

## Gravitas, the X factor of leadership, can be cultivated



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**W**e have all come across people who instantly convey gravitas. They impress in how they hold themselves, in how they listen, in what they say ... and don't say. There is calmness rather than histrionics. In such a person's presence, we are assured and engaged.

In a study\* sponsored by companies that included American Express, Deutsche Bank and Ernst & Young, gravitas was found to be the dominant 'pillar' of executive presence, with 67 per cent of the 268 senior executives surveyed placing it at the forefront.

If you feel you have a gravitas deficit, the good news is that you can develop it. However, it requires openness to feedback and experimentation. It needs careful cultivation as well as elimination of behaviours you may not even currently be aware of. Whether you are introverted or a more naturally 'out there' extrovert, there will be things to dial up – and down – as you start to develop your own authentic variant of gravitas.

Here are some ideas to work on.

### Building foundations

**1. Slow down, listen... and show it** People with gravitas are invariably outstanding listeners. This is a skill that leaders such as Barack Obama and Richard Branson demonstrate effortlessly and authentically. Consciously slowing down can help develop your capabilities in this area. In coaching developing leaders, I often see passion fused with hurriedness, which invariably extends to the way they communicate. This need for speed can often be interpreted as a lack of any, or only tokenistic, connection. So drop back a gear. Connect as fully as the situation allows, be curious and be aware of the [non verbal](#) cues in front of you.

**2. Be generous in your recognition of others** The best leaders I have known have effortlessly promoted wide collegiality, where contributions have been generously acknowledged. Being generous means sharing the spotlight more broadly, even when you feel you are due the majority of plaudits. An excellent way to achieve this is by consciously changing your vocabulary from "I did..." to "we did...", at every opportunity. "We" is noticed, and it inspires a virtuous loop of collegiality

**3. Increase and communicate your expertise** Leaders with gravitas often come across as the most knowledgeable person in the room. But they didn't get there overnight. Focus more narrowly when you start developing expertise in areas that inspire you – learn 'a lot about a little', and seek to become a curator of the range of ideas in your domain. Dorie Clark from Duke University says: "If you're a [thoughtful curator of the best ideas in your field](#), even if you're not developing them yourself, others will start turning to you for guidance." A thoughtful curator will not just passively collect, they will also mesh and reinterpret the ideas they are exposed to. You can show you're a thinker which will add a unique, authentic and valuable dimension to the foundation you are establishing.

**4. Pause and stay cool** Gravitas meets stressful situations level-headedly, without vein-bulging [histrionics](#). Leaders with this capacity recognise their own and other people's emotions when stressful situations emerge, and use the cues they experience to guide their thinking and behaviour.

Unpredicted day-today "emergencies" represent a good place to enhance your emotional intelligence. Recognise the emotions you see in yourself and others when such situations present ... and don't go where your autopilot instinctively wishes to take you. Tuning in to your breathing can be a useful ally, as can the mindful use of a pause. As Mark Twain said: "The right word may be effective, but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause."

### Managing the cursory signals

Most of the ideas I've described so far require effort that starts from the inside. These are important and necessary foundations for gravitas. But in a competitive workplace there is also a more overt external dimension to consider. Here are some ideas that can help you better manage the signals you send:

**1. Your look – simplify the interpretation** [People jump to conclusions](#) all the time. This is efficient but it means that only a selective picture is perceived. Nobel Laureate psychologist Daniel Kahneman has called this "WYSIATI" – What You See Is All There Is. Your first impression may be an ongoing impediment to people recognising the deeper package within. Every industry has its own fashion bandwidth, and it is important to calibrate accordingly. There is room for an authentic and distinctive look that does not detract from the gravitas you are cultivating. Gain

a frank assessment from a trusted colleague or mentor who is sartorially savvy. Hold back any defensiveness and develop your look to one that is congruent with where you wish to go.

**2. Body language and mannerisms** In addition to clothing, other signals may be apparent in any WYSIATI assessment of you. Mindful development of gravitas also requires understanding what our body and physical movements tell others. For example, do you have a bunch of mannerisms, be they "umms" or tendencies to scratch certain body parts when nervous, that undermine how you present? These are often things we don't notice but can unfortunately jump out immediately at others.

Harvard Professor and social psychologist Amy Cuddy gave one of the most viewed TED Talks of all time on this topic entitled: "[Your body language shapes who you are](#)". Cuddy's research suggests that positive, expansive and open postures change your body chemistry – you feel more powerful, while also being perceived more positively by others. [Cuddy](#) says: "Holding one's body in 'high-power' poses for short time periods can summon an extra surge of power and sense of well-being when it's needed".

### Feeling inauthentic? Good!

Because the cultivation of gravitas will stretch you, it is likely that you will feel inauthentic in some aspects of the journey. Such feelings are inevitable and will be a sign that you are stretching yourself in the right directions. INSEAD's Professor Herminia Ibarra indicates that [acute feelings of inauthenticity](#) can be a sign of real leadership growth. This is because when we introduce new or challenging behaviours, we also move beyond our comfort zone.

Experiences with good leaders are not forgotten. In cultivating gravitas, be mindful of how the people you deal with will feel during their interactions with you. Ultimately, they won't remember the detail in the PowerPoint deck you delivered, your clever dot points or your erudite executive summary. But they will remember how you made them feel. Work to this, and you are on your way to gravitas.



**GROWGRAVITAS**  
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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\* If you are interested in the report produced by the Center for Talent Innovation, please [contact me](#).