

# How To Build Executive Presence: A Message for Mission Leaders

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**D**ear Colleague,  
Congratulations! You have been appointed to serve as a mission leader. Your education, formation and experience have equipped you well for this. Through your professional leadership role, you have developed important competencies in ministry, theology and spirituality, as well as expertise in Catholic identity.

In your conversations with other leaders, you've probably heard the phrase "executive presence," and may have even noticed articles referring to this term in online business journals and occupying a significant share of the shelf space in airport bookstores. You may have seen a post from Forbes Coaches Council, saying that executive presence is "most importantly, inspiring confidence among senior leaders that you have the potential for great achievements. ... [because] Your executive presence determines whether you gain access to opportunity."<sup>1</sup> You want the chance to use your gifts most effectively, and you wonder if it really is about "how you control a room, the impressions you make ... how you communicate verbally and through your appearance and physicality."<sup>2</sup> But are these tips really the path to building executive presence?

What these articles, and unfortunately some leaders, miss is that executive presence cannot be simply a projection of confidence and control, but needs to be an expression of their leadership integrity. If you attempt to develop executive presence by focusing solely on the external aspects,

you risk a kind of fragmentation — what author and educator Parker Palmer famously describes as the "divided life"— which is more likely to communicate disintegration than integrity.

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You are called to carry out a profound responsibility tied to the integrity and mission of Catholic health care. In a world sometimes skeptical of institutions and religion, you carry a message that all of our facilities — even virtual sites of care — and processes can be sacramental, that is, can be occasions to encounter the loving presence of God. In a world skeptical of and sometimes wounded by religion, you carry the message that Catholic tradition and teaching offer a professional



and organizational path to all that we are called to be as a Catholic ministry. Along the way, you embody these messages in multiple settings and with diverse groups of people, introducing them to a vision they may have only glimpsed. The executive presence you embody flows from the integration of your inner life, behavior and interactions and expresses the fullness of your integrity as a leader.

The word “authentic” represents ways to develop an executive presence that is shaped by your leadership integrity. Although authenticity is sometimes treated as a fairly anemic quality — for example, “I think authenticity is really important ... Hopefully, you’re a positive person ... but if you’re all warmth and fuzziness, people ... might perceive that you lack substance.”<sup>3</sup> Examining additional layers of meaning, however, reveals authenticity as essential, both in the sense of being necessary and being “the essence” of executive presence. Far beyond positivity and sentimentality, authenticity empowers executive presence through dimensions that are critical for you in mission leadership: identity, authority and responsibility.

#### **BE AUTHENTIC IN YOUR IDENTITY**

Authenticity in executive presence is powered first by a deep awareness of your identity, what many spiritual writers refer to as the “true self.” This includes awareness and acceptance of your personal qualities, attitudes, habits of mind and patterns of emotions and behavior, as well as awareness of your connection to and impact on colleagues and those being served. As you examine your strengths and weaknesses, you build the virtue of humility, which keeps you grounded in the truth of who you are as a gifted and limited human being. Honest self-appraisal also reveals your more or less resourceful attitudes and reactions, and enables you to cultivate the virtue of temperance, especially where it is needed to modulate and/or set limits in your emotional responses and even in the use of your strengths. As awareness of your identity deepens, humility and temperance build an executive presence marked by confidence, an ability to be fully present, an understanding to hold an acceptance of

differences, a desire to honor others’ gifts, and a willingness to seek and offer forgiveness.

The more that you follow the path of identity, the more you recognize and experience your connections to your colleagues and those you serve. Far from needing to control the room or their impressions of you, you realize the deep human connections you share. You recognize that you are part of them, and that they are part of you, which then communicates empathy and mutuality. At

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the center of your exploration of identity, you recognize the significance of your own leadership being made in the image of God, and from there, you develop a quality of presence that is steadfast, other-centered and an expression of complete integrity.

#### **BE AUTHENTIC IN YOUR AUTHORITY**

Reflecting on your identity as an individual within the community of Catholic health care leads naturally to questions of authority. By what or by whom are you authorized to lead? What is the nature of your authority as a mission leader? These questions may be complicated by a tendency to put more emphasis on “mission” than on “leader” at the core of your professional identity. Further, depending on your background and experience, you may have reflected more on being called to your specific area of expertise rather than on the question, “Are you called to lead?” As a leader, however, your executive presence will communicate your understanding and integration of your authority.

The authorization of mission leaders can be traced to the vocational call that echoes through the founding history of Catholic health care to the present moment. Rooted in the universal Catholic Church and its profound vision of the human

person, authority comes not just from “your” story, it comes from “our” story, the story of God’s call through the ages to honor and preserve the dignity of all persons and to foster conditions in the world that enable the flourishing of all individuals and creation. Recognizing this deeper source of authority activates the virtues of fortitude and justice, and enables your prophetic witness to the movements of the Spirit and where it may be leading through complex situations.

Recognize you could fall into one of two traps regarding the nature of your authority: imagining that your power comes from external recognition, or that its source stems from your ability to control. The clues to the first trap are heard in discouraged comments: “I’m not at the table,” or “I’m not seen as an essential member of the team.” To counter those fears, mission leaders occasionally fall into the second trap, positioning themselves as the sole and zealous protectors of the mission in ways that quickly become divisive and counterproductive. In contrast, when you recognize that you are authorized by your identity, your vocation and by the roots and breadth of the mission, the nature of your authority is hospitality and invitation. Through trust and relationship, you draw other leaders, coworkers and caregivers into an expanding circle of shared authority.

You come to see authority as an act of cocreation, or shared “authorship” of an organization directed by and toward mission. Authentic authority is demonstrated in your ability to influence, guide and enroll others in the Catholic vision of persons and community in ways that are profoundly self-effacing. Beyond the adage, “make them feel like it was their idea from the beginning,” the most effective mission leader catalyzes in others a degree of competence and passion that borders on making the mission leader seem redundant or invisible. Because you have internalized a profound authority, invisibility does not trouble you, and your authority enables those around you to see themselves as creators of a world made possible by commitment to the mission.

#### **BE AUTHENTIC IN YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES**

Another dimension that is key to executive presence for mission leaders is the quality of being

present through action. As you explore and understand your internal authority by expanding and sharing it with wider circles, your executive presence produces the quality of freedom — freedom to be discerning, to act and to let go of attachments.

The earlier stages of development that cultivate deeper awareness of your identity and integration of authority, and which produce that freedom, are critical because there is no single list of required tasks to integrate mission into the organization. Instead, the responsibility of a mission leader is always an exercise of prudence or practical wisdom, being attentive to lessons of the past, trajectories heading into the future and the exigencies of the present moment.

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You provide access to Catholic health ministry’s founding mission, legacy and spiritual and theological teachings and practices, and translate them for current circumstances. You can see the not-so-apparent complexities in situations that may impact the broader health care and community environments, and anticipate the likely consequences of current decisions toward that horizon. You highlight connections between decisions and organizational identity — keeping what is most human at the forefront — and you connect people. You discern the good and identify appropriate decisions and actions through discourse with other leaders and associates, and offer creative and innovative approaches to advance the mission. You are able to unite the perspectives of past and future because you remain free and true in the present moment. And, prudence calls you to act even without absolute certitude: speaking, building relationships, teaching, influencing, collaborating and, at every turn, reflecting.

## CONCLUSION

The unique paradoxes of your responsibilities as a mission leader in Catholic health care shape the development of your executive presence. Mission leaders don't "own" the mission, nor could you alone fully achieve its integration, as ideally, everyone who serves in Catholic health care plays a part. However, without mission leaders — without you — the drift from those principles of identity is usually swift.

Furthermore, another paradox of your service is that executive presence is usually developed while observing other leaders and learning the culture of an executive team. Although many mission leaders do hold executive positions and serve with other peer or senior leaders, some still do not (for example, those whose primary responsibility is for ethics education, community benefit, ministry formation or spiritual care) and may exercise leadership among those who are far senior to them.

The formation necessary for mission leaders to develop an executive presence marked by authentic identity, authority and responsibility requires spiritual practices of ongoing reflection on one's inner life and actions in community. By

doing so, you embody and model what all leaders and the whole organization are called to do and be. And through your presence, you sustain and deepen the integrity of the ministry, its authority as an agent of healing, and its responsibility to honor and preserve human dignity and advance the common good.

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## NOTES

1. Gerry Valentine, "Executive Presence: What Is It, Why You Need It and How to Get It," Forbes Coaches Council, July 31, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/07/31/executive-presence-what-is-it-why-you-need-it-and-how-to-get-it/>.
2. Mary Duan, "Improve Your Executive Presence," Insights by Stanford Business, September 27, 2017, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/improve-your-executive-presence>.
3. Duan, "Improve Your Executive Presence."

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Author Celeste Mueller describes executive presence as a multidimensional way of being a fully present and authentic leader in the workplace.

1. What did she describe about executive presence that may be different from what you previously thought about it?
2. How can mission leaders effectively navigate the traps regarding the nature of authority that Mueller discusses? How can they exercise authority through their identity, vocation and ministry heritage? How can mission leaders serve as catalysts of competence for other leaders and agents of collaboration for the ministry?
3. When have you seen a leader demonstrate executive presence in a meaningful way in a Catholic health care setting? Did you bring anything away from that person's example that you try to model in your own work?
4. Mueller talks about cultivating an inner life as an important foundational aspect of developing executive presence. What are some ways that you can incorporate silence, reflection and prayer into your daily routines and work?
5. Do you have other favorite ways of enriching your inner life that you'd like to share with colleagues as a successful tool, whether reading broadly about health care, journaling about your own day or something of that nature?

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