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PRESENCE



Stake your mark, stand up, be counted – without putting off others

Text by Marie Peeler

Despite how far women have come over the years in securing their place in the work force, they are now just tipping the scale in securing management level positions.

Still, even as women vie for a greater piece of the management pie, many continue to struggle with presence in the office.

Many women still complain that when a man takes charge and does what it takes to get a job done, he's admired as a great leader. When a woman takes the same approach, she's often perceived as being a witch.

While many women have had at least one experience with a Neanderthal, those attitudes are becoming increasingly rare.

More often, there's neither a care whether the job goes to a woman or a man. It's more important that the candidate up for the job be a strong, confident compassionate leader.

The good news here is that women really do have the power to take responsibility for how they are perceived.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is for women to find their place between submissive and aggressive behavior.

Lean too far one way, and you'll not be taken seriously. Lean too far the other way, and you'll threaten women and alienate men.

For the overly submissive, there are things you can do to earn greater respect in today's workplace.

First, identify the problem. Use a visualization exercise to figure out exactly how you "look" during a meeting. Close your eyes and see yourself amongst team members in a meeting.

Where are you in relation to the CEO and your peers? Take it to the next step and

make out exactly how people in the room are sitting, and consider the amount of room they take up. Is the CEO seated with a foot over the knee? Is his or her chair pushed back from the table?

Finally, zoom in and look closely at yourself. Are you sitting with your arms folded in your lap, taking up as little room as possible? Are your papers stacked neatly in front of you? Are you small? If you've answered yes to any of these questions, take it to heart. You need to take up more space.

This exercise is but one action to take in helping to overcome meekness. Once you identify the problem, it's far easier to make adjustments to overcome such insecurities.

Also consider your dress. If you're wearing a cardigan draped over your shoulders with a pencil skirt, you may very well be addressed like a secretary rather than a manager.

Think about the volume of your voice and how you project. Maybe, once in a while, you might have to raise your voice in order to get the attention you deserve.

Observe how you respond to sticky questions or challenges. Does your hesitation look like a moment of thoughtful consideration or do you appear to falter? Sometimes your facial expression says it all, so make sure it is saying what you want it to say.

At the other end of the spectrum, women occasionally try too hard to be one of the boys. But behaving the way they think a rough, tough guy would act generally gets them nowhere fast.

While it's difficult to accept submissiveness, it's even a greater challenge to accept that you might be overbearing.

Pay attention to the body language of others you are around. Do they become small

in your presence? Another dead giveaway is when subordinates won't ante up good ideas or challenge you in a healthy, productive way.

Ask someone you trust if they think you're intimidating and, if they share with you that you are, take immediate steps to soften up. It's likely that your team values your mental toughness, but that they'd like you to be more approachable.

Trying to dial such traits up or down doesn't, however, mean you need to be unauthentic. Remain true to your values.

If you want to be seen as a self-assured leader who exudes confidence without arrogance, but your natural inclination is to be shy, it's not disingenuous to attempt to be more brazen.

Nor is it insincere to monitor and modulate your approach when coming on like gangbusters won't serve anyone's best interests.

The goal is to move from your natural way to where you want to be, because you value a characteristic and believe that cultivation of that trait will serve you.

Self-awareness is the key. It's about making change from the inside out. Mentally trying on a new persona is the only way of closing the delta on who you are on the inside and how you look on the outside.

The more self-aware you are of how you're being perceived by the world around you, the better chance you'll have at business success.

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