LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION: DEMONSTRATING LEADERSHIP AND EXECUTIVE PRESENCE IN A VIRTUAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

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LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

In January 2020, most legal and business leaders were accustomed to frequent in-person meetings, even though it often required a lot of travel and frequent jet lag. That all changed two months later, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when remote work became the new normal. At that time, many leaders who were accustomed to holding in-person meetings suddenly found themselves talking into a computer microphone while looking into a small video camera for the first time, and not everyone adjusted seamlessly to this transition.

Communication techniques that worked well in-person didn't always translate onto a laptop screen, so many leaders found themselves relying on the reputations they built pre-pandemic to continue leading in a virtual work environment. Four years later, as new leaders are emerging and memories of early 2020 are fading, it's become increasingly important for emerging and current leaders to showcase their executive presence and leadership via videoconference and phone calls. Below are some suggestions for legal and business leaders seeking to master these skills in the post-pandemic era of virtual and remote work environments.

First, What Is Executive Presence?

Executive presence is easy to recognize but hard to define. I consider it to be a combination of traits that make someone a trusted and inspiring leader in a business organization. It's something that can be acquired and honed even though it is determined by what others see and feel. When I recruit lawyers for a role that requires a strong executive presence, I look for attorneys who appear credible, demonstrate expertise and reliability, and have an ability to inspire others. I also look for lawyers who are adept at forming emotional connections with others based on trust, shared values, and mutual understandings.

In many ways, leaders with a strong executive presence are the exact opposite of leaders who entice employees to follow instructions based on fear of punishment or hope for reward, because those with executive presence have a charismatic leadership style that inspires people to do their best without the need for threats or rewards. They also have an ability to shape the environment around them, they project confidence, and they appear in control at all times.

Why Is Executive Presence Important for Leaders?

When hiring for leadership roles, most organizations look for candidates who have a strong executive presence because they want leaders who can inspire confidence in employees, investors, and other stakeholders. Companies also want to be sure that

their executives can remain calm under pressure, inspire others, communicate effectively, and motivate others to make significant contributions to the organization.

How Is Executive Presence Different on Videoconferences and Audio Calls Than in Real Life?

When business leaders meet face-to-face with colleagues, team members, clients, and others, it is easy to portray charisma, poise, and confidence because non-verbal cues can be used to build connections. For years, many executives could simply put on their "power suit," stand up straight, walk into a room, make eye contact, and start engaging in small talk with small groups of attendees to begin connecting with their audience before taking their seat at the head of the table for a formal meeting.   As long as those business leaders communicated articulately, listened well, and spoke confidently from the head of the table, they would likely be able to command the room.

Now that more business meetings are taking place virtually, leaders often are seen by others through a computer screen. In many virtual meeting platforms, the executives are seen in a small square that is equal in size to the square showing all the other members of the virtual meeting.   This can make it hard for attendees to notice who is wearing a neatly pressed, custom tailored suit, and who is leading the charge. Also, small talk is more difficult before the start of a

virtual meeting, because one-on-one conversations don't work when there are many people in the same virtual meeting room waiting for a conference to begin. This can make it more challenging to demonstrate executive presence, but it's still possible.

Tips for Conveying Executive Presence

Here are some of my favorite tips for conveying executive presence on videoconferences and calls.

Turn on Your Video Camera When Feasible

If there's an option to turn your camera on, good leaders make it a habit to do so for a number of reasons. Showing facial expressions can help to show that you are engaged, and it helps to build a relationship with the other attendees when they can see you. If you aren't able to be on camera (e.g., because of technical problems), let people know that so they don't make assumptions about why your camera is turned off.

Be Aware of How You Appear to Others When You're on Camera

It's helpful to know what your video looks like from the other side of the camera. Some cameras have wider angles then others, so if you switch between multiple devices with different cameras, be sure to get familiar with how wide of a lens they each have so you know what others see when you are on camera. Also, if you are the only person on camera while speaking with a large group of people who are all gathered in one conference room, be aware that they may be watching you on a large screen so you may appear very close-up as compared to everyone in the conference room where the camera has a wide angle to show the whole room.

Be Cognizant of How You Come Across on Camera

To do this, consider recording yourself while you're leading a meeting and then watch the recording (of course, let all the participants know in advance that you are recording meeting). I know it's painful to watch

yourself on camera – at least it is for me – but you can learn a lot about how you look and sound on camera by doing so.

For example, you might realize like me that you tend to overuse filler words, such as "um," "like," and "you know." These filler words can be distracting for your audience, and listening to a recording of yourself is a good way to find out how often you do this. Also, watching yourself on camera can allow you to see how you appear visually, and if you have any distracting behaviors or expressions. Doing so also allows you to see what appears in the background when you're on camera.

Create a Backdrop That Makes You Feel Confident

Confidence is a big part of conveying executive presence; the more comfortable you feel, the better you will present. This backdrop includes everything you can

see, and everything that can be seen by those who will view you on camera. If you feel more confident when your desk is neat and tidy, make sure that your desk is uncluttered before taking videoconferences. And if you feel most confident using a virtual background, rather than showing others the content of your home office, then it's best to do so.

Stand Up and Walk Around During Audio Only Calls

When it comes to audio only meetings, which do still happen periodically, most of us have probably heard the recommendation to stand up and walk around at times during the call. You may be more comfortable if you move around periodically, and therefore you'll be better able to focus. Also, when you're standing there can be less temptation to do something else (i.e., multi-task), so you're less likely to appear distracted during the call.

BEST PRACTICES

Whether your meetings are videoconferences or audio only, there is a lot you can do to help demonstrate leadership and executive presence, including:

- ▶ Stay focused and give the meeting/call your undivided attention.

- ▶ Use non-verbal cues when on camera, such as making eye contact, not picking up your cell phone or looking at another monitor, etc.

- ▶ Ask questions and provide feedback to show you are engaged.

- ▶ Be mindful of brevity. Don't be that person who takes 3 minutes to say something that could have been communicated in 30 seconds.

- ▶ Consider "warming up" before meetings at which you expect to do a lot of speaking. This is the same concept as warming up before a physical activity. Tongue twisters are a good way to get warmed up for speaking.

- ▶ When on camera, think about your posture. Always practice good posture and be sure to

sit up straight during videoconferences.

- ▶ Understand how to use videoconferencing technology. Dealing with technical issues creates a distraction, and making everyone wait while you try to figure out how to share your screen can be detrimental to your efforts to convey executive presence.

- ▶ When on camera, have a professionally suitable background free from distractions
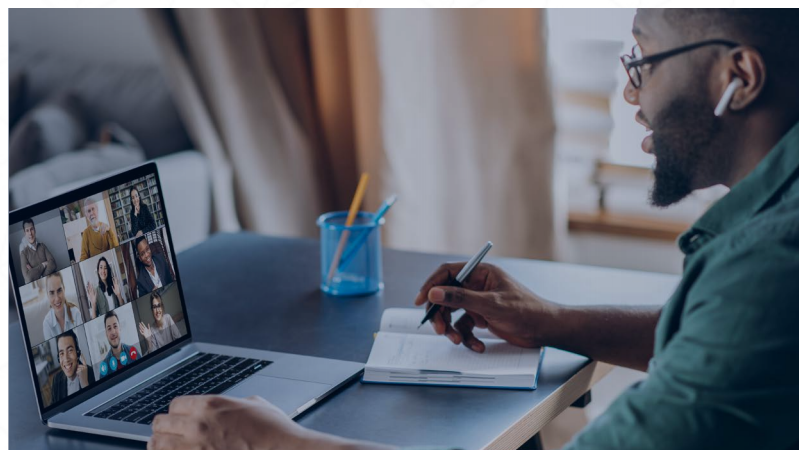
(*i.e.*, don't have your bed/bedroom visible in the background). Ensure that those viewing you on camera don't see clutter around you; make sure the focus is on you, not your surroundings.

▶ Eliminate background noise. At times it seems inevitable that your landscaper will show up to mow your lawn right at the start of your most important meeting of the week, so consider investing in a good pair of headphones and get in the habit of using them to eliminate background noise. Also, know which remote working spaces available to you are the quietest, and be prepared to take a videoconference or call from those areas on short notice, if needed.

▶ Always be prepared for meetings and calls. Anticipate questions and discussion topics in advance and have the material you'll need handy. Don't make everyone wait while you pull up a document, login to an app to look for information, or search for a relevant email.

▶ Be your authentic self. When you are being genuine, you will be more comfortable and appear more confident.

▶ Make sure to prioritize listening over speaking. A strong executive presence has nothing to do with the amount of time you spend speaking; many of the best leaders focus on spending their time listening while in meetings. Executive presence is about the quality of the connections you have at your organization, and when people feel you listen to them, they will feel a stronger connection with you than they would if their relationship with you were based on you doing most of the talking.

▶ Plan your talking points in advance. If you'll be expected to take the lead or do much of the talking during a particular meeting or call, have a script or an outline prepared in advance. Good leaders are always prepared, so it's best to plan what you're going to say in advance and be sure your content is logical and relies on facts. Also, it helps to rehearse what you're going to say so that the message gets communicated clearly and without uncertainty or hesitation.
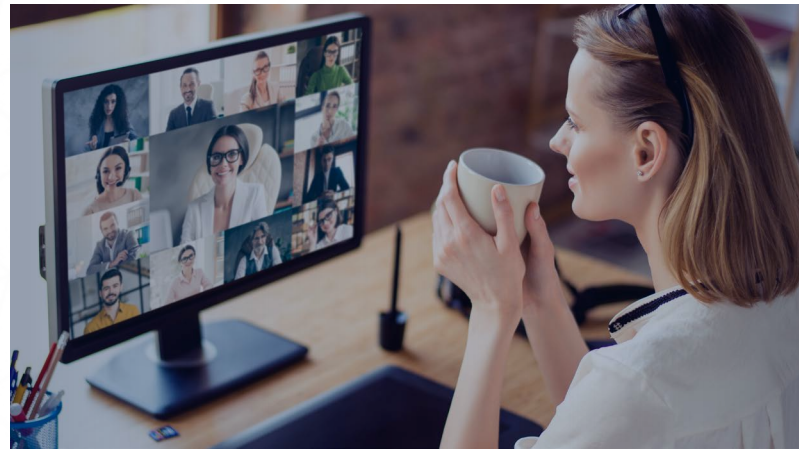
▶ Always appear calm and steady, even during times of crisis. Good leaders are able to lead through good times and bad. To effectively lead a team through a crisis, it's important to remain calm.

▶ Maintain consistency in your tone of voice and keep voice fluctuations to a minimum. Keep a strong voice throughout; don't trail off at the end of sentences. Strong voices convey confidence and authority.

▶ Position your video camera appropriately. Make sure to position your video camera so that your head and the top of your shoulders fill most of the screen, and so that the camera is at eye level.

Pitfalls to Avoid

In the post-Covid era, many of us have become accustomed to working from home while wearing sweatpants and baseball caps. The causal nature of our new work environment can make it easy to forget that just a few years ago we showed up for work every day wearing business casual attire. Even though our day-to-day workplace attire has changed (at least for internal videoconferences), we are still professionals so there are still some basic etiquette rules that should apply, and this is especially true for those who are in, or aspire to, leadership positions.

▶ Don't eat while on camera. Even if you're attending a lunchtime meeting, it's still best to turn your camera off while eating. Most of

our videoconferencing platforms are setup to zoom in on our face, and nobody wants to watch someone chewing at close range. It's understandable that with the busy calendars we all keep there is sometimes no option other than to eat lunch during a work meeting, but it's best to explain at the start of the meeting that the time slot is your only available time for lunch, so you'll be turning your camera off while you're eating. As soon as you're done eating, be sure to turn the camera on.

▶ Avoid multitasking or looking away from the screen or speaker. If you think you'll be tempted to peek at your phone every time a notification comes in, consider turning your phone upside down at the start of the meeting, or even leaving it in another room. Also, be sure to close your Outlook window and anything else on your screen that could present a distraction and cause you to appear disengaged during virtual meetings.

▶ Be careful when using the "chat" feature to send messages to just to one person during a meeting. Similar to using "reply all" when responding to emails, be sure that if your chat messages are meant for one person, they only go to that one person.

▶ Don't feel obligated to speak at every meeting. If you don't have anything to say that is relevant for the entire group attending the meeting, there's no reason to talk. It's usually obvious when people speak at meetings just because they feel as if they need to demonstrate to others that they are adding value to the organization. If you're a true leader with good executive presence, everyone knows that you work hard and add value so you don't need to prove it by finding a reason to talk even when you don't have anything useful to add to the conversation.

▶ Don't display excessive hand gestures or other unnecessary movements. When others are viewing you on a zoom platform, they will typically only see your head and shoulders because you're likely sitting close to the camera. Dramatic hand gestures around your upper body can take up much of the window

showing your image, which some participants may find distracting.

▶ Avoid dark lighting during videoconferences. Lighting that illuminates your face is likely to minimize distractions and keep the participants focused on you while you are speaking. Test your lighting in advance of a videoconference and adjust as necessary.

▶ Don't slouch. Since the other participants on a videoconference will only see your head and shoulders, bad posture will be even more obvious than it is during in-person meetings. Slouching not only looks unprofessional, but it can also make it appear as if you're not engaged or interested in the discussion.

▶ Don't focus on the onscreen images of yourself or your colleagues; instead, focus on the camera. For most of us, it doesn't feel natural or comfortable to speak into a video camera while on videoconferences because we are used to making eye contact by looking into the eyes of the person with whom we are speaking. It takes a conscious effort and a lot of practice to unlearn that habit, as we've been trained to look at the faces of the people with whom we're speaking. But it's important to make this effort during a videoconference, because if you look into the onscreen eyes of the person with whom you are speaking, you won't be looking directly into the camera so on the other side of the camera it will appear as if you aren't making eye contact.

Conclusion

While executive presence is determined by how others perceive you, you have control over shaping the way you are perceived by others. By following the tips outlined in this guide, you demonstrate that you are a leader and give others confidence in your ability to lead even when you don't regularly meet face-to-face with your colleagues and clients.

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Kimberly Lerman is a Talent Manager of Lawyers On Demand, a Consilio company. She helps to match attorneys with clients who have needs for contract attorney assistance in a variety of different types of positions at law firms, corporate legal departments, and government agencies.

Prior to the start of her career in recruiting in 2015, Kimberly spent 15 years practicing law in Atlanta, and she was involved in hiring attorneys throughout that time. In her last legal role she served as Vice President & Associate General Counsel for a large company in Atlanta. In addition to seven years of in-house experience, Kimberly also worked as a litigation associate at local law firms, including several years at both King & Spalding and Eversheds Sutherland. Throughout her law firm tenure Kimberly was involved with interviewing law students and lawyers at job fairs, on-campus interviews and onsite interviews. She also was a member of the Hiring Committee at Eversheds Sutherland from 2005 – 2007.

Kimberly currently serves as Co-Chair of the Duke Atlanta Women's Forum, and is a Member of the Duke Law Atlanta Board. She also volunteers with Emory Career Connections as a speaker and a mentor for current Emory students considering a career in law. When not working or volunteering her time, Kimberly enjoys swimming, biking and running, having completed 21 Ironman® triathlons. She is also an avid scuba diver and enjoys standup paddleboarding, hiking, nature photography (including underwater photography), yoga and cooking.