

Sheila Wherry

THE PINNACLE OF PRESENCE

How great leaders
connect, instil trust
& get the right results

Sheila is a coach and consultant with a 'secret weapon'
– the ability to use emotional intelligence to get to the
heart of people-performance.

Joshua Freedman, CEO of Six Seconds EQ Network

CHAPTER 5

LEADERSHIP PRESENCE

Chances are, for every ten supervisors you've had throughout your career you'd probably want to work for only two or three of them again.

JIM CLIFTON & JIM HARTER

IT'S THE MANAGER

Your Inner Presence is why you do what you do. Leadership Presence is how you show up doing it.

You would have recognised Leadership Presence in others, even if you haven't been able to label or define it. It isn't about their technical skills or simply whether they produce results; it is about confidence, credibility and trust. These are the leaders that you implicitly trust to take the team in the right direction. You have confidence in their abilities, and in return they demonstrate confidence in you. These leaders have the ability to

connect authentically with others, they value relationships as much as results and they lead with a balance of strength and warmth.

And now that you have started honing your reflective skills, this is the kind of leader you can be. Leadership Presence is built on your foundation of connecting to self and Inner Presence. Your ability to self-regulate, your strong sense of self, your inner confidence and calm will help you bring your best self to the role.

I define Leadership Presence as: *Projecting your Inner Presence outwards, signalling that you have what it takes to lead others.*

Leadership Presence is:

- bringing your best self to the role with inner confidence and calm
- balancing strength with warmth to build trust, connection and credibility
- reading the context and adjusting behaviours as needed.

Bringing your best self to the role of leader

In the last chapter you identified your personal vision, your core values, your strengths and development gaps. This is what you need to bring to your leadership style. (Yes, even the parts of you that need work.) Having clarity here will ensure you stand firm and are clear

in your communication, and not easily flustered when others disagree with you. You have clear boundaries and are able to say yes or no as needed.

A key part of bringing your best self is to develop your own genuine style of leadership. You can take cues from leaders you admire, but don't try to imitate someone else's leadership style, it will leave you looking fake and will not build trust, confidence and credibility. Instead, embody your Inner Presence (why you do what you do) and bring your genuine and best self to the role. It is an inside-out approach.

Having become clear on the 'inner' component, it is equally important to be clear on how you define your role as leader (as distinct from other roles you play in your life), how you want to be perceived in this role, and to be clear that how others perceive you is what you intended. You can then feel confident that your inner confidence and calm will be seen by others appropriately, and you will build credibility and trust.

Balancing strength and warmth to build trust, connection and credibility

In Chapter 2 we looked at the style of leadership that is needed in our times – one that balances strength and warmth, relationships and results. This builds trust, connection and credibility.

I'm going to take you through four core behaviours that focus specifically on supporting you to balance warmth and strength:

- empathy
- active listening
- adopting a humble mindset
- assertive communication.

These core behaviours will ensure you show people you care, that you treat them with respect and speak with clarity and decisiveness, building connection, while emphasising your credibility and trustworthiness. Having power with, not over, others will cultivate relationships and get results.

As we address each behaviour, I will ask you some questions to reflect on where you sit with these today.

Empathy

Demonstrating empathy shows you care, which builds trust and connection.

Empathy is the ability to see the perspective of another – through their eyes – to be able to tune in and sense what they feel, and to express care for them. And to do this while maintaining your separateness and being objective.

Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*, defines empathy as, 'the ability to imagine yourself in someone else's position and to intuit what that person is feeling. It is the ability to stand in others' shoes, to see with their

eyes, and to feel with their hearts’.

In your role as a leader, to achieve ongoing results with others, engaging and influencing them is essential. This is more challenging than ever given the varied nature of teams and how geographically dispersed they are. This calls for you to have the ability to meet the needs of a diverse range of people, to be other-focused and to take the time to understand their perspective. Without this, others will not feel seen nor heard and you will miss the opportunity to connect with and motivate your team, stakeholders and peers.

Leaders who demonstrate empathy

- take an interest in their co-workers’ concerns
- actively demonstrate this in words, tone and action
- overtly communicate that they care.

Through this connection they are better able to intuit a co-worker’s feelings or needs, and have a good sense of how they may see a particular situation.

Let’s see what this looks like in action.

My client ‘Blake’ explained he was feeling frustrated with his direct report – ‘Charlie’. Charlie had not been offered the promotion she had been anticipating and had become reactionary and negative as a result. Her behaviour was impacting the team. It was for this very reason, her reactionary behaviour, that the management team had decided not to progress her to the next

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management level. Blake set up a one on one meeting to give Charlie constructive feedback and support her growth and development. He wanted her to be ready the next time around. Blake took an empathic approach and, in our session, reflected on how this had supported a favourable outcome:

'When we met face to face, Charlie launched into her story and she was visibly upset and frustrated. I gave her the space to talk, instead of defending myself or the organisational decisions. I tuned in to how she was feeling. In the space of 10 minutes her body language relaxed as she spoke and I listened, and she saw that I understood. I didn't agree, but I understood. This completely changed the trajectory of our meeting.

Having connected on this level, I was then able to give her constructive feedback that would support her promotional aspirations moving forward, as well as ensure she was more focused on her behaviour with the team. She was able to hear this because I had started with empathy. That 10 minutes made all the difference. We both moved forward positively'.

The prerequisite for empathy is emotional self-awareness, starting with understanding the bodily sensations we feel before we tune into those of another. We covered this in Chapter 3.

When in meetings or interacting with others, ask yourself what another may be thinking or feeling in that moment. Be curious. Make a concerted effort to ask more questions. Pause. Be other-focused. By doing this in low stake situations, you can practise and prepare for more stressful times. When the stakes are higher, you are more likely to have to work harder to remain empathic.

Simple ways you can demonstrate empathy include:

- acknowledging a team member is stressed and suggesting they take a break
- offering greater flexibility to meet a family commitment
- providing development opportunities for an employee who is keen to progress.

It is important to recognise that as a leader you need to balance empathy with emotional regulation. A leader who is too empathetic may become overly embroiled in the needs or emotions of another, or be unable to provide constructive feedback when necessary. The key here is to empathise and appreciate the other's perspective, while remaining objective.

Reflection on empathy

- What helps you feel empathy?
- Do you feel you are able to demonstrate and utilise empathy in all contexts?
- When do you find it easier to feel empathic towards another? Clients tell me they feel more empathetic towards people they trust, respect or if they understand the situation another person is facing, perhaps due to a shared experience.
- Are there certain people with whom you are less able to feel empathy towards? Perhaps where the person has shown you a lack of respect or interest?

Empathy is a skill you can learn. And it takes practise. As you reflect on the above questions, make a note of what resonates with you. Use the Leadership Presence Action Plan at the end of this chapter to guide you.

And one final point: practise does not mean you will get it right every time, but you always have the option to go back and repair. To say to someone, 'I don't think I managed our conversation very well. Can I try again?'

That takes empathic leadership.

Active listening

Active listening is vital for keeping the balance between relationships and results. When others do not feel heard by you, they are less likely to listen to you or feel safe enough to share their perspective. Building the capacity to actively listen establishes trust and connection. You may not agree with another's perspective, but by tuning in to them, you show you care. You cultivate the relationship.

At the same time, as you actively listen, you create space for others to share their ideas. This enables collaboration and collective problem solving. You promote results, through relationships.

I work with some clients who find it challenging to take the time to actively listen to others. There are a myriad of reasons for this, and they are not usually because my client is trying to be difficult or challenging, even though they are often perceived as such in these moments. Instead, they are passionate about the topic, or perhaps they disagree vehemently with the person speaking, or they are short on time and want to get to the solution they have prepared. Some have had an emotional reaction to something someone has said and were not able to self-regulate in the moment. Their intention is good; they want to get to a solution. In the process though, they become disconnected with their

colleague(s) and the very solution they are trying to drive becomes difficult to execute. And the very people they need to support with their initiative are the same people they have not taken the time to connect with in previous interactions.

Active listening may feel counter-intuitive, especially when you are under pressure to get to an outcome and produce results, but if you are able to put your own opinions to one side and focus on the other person, you are more likely to create an opening for a real conversation – one in which you can both feel heard. This is the platform upon which you will co-create solutions and achieve buy-in.

Non-verbal communication

A key factor for developing your ability to actively listen is non-verbal communication. Keep in mind that much of what you communicate is conveyed through your body language. Pay attention to your tone, pace and body language, such as eye contact, to ensure your desire to actively listen is not being misconstrued. For instance, a client I worked with would lean towards the person he was talking with to show interest. However, he received feedback that through this action he was being perceived as aggressive. Be mindful of softening your stance and your eye contact, and consider whether it is appropriate to smile.

Your mindset is key to supporting your non-verbal

communication. By remaining curious and other-focused, and by adopting a position of respect, your overall interpersonal communication is likely to be aligned. As Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis, noted, ‘He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore’. Here is an example.

I recently worked with a client who had been advised by his manager and various peers that he was coming across as too direct and dogged in his drive towards results. To gain a more in-depth analysis to support my client’s reflection and development, I conducted a series of 360-degree feedback sessions with various members of my client’s team and peers, and with his manager.

The feedback showed clear themes across all stakeholders. While my client was seen as extremely direct, this in itself was not seen as a negative. Many valued his willingness not to be afraid to disagree, and be brave and tough instead of toeing the line, as well as putting differing views on the table and offering diversity of thought. However, the negativity was created because, when interacting with his co-workers, he

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was being perceived as being driven by achieving solutions at all costs. He was not keeping the relationship as a key focus.

I work with many clients who receive similar feedback. The overarching message from their peers is that they are knowledgeable and widely respected, but if they were able to adapt a more open approach, one in which they actively listened to their colleagues and created a relationship of mutual respect, they would be formidable.

My client reflected on his 360-degree feedback and made the conscious decision to adjust his style in the following ways when interacting with his co-workers:

- He spent more time asking others to share their perspective or specific challenges.
- He learnt to paraphrase what others had said to ensure they felt heard.
- He asked for feedback when sharing potential solutions and used open-ended questions, rather than making statements.
- He worked hard to avoid negative non-verbal communication such as folding his arms and

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sighing when frustrated. Instead he smiled and used open gestures.

- He was mindful about topping and tailing emails with gentler and more engaging introductions and conclusions, rather than adopting a short, sharp tone. In other words, he avoided responding purely to the content of the email and reminded himself to interact with the addressee on a human level.

As he embedded these practices, my client shared, 'I am a results and action orientated person and I always want to keep things moving and get to a result as quickly as possible. I usually have a preconceived idea or opinion as I go into a meeting, but I now make the effort to hold it, initially. I can sometimes feel a little frustrated by this, as it is not my natural style. However, I can see the positive benefits of allowing the time to hear others' perspectives and consider their approach. It is clear that the more I do this, the more others are comfortable to share their ideas, and their approach. I have also noticed that this usually results in stronger buy-in of the final solution from my team and stakeholders'.

Overall, he reflected, 'I have come to realise that sometimes it is better to step back and review

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before I make a comment, to notice what is happening around me. I work hard to pause and ensure I don't overtake the conversation. I have learned to let people in, to focus on trust and create connection. I can see the positive impact this has had. I have generated more impactful relationships, which has supported us to collaborate and get to results more effectively'.

Reflection on active listening

Reflect on a recent conversation in which you felt actively listened to? What was the person doing to support you in feeling this way?

Interestingly, 'listen' and 'silent' may have the same letters, but active listening is much more powerful than just keeping quiet. Active listening requires you to listen and respond in a way that focuses on what the speaker is saying, and to be able to relate back to the speaker the content and feelings in the message to enhance understanding.

Take a moment to consider how effectively you utilise the following active listening techniques:

- Paraphrasing, which requires you to interpret in your own words what the speaker has said and repeat it back to them.
- Reflecting facts, checking your understanding of the content or factual aspect of what the speaker has said.
- Reflecting back feelings, as appropriate, and conveying empathy.

Summarise key themes you heard. Make a note of what stands out for you as areas to refine and work on as you develop your active listening skills. You can incorporate this into your Leadership Presence Action Plan.

Humble mindset

We saw in Chapter 2 that in these complex times leaders need to accept they are no longer the experts with all the solutions. This calls for humility and a willingness to give everyone, including yourself, the opportunity to explore, to learn, to practise and to fail.

This is an argument supported by Dan Cable, a professor of organisational behaviour at the London Business School. In his book *Alive at Work* he says that for leaders to adopt a humble mindset means having the

‘humility, courage and insight to admit that they can benefit from the expertise of others who have less power than them’.

Of course, the buck stops with you as the leader, but if you don’t train and flex these new leadership muscles, you risk missing out on a huge opportunity to gain from others’ insights, as well as keep them engaged and productive.

As Dan Cable writes, ‘Humble leaders help other people seek their potential, and experiment toward that potential. This is a gift that makes other people want to give back and want to follow’. So rather than seeing you as weak (a concern I hear from some when I suggest a humbler approach) your people see you as more confident, and they will feel more engaged along the way.

A leader I work with makes a point of saying to her leadership team, ‘I don’t know the answer here, can anyone help me?’ She encourages her team to speak up, to suggest a solution and to do the same with each other. She speaks with confidence, and, through her words and actions, demonstrates that it is quite acceptable to find a solution together. She understands that so much is uncertain. She can’t possibly have all the answers. She is modelling humble leadership. This generates an inclusive team and she gets to results quickly; the outcomes are co-created.

Making it a habit to ask questions and be curious

supports the modelling of a humble mindset. Rather than making you look uninformed this practice will foster motivation and engagement. This is an argument supported by Tim Westergren, co-founder of Pandora. He says in a Harvard Business Review video, 'I really do think that people are very, very motivated by leaders who they view as humble. I think it is an inspiring attribute. You want to work for someone who is like that, and more importantly, you model that for people who work for you. So, if you do that as a leader, you build humble leaders who then, in turn, build motivated teams'. This also builds the capacity of the team to make decisions and be more self-reliant, thereby reducing dependence on the leader.

You may choose to ask open and broad questions if you are looking to invite a wide selection of perspectives, for instance, 'Does anyone have anything to offer here?' Or perhaps you are looking for thoughts on a specific agenda item, such as, 'Can you make any suggestions on how to improve our virtual team meetings?' Overall, the key here is that you are explicitly letting the team know you value and expect their input.

You are welcoming an open conversation that supports relationships and trust. You are demonstrating a humble mindset.

Reflection on humble mindset

Take a moment to consider humble leadership.

How well do you demonstrate this style of leadership?

- How comfortable are you with asking questions, and voicing that you would like to hear the perspectives of others?
- How could you actively model a humble leadership approach within your team and across your stakeholders? Do you know other leaders who do this well?
- Do you find yourself resisting the notion that you alone can't solve the problem, or are you open to co-creating solutions with others? Can you see the benefits of involving your team, stakeholders, peers and acting together on their suggestions?

As you reflect on these questions, make a note of what resonates for you. This can be incorporated into your Leadership Presence Action Plan.

Assertive communication

Empathy, humble mindset and active listening sit closer to the warmth end of the warmth/strength spectrum. We need to remember that strength also has a place. There are times when your team need you to be clear and decisive. For example, in the above section on active listening, I addressed the importance of hearing another's perspective. In this section, I am highlighting the necessity of being able to clearly articulate your views on the issue at hand while continuing to build trust and connection.

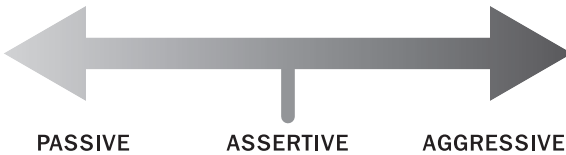
A practical example of this is when giving candid feedback. A high-performing team needs to be able to receive honest and open feedback. Assertive communication, aligned with the skills we have already addressed, is a critical component to this.

Assertive communication requires you to balance sharing your views and needs, while not restricting the other's ability to reply and share their perspective. You align this with appropriate body language, including good eye contact, a tone that is clear without being threatening or unapproachable, and an upright posture. You are firm, clear and respectful.

According to Sylvia Ann Hewlett, an economist and expert on gender and workplace issues, 'Real leaders listen, gather critical information, weigh the options carefully, look for a timely opening, and then demand action'. Such leaders are able to find the middle ground

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between passive and aggressive communication. This is assertiveness.



Being decisive and demanding action when appropriate requires good assertive communication skills. The key is in striking a balance.

Daniel Ames, a professor at Columbia Business School, and Francis Flynn, a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business, conducted a number of studies in which they gathered employees' views of their colleagues' leadership strengths and weaknesses. They found that assertiveness was the problem most frequently raised, at times more so than intelligence, charisma and self-discipline combined.

Ames and Flynn's research showed that potential leaders tend to be at one end of the passive to aggressive scale or the other. In one study, they reviewed 1,000 comments made by co-workers. Overall, more than half of the descriptions of leadership weaknesses made clear references to assertiveness, with 48% suggesting too much assertiveness (at the aggressive end of the

spectrum) and the remainder highlighting too little (at the passive end.)

Aggressive leaders can be toxic, closing off relationships and their ability to generate outcomes. They are focused on ‘winning’ or getting their point across and are not focused on the other person. This may be a useful tactic to generate fear and get results in the short term, but they will not instil trust and results over the long term. Behaviours associated with aggressive communication include shouting, giving ultimatums, using hurtful language, and non-verbal gestures such as pointing.

Conversely, a passive communicator will concede to another’s demands and will not clearly deliver their message to another. Passive leaders are unlikely to be effective or achieve results. They will compromise and fail to pursue what they need to avoid conflict. Behaviours associated with passive communication include remaining silent or being overly polite.

Aggressive or passive communication styles can become problematic and both are non-assertive.

Assertive communication is relating to others in a clear, direct, open way without wielding power or applying undue pressure. It is respectful and keeps the focus on the building and the maintenance of relationships. Assertive communication ensures you are candid and credible, but not controlling. There is a distinct difference, and a vital one if you hope to build trust and connection when leading others.

As a leader you will always need to navigate your way productively through conversations and conflict. Let's look at a hypothetical scenario and see how to do this with assertive communication.

Imagine one of your team members, 'John', has committed to getting a report to you by 4pm, in time for you to incorporate it into a final document to share with the board the following day. It is now 5.30pm and, when you go to look for John, you realise he has left the office and you are unable to reach him. You work into the evening, generating the necessary information to complete your document for the board.

Given your likely levels of frustration, it is possible when seeing John the next day, you may take an aggressive stance, calling him into your office, raising your voice to get your message across that you never want that to happen again. Alternatively, you could take a more passive position, and not address the issue at all with John.

Or you could embrace assertive communication and share the impact the situation had on you and your desired expectations for the future.

To support you with this I have created the following acronym:

Raise the issue, and express the
Impact on you (state your issue without blaming anyone. Do not label the other person, e.g. 'You are lazy'), then explain your
Desired expectation for the future.

An example of how to apply this could be:

R: ‘John, I asked you to get that report to me by 4pm yesterday’.

I: ‘When I discovered you’d left for the evening and had failed to send me the information, I felt frustrated and let down’.

D: ‘Next time, if I give you a deadline, I’d like you to let me know if you foresee an issue. And let me know if you are going to miss it’.

I encourage you to finish this statement with, ‘Is there anything you need from me to make this happen?’ This ensures the accountability remains with your co-worker while demonstrating your level of support.

For example, John may not have sent the report to you because he did not have the skills to generate the necessary data. He may be more inclined towards a passive style of communication. Without this final statement, you are not opening up the option for John to reply to your request, and to take the necessary steps to upskill, and support you better in the long run. This simple final statement will allow you to build trust and connection, and ensure a better outcome in the future.

Reflection on assertive communication

- As you review the passive – assertive – aggressive spectrum, where do you currently sit?
- Does this change depending on the context – for instance, if you are in a high stake situation or close to a deadline?
- Do you find it harder to be assertive with certain types of people – for instance, a person with a particular style or position of power?
- Do you effectively step back and listen? Or do you go into meetings with a preconceived idea? Are you able to pause before jumping in with a comment?
- Do you feel you are able to speak up in a meeting for an idea you feel strongly about? Does this vary depending on who is in the meeting?
- Think of a recent occasion when you wanted to let someone else know that you were unhappy or dissatisfied with a result they produced. Did you find it challenging to give them this feedback? Is it harder to speak up with one person, and less so with another?

As a leader, to remain focused on both relationships and results, it is important you are able use assertive communication to share honest and robust feedback. Having the ability to speak up candidly while also demonstrating respect and care for the other person is an ideal way to build connection, while not losing sight of results. As you reflect on the above questions, consider what you would like to incorporate into your Leadership Presence Action Plan.

Reading the context

Bringing your genuine self to your role of leadership comes with a caveat. And that caveat is context.

The elements that define a good leader in one context may not work in another, and ideal leadership behaviours may vary across organisations. For example, what is required in a large financial institution may be very different to what is required in a small family run business, or a large government agency. Likewise, what is required in your role as a leader may be different to what is required in your role of parent or friend. You are still you, but you may need to adjust based on the context.

In your role of leader, while it is important to remain genuine, you may need to modify your behaviour to fit with the environment or particular needs of the situation at hand.

For instance, one of your key strengths may be your detail orientation – your ability to absorb, contribute and get across a lot of information. If you are working on a complex report with your team, diving into the detail with them may be imperative. However, if you are presenting a strategic overview to the board, you will need to lift out of that detail.

Likewise, if a part of your genuine self is to use a lot of humour, to find the funny side of things or be flippant, this will not be appropriate in various work contexts. You may find that you need to ‘dial up’ or ‘down’ depending on the situation at hand. If you are about to share some bad news with the team, humour is unlikely to be appropriate. Yet, when giving a celebratory speech about a colleague, humour is probably welcomed.

With each of these examples, you may know this instinctively but lose sight when under pressure, or when feeling tired or frustrated.

To demonstrate Leadership Presence, it is important to be clear how to modify your behaviour, or dial up or down, as required.

I am not suggesting that you compromise or ‘sell out’ to the extent you no longer feel genuine. In fact, I have worked with executives over the years who have felt their personal values were misaligned with the culture of their organisation to such an extent that they have made the decision to move on. By doing their Inner Presence work, they became clear on their non-negotiables.

Being mindful of nuanced contextual considerations and adjusting your style and approach to fit organisational and situational contexts is essential in demonstrating Leadership Presence.

Leadership Presence at a glance

In Chapter 2 I encouraged you to focus on relationships to get to results. The behaviours outlined above will help you build trust and connection with others to cultivate those relationships.

I've also said leadership is contextual, and so it is important to decide the type of leader you want to be, and to understand how you are being perceived by others. Now we are going to create your Leadership Presence learning and development plan to help you gain clarity on this and generate an action plan to bridge any gaps between the two.

This will help you to build a list of key themes to work on to ensure you are exhibiting the leadership behaviours needed to demonstrate Leadership Presence.

Leadership Presence learning and development plan

A key to Leadership Presence is being intentional about how you want to be perceived by others in each and every context, and being clear about the behaviour you want to exhibit and model.

To support my clients to get to this point we work through a series of exercises. Everyone comes in with a different set of skills and issues, so I tailor reflective exercises and actions to their particular situation. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

I don't know your starting point, so I can't tailor exercises for you, but I can step you through a process to decide the type of leader you want to be and discover how close you are to the mark, in the eyes of both yourself and others. This will help you understand what areas to work on. I'll give you some examples of common themes that arise for my clients, as some may resonate with you.

I have provided you with a Leadership Presence Action Plan template to capture your findings. It is then over to you to be your own coach. Remember, we are continually learning and adapting, so go easy on yourself. Take it step by step. The key is to be, and remain, intentional. It is about being the leader you want and chose to be – for yourself and for others.

There are three steps:

1. Decide the type of leader you want to be.
2. Discover how you are perceived now.
3. Develop your Leadership Presence Action Plan.

Let's get started.

Step 1. Decide type of leader you want to be

Start by reviewing the leadership behaviours I have outlined in this chapter (empathy, active listening, humble mindset and assertive communication). Having reviewed the reflective questions, in each section, what resonated? What would you like to refine? Use the Leadership Presence Action Plan at the end of this chapter to guide you.

How do you want to be viewed as a leader? How would you like others to describe you? Consider the following questions to support your reflection:

- Think of a leader you are inspired by. This can be someone you know, worked for or with, or someone famous, past or present. What behaviours did they exhibit that you admire? What did they do that made you want to follow them and enjoy working with them?
- Now consider a leader you didn't enjoy working with. What behaviours did they exhibit that you didn't like, or found ineffective?

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- Think back to a day or time you got home and thought, 'I did a really good job today'. How were you acting on that day? What stands out for you?

Reflect on your responses to the above questions and write a list of clear bullet points on the type of leader you want to be.

Now answer the question: *What is my leadership style when I'm leading as my best self?* Refer to your SWOT analysis from Chapter 4 as you consider this question.

Now distil this:

- What three words would you use to describe your leadership style?
 - If you're struggling, what words would your manager use? If you don't know, have a guess.
 - What words would your direct reports use, or other stakeholders?
 - What words would you like them to be saying?
- Now come up with three words to describe your leadership style, and complete the sentence.
I am _____, _____, and _____.

When I ask my clients to do this, they struggle to come up with three words initially. However, as they start to reflect on and describe their leadership style, who they

are aspiring to be as a leader and who they have been when they are at their best, their body language clearly shows they feel empowered. They are energised by this process.

Here are some examples from my clients:

- I am a credible, empathetic and accountable leader.
- I am an empathetic, strong and professional leader.
- I am a decisive, genuine and caring leader.

This is an outward demonstration of your Inner Presence and ensures congruence between how you act and who you are.

Step 2. Discover how you are perceived

As Leadership Presence is largely about perception rather than concrete facts, collect feedback from people around you.

When working with clients to develop their Leadership Presence, I conduct 30-minute interviews with their key stakeholders, managers, peers and direct reports. Feedback varies of course, yet there tends to be consistent themes that come through the conversations. This provides my client with clear areas to work on, and real-life examples from which to build a Leadership Presence development and coaching plan.

Examples of feedback I might receive:

- X is warm and approachable.

- X offers a diverse perspective.
- X is outcomes-focused, dogged and resilient.
- X needs to devote more time to strategic imperatives and be less involved in the details.
- X should build stronger engagement with cross-functional teams.
- X needs to utilise more of an active listening approach.

While it may be uncomfortable, there is no reason why you can't do this for yourself.

Select a handful of people who have seen you interact in various situations, day-to-day and in high stake situations. This may be your manager, one peer and two direct reports. Pick people you trust and respect, and people you feel will be able to give you honest and direct feedback and won't just be nice to you.

Ensure the person is aware that you will not hold their feedback against them and that you value their perspective. Be clear that you are collating feedback to understand key themes you can work on.

Here are the types of questions I ask, which you can use or customise to fit your own needs:

- What do you see as my strengths? (This can be useful to start as it's a broad question.)
- What do you see as my development opportunities?
- What would you like to see me doing more of?
- What would you like to see me doing less of?

- What would you like to see me stop doing, start doing or keep doing?

Remember, the goal is to understand key themes to work on. It is useful to ask for specific examples of times you've demonstrated a particular behaviour being discussed. This gives you tangible examples to reflect on. On the other hand, try not to get overly caught in the detail.

You may find you want to defend yourself when you hear the feedback, or you may feel uncomfortable. Work hard to remain curious and listen. Remind yourself that while the feedback is useful, it is subjective. And it is incredibly useful – this is your opportunity for growth.

Be relaxed. If you look uncomfortable or upset, the other person will recognise this and start to minimise their sharing. Always remember to thank the person for being generous and courageous enough to provide you with feedback. Remember, it is quite possible this was uncomfortable for them too.

The feedback provided gives you clear data on how you are perceived by others. Review the data to draw out key themes – both strengths and areas for development.

Step 3. Develop your Leadership Presence Action Plan

You now have three sources of information to draw from:

- your self-reflection on your leadership style
- your reflection on leadership behaviours that build trust and connection
- the key themes you've drawn out from the feedback you've collected.

The next step is to compare your self-reflection alongside the perception of others. What are the key themes that emerge? Where are the most significant gaps, and strongest alignment?

Pay attention to any areas where your perception is quite different from the feedback you have received. This indicates potential blind spots to work on. By closing these gaps you can feel confident you are being seen by others in the way you intended.

As you review, consider areas that will have the most impact and create the biggest wins for you. This is very individual, so I encourage you to take your time with this exercise.

Let me give you an example.

I have gathered feedback on behalf of clients whose stakeholders have stated they are 'too blunt and direct'. Some clients, when hearing this feedback, aren't shocked, knowing they have a particularly direct communication style. The feedback, however, reinforces their need to

refine their style (as they are getting their stakeholders off-side, and this is starting to damage relationships and their career prospects).

However, other clients have not expected their 360-degree feedback group to perceive them as ‘too direct and blunt’. This comes as a surprise. As we reflect on why they have received such feedback, some come to realise it is borne out of frustration, perhaps because they have recently missed out on a work opportunity and feel demotivated, or because they do not have sufficient organisational resources to get their job done and have become solely task focused. In this instance, we work to resolve the underlying issue.

I share this example to illustrate the importance of taking your time to reflect not only on the themes that emerge, but also addressing any underlying cause.

What actions do you need to take to address your findings? Add these to your Leadership Presence Action Plan.

Following are some common themes (not an exhaustive list) that emerge when conducting a 360-degree feedback review for my clients. You may choose to reflect on these as you consider where you want to be, and where you are today.

Common strengths:

- depth and breadth of knowledge
- people focused

THE PINNACLE OF PRESENCE

- enterprise mindset
- able to offer a diverse perspective
- provides candid feedback
- strong work ethic
- results driven
- creates a loyal team
- provides a broad and diverse perspective
- passionate about chosen field
- ability to work across multiple priorities.

Common development areas:

- interpersonal communication – increase awareness of impact on others
- give greater focus on securing buy-in from others
- manage frustration – ensure this doesn't show up in interactions with others
- lift out of the detail – consider broader context
- empower team – let go of detail
- strategic focus – create more time for this
- focus on wider consultation with business
- target appropriate level of detail for various audiences.

Now it is time to finalise the areas you would like to start working on. Use the following Leadership Presence Action Plan to guide you.

LEADERSHIP PRESENCE ACTION PLAN: BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Your leadership style

(Refer to ‘Decide type of leader you want to be’ section above). Remember, this is the leader you would like to be consistently, leading as your ‘best self’.

I am _____ , _____ ,
and _____ .

Leadership behaviours that build trust and connection

What resonated as you reviewed the reflective questions under each leadership behaviour covered in this chapter? What would you like to focus on and refine to develop your Leadership Presence?

Empathy _____

Active listening _____

Humble mindset _____

Assertive communication _____

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Key themes to emerge from 360-degree feedback process

Strengths

Development areas

CHAPTER 5: LEADERSHIP PRESENCE

Areas to work on (examples provided below)

Key area of focus _____

Strength or development area _____

Action steps

Desired outcome

Impact on my Leadership Presence

Example 1.

Key area of focus: Provide context

Strength or development area: Development area

Action steps:

When making requests, start by explaining the rationale and provide background information. Give others the WHY.

Desired outcome: Secure buy-in.

Impact on my Leadership Presence:

My team will be clearer about why I am asking for their input on project X, and why I am asking them to work to a tight deadline. They will feel more motivated as they are clear on how this ties back to broader context.

Example 2.

Key area of focus: Assertive communication

Strength or development area: Strength

Action steps:

Continue to keep a focus on providing 'in the moment' feedback with my direct reports (balance this with empathy).

Desired outcome:

Mutual accountability to ensure Project X gets completed on time.

Impact on my Leadership Presence:

My team will get more comfortable with speaking up, sharing feedback to ensure we keep driving outcomes together. They will also know I care about their development – and this will support trust and connection within the team.

What's next?

In Chapter 6, we look at Team Presence – how to produce results with others, by navigating team dynamics, adopting intentional communication and learning to foster a team environment that embraces collective learning and problem solving. A team that produces effective and innovative results together.