



Episode 26. Build Your Executive Presence with This 1 Question

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Let's start with this question. If you were going to ask your colleagues for 3 words that best described you, what would they say? Would you be pleased with the adjectives they shared?

Here's the big idea today: We all have a presence. We all have a brand. We talk in a certain way, we act a certain way, and these words and actions are noticed by the people we work and live with, whether we want them to or not. Other people's brains create perceptions of us based on what they observe. Even though they cannot see into our hearts or brains, other people create stories about how we feel and what motivates us. And they create these stories based on our words, tone, and body language, and what we do and don't do.

And when we're not aware of or intentional around our presence and communication, it can undermine our leadership and relationships. We might unintentionally influence the stories in people's minds about us to be different than the ones we wish they would create.

The last time you hopped on a video call, what was the impression you wanted to create? Did you set an intention ahead of time?

Here's another thing that I believe. That, regardless of title, we are all leaders. Because being a leader means recognizing that you have an impact on those around you and wanting to be thoughtful about that impact.

This concept of how we're seen by others is also sometimes referred to as executive presence. Here's a popular internet definition: executive presence is the combination of personality and character traits that create a dynamic executive.

The truth, though, is that we all have a presence, whether we're a senior executive or an individual contributor. Executive presence is not just for executives. It's important for everyone. And it's especially important if you're in a leadership role, because others notice and watch you.

Believe it or not, creating a more confident and intentional executive presence is easy, and it all starts by asking and answering this one question:

How do I want to show up?

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This question is great because it applies not only to your presence at work, but also to all other situations you're in, whether a meeting with your manager, a call with a frustrated client, a conference you're attending, or even a conversation with a worried family member.

Anytime you care about the impression you're creating, stop and ask yourself, how do I want to show up?

After you ask this question, I suggest that you answer it by choosing 3 words that reflect how you want to be seen. Here are some examples. How do I want to show up for this series B pitch meeting? Your words might be: confident, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable.

How do I want to show up for this parent-teacher conference? You might say appreciative, curious, and clear.

How do I want to show up to this frustrated client? You might choose supportive, connected, and innovative.

We get to choose how we show up in each situation, and making this choice requires us to reflect, get clear, and take action.

When we stop to ask and answer this question – how do I want to show up? – we are inviting our brain to think effectively. When we choose the 3 words that reflect our intention, we are engaging our prefrontal cortex, our higher level thinking, because this part of brain helps us make good choices.

Then, we help our brain think and communicate more effectively because the vision we create with our 3 words gives our brain a roadmap and cues to where we want it to go.

When we are clear about our intention and steer our brain in that direction, our desired outcome is more likely. Think about it. What happens if you don't set an intention? If you just hop on a call with whatever is top of mind? Who knows how you show up? Setting an intention helps you be seen as a leader with presence.

Let's talk about the word intention a second. It's a word we use a lot and I didn't really think about what it truly meant until I read this definition in a book called *Compassionate Conversations*. The authors shared that an intention has 2 dimensions: one is the idea of purpose, of turning our attention to the present moment. The second is the dimension of time, and stretching out what we want into the future. An intention, the book's authors say, is casting our purpose across time and space. Isn't that powerful?

Let's get back to this concept of our leadership presence. My coaching education opened my mind up to lots of new ideas, and the idea that the way we show up is a choice was huge for me. It's one of those pieces of wisdom I wish I knew years ago when I was early in my career. Back then, being intentional about how I showed up was not on my radar in the same way. Here's an example of a situation in which it would have been helpful.

When I was a medical student, part of our learning was to see patients before the doctor did. We were sent into the exam rooms to introduce ourselves, take a history, and do an exam. One day on my surgery rotation, I walked into a room to meet a patient – a woman in her 40s -- who was holding back tears. She had felt a lump in her breast and was bracing herself for this visit. And here I was, a medical student who had no idea if her lump was likely to be cancer, and I had no idea what to say. I wasn't sure if it were more important for me to be a knowledgeable healthcare person or a voice of reassurance.

If I had paused and considered how I wanted to show up, I would have chosen the 3 words caring, transparent, and empathetic. This intention would have then guided what I said and did next. I imagine

that I would have explained honestly what I knew and didn't know. I would have explained how teaching hospitals worked, and told her I understood her anxiety and hoped it would all be OK.

When we set an intention about how we want to show up, we can then be clearer about what we want to say, how we say it and the impression we leave someone with. We can decide the phrases and words we'll use, the confident body language that will help, and the steps we'll take to move forward. It gives us more clarity and confidence, and we're less likely to second guess ourselves.

Now, let's bring this to you. In the next few weeks, I invite you to write out this question, How do I want to show up? on a sticky note and put it near your computer and where you're likely to see it. Then, before important conversations and meetings, ask yourself this question and choose 3 words that represent your intention about how you want to be seen and the executive presence you want to show.

In addition, please use this question with those you lead, mentor, or coach. As you work with others, and they share situations they're thinking about, ask them, How do you want to show up? and ask them to choose 3 words. Then, I would say, OK, if you want to show up that way, what phrases need to come out of your mouth? What body position and facial expression do you want to have?

Asking these follow-up questions helps connect a big intention with tactical communication strategies. And be sure to check in with them after, to hear how they manifested their intention.

My intention in these podcasts is to be clear, encouraging, and relevant and to help you show up as your best self in all areas of your life.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you found today's podcast helpful, please share it with a friend. And if you'd like coaching around your executive presence, email me at deb@debelbaum.com. I'm here to help you.

Until next time!