important component of confidence comes from failure. Once you've taken some risks, fallen down a few times, and realized that it wasn't so bad, that gives you strength, self-confidence, and courage. Learning from your mistakes gives you wisdom, an added bonus.

Thinking a few steps ahead. Being a control freak is not necessarily a bad thing when it comes to an excellent leadership quality. It makes you think everything through before it happens and keeps you a few steps ahead of everyone else.

Adversity. Many highly accomplished people started with nothing or grew up in very difficult circumstances. It helped them deal with adversity. Resistance. Friction. Competition. That's what breeds strong leaders. And if you're a survivor, you come across that way.

Believing you're special. It's one thing to be special. But a key aspect of Steve Jobs was his much talked about "reality distortion field." From the time his adopted mother told him that he was special because they chose him, he truly believed he was special. That's where his unique presence came from. It's often a self-fulfilling prophecy.