

Developing Executive Presence through *Grit Grace and Gravitas*

By Mobius Executive Coach Andrea Zintz and Jane Firth

“What you get by achieving your goals is not as important as who you become by achieving your goals.” – GOETHE

The terms *executive presence* and *charisma* or a *larger than life personality* are frequently used to describe a leader who is exemplary. It is commonly believed that people either have executive presence or they don't. Beyond basic management and communication competencies, we hold to the adage that an individual's ability to be respected, earn trust, build great teams, be an inspiring catalyst for innovation and enable consistent performance is due to a charismatic or a larger than life personality. Company Boards, Human Resources and executive search firms sift through thousands of resumes and attend countless interviews attempting to find those “blessed” individuals with these rare traits. However, based on our experience, we believe that the idea of random, heaven sent qualities is a widely accepted misunderstanding about the true source of leadership effectiveness. Our observations lead us to an understanding that leadership effectiveness has more to do with an individual's deliberate way of being and how they build skills to interact with and relate to others. These skills can be learned. Self-aware and committed leaders can become exemplary leaders who project compelling *executive presence* when they develop the necessary critical foundation of qualities we call *Grit, Grace, and Gravitas*.

Grit represents an uncompromising commitment to performance excellence and strategic focus. *Gravitas* represents a depth of professional knowledge and competence that contributes to excellence in a leader's performance and their impact on the performance of others. And *Grace* represents a command of relationship intelligence and transformative communication that plays a critical role in elevating the performance of others. Each of the three G's holds and expresses energy that we can see and feel in ourselves and in others. How does your energy show up when you are tested? Regardless of your personality or emotional orientation the deeper distinctions that follow provide guidance to help you authentically develop executive presence.

GRIT

Grit is essential in making tough decisions and having the difficult conversations that are an essential part of achieving an organization's strategic objectives. It allows us to see beyond obstacles and opposition and identify possible ways to innovate and move forward. It helps us empower others to recognize and take effective action in the face of breakdowns, and challenges.

Grit begins with vision, innovation and decisiveness. This includes eliminating confusion and hesitancy, and knowing when to stop talking and take action. Grit requires strategic focus and constructive persistence. This involves an understanding and acceptance of the uncertainties of risk, facing critical issues, and communicating with transparency and relevance. Grit is also about dedication, boldness, commitment and courage. It involves standing up for what matters. And lastly, it is about resilience, power and possibility in the face of resistance. Grit helps us melt resistance, including our own.

The energy of Grit is one of commitment informed by toughness – a core of inner strength. Grit is not intolerance. It is not about being demanding in ways that intimidate, dominate, bully, or manipulate others. Grit provides toughness that is up to the challenge, that faces difficult people and situations not by imposing one's will, but rather by providing an approach, from a clear and certain place, that opens a way forward for all to benefit.

GRACE

It is Grace that helps a leader understand his or her perspective, feelings, and needs, as well as those of the men and women they lead. Grace accounts for a leader's ability to inspire others, and is essential in generating strong partnerships. The energy of Grace is useful in transforming emotional content in a way that neutralizes turmoil and allows everyone to remain constructive in the face of challenges. Grace is about having a respectful and constructive influence.

Grace begins with a clear understanding of identity, values and purpose. It's about equanimity and constructive intent. It calls for our own mental calmness and composure. Grace is about dealing well with our own emotions and reactions as well as the emotions and reactions of others. It requires us to work in a spirit of partnership and shared accountability. Grace is about transforming emotional content to remain aligned and forward objectives. Grace accounts for our ability to inspire those we lead. Qualities of humility, generosity, and empathy reflect an absence of arrogance.

Exemplary leaders are masterful in choosing what is permitted to occupy their attention. The energy of Grace is about being present in a way that places full attention on people and issues that are strategic and critical in the present moment. It is not about a leader allowing his or

her attention to be hijacked by all the things clamoring for their attention. Instead, as leaders strategically select their focus the energy of Grace invites the higher quality of work and collaboration that comes when a leader speaks and listens with full, undivided attention.

GRAVITAS

Gravitas forms a foundation for generating trust and credibility. The development of mastery begins with a clear sense of one's evolving depth and breadth of knowledge and experience, and how that is then conveyed through one's demeanor. The energy of Gravitas is not self-contained, or only self-referent. It includes an awareness of what one doesn't know. It operates with open curiosity and a respect for inquiry. Gravitas is about being someone others know they can count on, and someone who follows through on promises. Gravitas includes a leader's integrity and trustworthiness; where values and behavior are congruent, ethical, and honorable. The Gravitas of excellence in one's role and profession also involves one's voice, carriage, dress and demeanor. It's about speaking in a way that forwards the action and invites connection, and it's about dressing in a way that is role-appropriate. Gravitas brings an overall grounded and focused presence that inspires trust and followership.

Gravitas is about recognizing when it's time to change course. The energy of Gravitas requires a leader's flexible resolve. When the unexpected calls for strategic regrouping, flexible resolve is about remaining open to input and evidence and adapting to the changing directions and needs of the organization and its stakeholders.

BALANCING "THREE G" ENERGY

A leader's ability to balance their Grit, Grace, and Gravitas results in he or she generating an authentically positive presence.

Each of the three G's generates a specific type of energy that drives behavior.

Presence, yours, anyone's, is something people feel and experience when they are with you... it is a kind of energy.

On the door to Oprah Winfrey's office is a sign that reads: "Be responsible for the energy you bring into this room." Your energy can be positive, negative, constructive, and destructive. It can lift people up and it can bring people down. It can bring people together and it can drive people apart. How does your energy inform your presence?

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What do people experience when they are with you? Do they feel your genuine interest in them? Do they find you approachable? Empowering? Objective? Or, conversely do they find you unapproachable, dismissive, demeaning? If you could observe yourself in action, what do you think you would see about what people experience when they are with you? How is your presence felt in a room of colleagues when you are leading a meeting? What energy do you bring when you walk into a room? What could you observe about what you leave in your wake through your interactions with others?

While exemplary leaders have a positive presence that includes and balances the three G’s, let’s consider some of the dynamics involved in situations where one of the three G’s are distinctly missing. Below we examine three examples.

BILL: A LACK OF GRIT

In charge of leading a large construction project for a major U.S. city, Bill had a team of experts, subcontractors and stakeholders under him for whom he was responsible to inspire, inform, manage and develop as he literally planned and built a new skyscraper from the ground up. Bill landed his position in light of many years of established Gravitas, earning his reputation through successful past projects and developing strong and trusting relationships along the way.

An intelligent, warm and giving person, Bill’s authentic demeanor drew him towards helping others and he often chose opportunities to be kind, caring and give freely of his time, energy and resources. Along with his need for giving, belonging and expressing his support of others, he

had little need to be recognized or viewed as prominent and well known. He never sought the spotlight nor was he comfortable being the focus of attention. The only recognition Bill appreciated from others was on the basis of earning it for the team. His use of Grace energy balanced his Gravitas, and this showed up to those above him as a credible technical leader who was good with people. How does a leader build executive presence in positions of authority, influence and being the one in charge, when the spotlight is less attractive? The answer is found in how a leader balances Grit, Grace, and Gravitas.

Bill had already established a great deal of Gravitas in how he approached his work – researching, planning, his rich background of knowledge and experience – and this earned him respect. His natural expression of Grace created strong relationships, loyalty, and faith that he will share credit, operate with integrity, and be trustworthy. However, Bill’s default leadership presence lacked the energy of Grit, which caused him to be subject to the whims of others. Bill’s natural low tolerance for what he believes is political maneuvering, common in business, created less comfort in directly competitive situations. While Bill considered himself straightforward and unwilling to be calculating and opportunistic, the lack of toughness in consistently standing for his point of view when challenged robbed him of leadership presence. Bill realized he had to attend to his balance of Grit and Grace energy to increase his competence and confidence in political situations, and to stand up well in situations where there is conflict and competition.

Using his natural strength with Grace, Bill has an opportunity to listen with openness, be judicious and

thoughtful rather than judgmental. When Bill asks questions that arise from his concern for the integrity of the project, meeting the needs of stakeholders, achieving the project outcomes with respect to budget and meeting deadlines, this is Grit: an uncompromising commitment to performance excellence and strategic communication. In this case, strategic doesn't mean manipulative or opportunistic, but a sincere exploration of what decisions and behaviors will lead to the best outcome for all factors and parties involved. Bill can stand up for what he knows needs to happen, he can respectfully use the toughness of Grit as an important part of his stewardship of a project on behalf of his organization. Bill's authentic concern for integrity and congruence will then have a different energy than that of righteousness. His increased ability to face issues with the compelling courage of Grit will then be of benefit to all.

In practice, the balance of Grit, Grace and Gravitas served Bill well, especially when involved in high-powered negotiations that required some reciprocity and reconciliation of differences. With every opportunity to use inquiry thoughtfully and skillfully, his balance of Grit, Grace and Gravitas – enhanced his reputation and presence as a skillful leader.

Rick: a Lack of Grace

The second example is Rick, who was challenged with a lack of grace. Rick was the executive in charge of building his organization's brand and increasing their market share abroad. He was visionary. He was exceptionally intelligent and extremely successful in achieving his goals. He had tremendous Gravitas and Grit. What he lacked and had no time for was Grace. Everyone on the executive team he was a part of disliked and mistrusted him. He was uncooperative, he listened to no one, he placed the blame on others when things went wrong, he withheld important information, he strategically tore others down behind their backs so that they were discredited, and he had no remorse. Even though his negative behavior took a tremendous toll on company morale, teamwork, and the success of others, he was generously rewarded for the results he produced.

The absence of Grace in a leader can have dire consequences. You have most likely had experiences where a leader has used their Grit and Gravitas in ways

that left damage in their wake, or cases in which a leader's negative presence has been rewarded.

In his 2013 research study Dr. Gavin Dagle examined various elements of executive presence including 'negative' or 'dark presence' where a person's presence triggers anxiety in those around them.

Is there merit to what Goethe tells us when he says that "what you get by achieving your goals is not as important as who you become by achieving your goals"? Is the frustration and fragmentation of a team and their efforts worth the price it exacts? What power is available in the energy of Grace? Its power is in how it changes the energy of Grit and Gravitas into a more constructive and benevolent energy that invites partnership and participation of others in facing challenges. With Grace you get commitment, not merely compliance.

Ilene: a Lack of Gravitas

A leader's depth of knowledge and experience in their professional role is a critical component of Gravitas and executive presence. This is evident in exemplary leaders. What we have found in the work we've been doing with Grit, Grace and Gravitas and executive presence is that an absence of Gravitas isn't always because a leader lacks trust or experience. The way in which a leader is presenting him or herself, may cause their Gravitas to not be visible, that is, it isn't showing up in their demeanor in the way they lead or communicate during important discussions.

Ilene was a Director of Quality in a Pharmaceutical company. This role required a command of scientific knowledge matched with a grasp of process excellence. She brought to this role over ten years of operations experience and five as a manager within the quality group. In addition, she had an advanced degree. Ilene's role involved a great deal of negotiation with operations leaders, and influencing them required strong relationships based in partnership and credible influencing power. The feedback she received let her know that she lacked executive presence. She was surprised, given her knowledge and experience. When she requested more feedback from her boss, she was told that her soft high-pitched voice, need for reflection time when asked for an on-the-spot decision, and the way she got right to the point instead of setting a strategic context for her recommendations using facts and data, was detracting

from a strong executive presence. She was characterized as having a lack of Gravitas.

In our research, another executive woman, known for her Gravitas shared her frustration with this very topic – how women show up at the table in her organization. In her organization there are but a few women, she being one of them, who have succeeded in distinguishing themselves, who are seen as powerful women of merit and accomplishment. “Gravitas for me is substance and weightiness, it is not superficial.” She continued sharing her concerns about women missing the Gravitas mark, “Women with Gravitas are serious and can participate in serious business conversations on budget, market strategy, where to invest or divest... they would never be seen as understanding the business at a superficial level... they weigh in on issues, they innovate, they take risks and they do not use any stereotypical little girl tactics like smiling, batting their eyes or acting like the good daughter to get resources or funding, etc. They compete based on facts, data, and have a high degree of integrity.” She said that Gravitas is what is missing when women come to a meeting and don’t speak in a voice that carries weight and substance.

For Ilene, it is a case of owning and integrating the executive presence strengths that reflect her true Gravitas; to bring the energy of Gravitas forward through her voice, carriage, and demeanor where it can serve her and the organization well. It is within her grasp to balance each of the three G’s and harness their energies to speak through her presence as a leader.

Conclusion

Our work and research has led us to identify these three critical, non-negotiable qualities and behaviors that form the foundation and infuse the character of truly exemplary leaders. Each of the three G’s generates a specific type of energy and presence. The absence of any one of the three G’s will show up in different, counterproductive ways such as a leader’s derailment, a dark or negative presence that leaves anger and frustration in its wake, or diminished desired results at critical times.

To address imbalances, we are not talking about leaders reaching for some kind of perfection, but rather for a depth of knowledge, congruency, relationship intelligence, and transformational capability that is gained in the journey and process of reaching for his or her

leadership ideal. Rather than having to have charisma or a larger than life personality the three G’s of Grit, Grace and Gravitas provide a potent map and guide; they provide you with access to their distinct energies and give you the tools you need to place the evolution of your executive presence within your grasp.

Executive Presence is not a random set of qualities entitled only to those born with charisma or larger than life personalities. An empowered and effective executive presence, like the kind that is projected by exemplary leaders, can be developed and sustained by any person with self-awareness and the discipline to understand and promote within themselves the three G’s of Grit, Grace, and Gravitas. ■



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