

Conceptualizing and Measuring Executive Presence

The Bates ExPI™: Executive Presence Index

Abstract

A paper describing the development of the Bates Model of Executive Presence and the ExPI

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INTRODUCTION

We, like many reading this paper, have known intuitively and for a long time that Executive Presence (EP) is important. As most readily acknowledge, it's defining EP that has been difficult if not daunting. It is one thing to know that it is not simply a matter of presentation skills or image. Indeed, it seems to be one of those big, fuzzy ideas that when spoken signifies something that people “kind of” recognize but are challenged to articulate or specify in anything approaching actionable terms.

So, about a year and a half ago, we concluded that the time had come for a rigorous, scientific approach to assessing EP. With this resolve, we funded the development of a first-ever research-based model of EP, which has been used to design a multi-rater assessment tool that measures EP. The Bates Model of Executive Presence is presented below (Figure 1), and the assessment tool, the Bates Executive Presence Index (ExPI™), has been piloted, validated, and launched. We tell you about both in this paper.

Executive Presence: When and how it emerges as a need

Every year, when management is huddled around the table in executive talent reviews, the topic of EP comes up. In discussions about readiness for the next big job or when updating succession plans, there will inevitably be individuals who are found wanting in this area—even among the strongest candidates. But wanting for what exactly?

If you ask management what they mean by EP, even those with expertise in executive talent development, they may offer descriptors such as “gravitas,” “command of the room,” “inspiring,” “great communicator,” and “confident.” They will even provide examples of executives who “have it,” this by way of indicating “what good looks like.”ⁱ It's clear, then, that they know it when they see it *and* that they believe it makes a difference.

Upon further inquiry, we found that EP seems to become particularly noticeable and important as leaders are taking the larger stage. Here they and those they lead usually encounter rising levels of challenge. The executive leader faces more diverse, often more demanding stakeholders. Everything they do or don't do, say or don't say, is scrutinized.

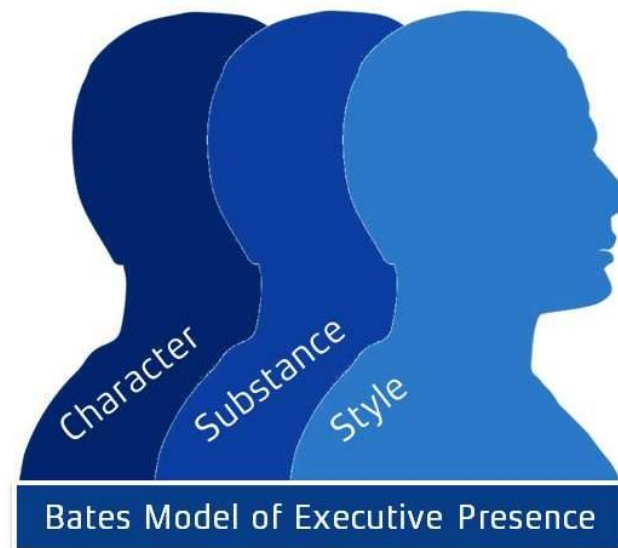
EP reveals itself, then, as a social-organizational phenomenon. Leadership at this moment—when leading a global change initiative or a post-merger integration—is in the proverbial fishbowl. Whether as one leader facing many or as one leadership team facing the multitude, executive presence concerns how others perceive and are affected by the

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leader's intentional *and* unintentional communications of meaning.

What is intended and what is perceived, of course, are not always aligned. But what we do know is that what is perceived will be determinative when it comes to attitudes, motivations, and actions. Therefore, even those who are not so sure how to define EP know it matters. They also know that until it can be defined *and* measured they will be disadvantaged when it comes to offering their executives and best candidates actionable guidance on how to develop it.

Defining Executive Presence



Whether they realize it or not, leaders are always communicating who they are and what they value.

As a social-organizational phenomenon, EP is appraised through many lenses. Leaders are judged for their *character*, their *substance*, and their *style*. Whether they realize it or not, they are always communicating who they are and what they value. The quality of their insight, judgment, and decision making are constantly being evaluated. Their stakeholders look for integrity and wisdom in their words and action, especially at critical moments.

We know now from research something that Abraham Lincoln surmised many years ago: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” Reinforcing the wisdom of Lincoln, management scholarsⁱⁱ have found that executives cannot rely on “surface displays” alone (faking it) to win hearts and minds. It goes deeper than that and involves more genuine expressions of feeling and value.

Our appraisals and judgments of an executive's character, substance, and style form over time. Enduring and predictable patterns of thought, attitude, and conduct emerge to support stable appraisals of trust, credibility, and competence. Followers attribute positive intentions to leaders with whom they have formed such bonds of interdependency over time.ⁱⁱⁱ Suffice it to say, EP is about more than *mere* style. A robust model of EP must address qualities that make a difference and that last.

Character has been a less studied—some^{iv} would say neglected—topic in research on leadership, but even now there is a growing body of literature on the role of vital character variables in leadership. Character includes person-based dispositions in moral development, temperament, and interpersonal relations. The five facets of character that make up this foundational dimension of executive presence in our model are *Authenticity, Integrity, Concern, Restraint, and Humility*. These variables often figure into models of exemplary leadership.^v

Substance includes cultivated qualities of adult development specific to the role of executive leadership: *Practical Wisdom, Confidence, Composure, Resonance, and Vision*. We observe here the pragmatic and aspirational qualities of mind (*Practical Wisdom & Vision*),^{vi} a mature capacity for risk assessment and prudent decision making (*Confidence*), as well as poised abilities to lead others through tough times^{vii} (*Composure*). And perhaps the most nuanced facet is the social-emotional savvy to read and respond to others, to connect with them, qualities often categorized under the heading of EQ (*Resonance*).

Style facets focus on the active, iterative, course of execution. The mere physical presence of the leader, her energy, demeanor, and nonverbals (*Appearance*), set a tone. Then the three interlinked aspects of dialogical communication—*Intentionality, Interactivity, and Inclusiveness*—sustain focus, check alignment, and ensure engagement. The leader thereby informs adaptive changes and prompts timely course corrections. When doing challenging work, there will be moments of disagreement, tension, and uncertainty, and that is where leaders must be ready to surface issues and pursue difficult conversations without delay (*Assertiveness*).^{viii}

The Model

The Bates Model of Executive Presence is presented in all its Dimensions and Facets in Figure 1. It has been operationalized in the form of a multi-rater feedback survey (Bates ExPI™) intended for use with a senior executive population in an organizational setting.

The ExPI™ measures self-perceptions of the leader and the perceptions that others have

of him/her on all 15 facets of the Model. The Model was developed based upon an extensive review of theory and empirical research in management, psychology, communication, social action theory, and ethics.

An international panel of 10 independent Ph.D. level experts in executive assessment and development helped reduce a very large item pool to the few “best” items. The ExPI has been validated; it yields very good reliability (consistency across people and situations) and validity (measures the “right stuff”).

Figure 1. The Bates Model of Executive Presence

| Character – qualities that are fundamental to the leader as a person, to his/her identity, and give us reason to trust him/her. | Substance – cultivated qualities of mature leadership that inspire commitment, inform action, and lead to above-and-beyond effort. | Style – overt, skill-based patterns of communicative leadership that build motivation and that shape and sustain performance. |
|---|---|--|
| Authenticity – being real, genuine, transparent, and sincere in one’s relations with others; and revealing the experience and beliefs that define oneself. | Practical Wisdom – displaying high honed qualities of insight and judgment that get to the heart of issues and produce prudent decision. | Appearance – looking and acting like an able executive; projecting energy, and handling social situations with tact. |
| Integrity – acting with fidelity to one’s values and beliefs, living up to high standards of morality, veracity, and promise keeping. | Confidence – being self-assured in decision-making and action; ready to accept the risk and responsibility for taking timely action. | Intentionality – clarifying focus, keeping actions aligned and on track, all without stifling dissent or neglecting needs to adjust course. |
| Concern – demonstrating interest in others, encouraging adaptive development, and promoting a healthy sustainable culture. | Composure – proving to be steady in a crisis, able to calm and focus others, and to bring objectivity and perspective to critical decisions. | Inclusiveness – actively involving others, welcoming diverse points of view, encouraging ownership in mission, and empowering initiative. |
| Restraint – displaying a calm disposition, characterized by reasonableness and by avoidance of emotional extremes or impulsiveness. | Resonance – connecting with others; attentive, attuned, and responsive to feelings, motivations, and thoughts; deepening alignment. | Interactivity – promoting an interpersonal style of dialog and timely exchange of information and questions to coordinate action. |
| Humility – showing awareness of one’s strengths and weaknesses, an openness to others, and a belief that all persons have worth. | Vision – generating an inspiring, enterprise-wide picture of what could be; recognizing emerging trends, and engaging all in strategy. | Assertiveness – speaking up, valuing constructive conflict, and raising issues directly without shutting others down. |

Validation of the ExPI: Reliability and Validity

Cronbach’s Alpha is the standard statistical measure of reliability for assessment scales. The evaluation of reliability is fundamental and important because it lets the user know whether the assessment tool in question can be counted on to produce the same results in repeated trials. It indicates that we can count on it to work consistently over time and across situations.

This measure of reliability was applied in analysis of the Bates ExPI™ Pilot Program data. Results indicate that the ExPI is sound in its scale construction. This is encouraging to see because our model or “construct” of Executive Presence was deliberately designed to preserve the original complexity and nuanced nature of the phenomenon. Doing so can sometimes make it more challenging to achieve high reliability ratings.

We took this approach to assessment design in order to maximize “content validity,” that is, to measure as fully and completely as we could the phenomenon of Executive Presence. Just as one can drive up the value of the alpha statistic by writing highly redundant items, one can lower the statistic by developing items that reflect distinct aspects of the facet in question.

| Facet | Cronbach’s Alpha ¹ | Description of Result |
|------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Authenticity | .747 | Good |
| Integrity | .875 | Good |
| Concern | .823 | Good |
| Restraint | .846 | Good |
| Humility | .845 | Good |
| Practical Wisdom | .877 | Good |
| Confidence | .821 | Good |
| Composure | .849 | Good |
| Resonance | .823 | Good |
| Vision | .849 | Good |
| Appearance | .834 | Good |
| Intentionality | .815 | Good |
| Inclusiveness | .870 | Good |
| Interactivity | .803 | Good |
| Assertiveness | .789 | Good |

¹Very high alpha levels, e.g., over .95, are often regarded as undesirable because they can indicate redundancy.

Our research resulted in a model of Executive Presence that is based on decades of advances in understanding what contributes to success in business leadership, especially in times of change and challenge. The fact that we drew upon research and variables known to have cross-cultural relevance, and the fact that we used an international expert panel to review the constructs and help winnow down a rather large pool of items to the few best items by Facet provide assurance that ExPI is a tool that can be deployed globally.

Executive Presence for Individuals and Teams

Most people think about EP as an individual quality of leadership. In one sense, this is really quite appropriate given our emphasis on the distinctive role of character facets in defining who the leader is as well as what he or she cares about and has reason to value. Everything we have included under the character dimension is value-based and has normative implications for our identity and conduct as free moral agents.^{ix}

So it was an interesting development when we encountered numerous inquiries about how feedback on EP might be used at the team level. Let's face it, the so-called senior leadership team (SLT)—whether it designates the CEO's direct reports or the direct reports of function heads or business unit presidents—is often rather a loosely aligned group, each with their own priorities and sometimes standing in competitive relationships to one another.

But even authors like Jon Katzenbach,^x who have expressed skepticism about top management's capacity for teamwork, allow that there are moments when it is particularly critical for the senior management group to function as a team. And it was just these kinds of situations that we were hearing about as we began to apply our model of EP to individual members of SLTs.

In one instance, the CEO of a leading technology firm had issued a call to action to his team. Their market position and profitability were eroding due to trends toward ubiquitous, mobile computing. It was time for the SLT to address issues of strategic direction and innovation in a way that they had not done since their birth as a company. The threat to their business had cross-cutting relevance to all business units. They would need to explore and evaluate options efficiently, make decisions and problem solve jointly, and succeed or fail together.

Consider for a moment the potential role of just one facet from the model, *Humility*, for this SLT. Their legacy strengths and winning ways are now no longer sufficient. They must recognize the reality that all innovations have a shelf life. It's time for a new wave

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of innovation. Their leaders and key contributors must let go of pride that blocks fresh thinking and exploration of new possibilities. Their *Confidence* must be grounded in the courage and determination to find the next big wave.

Another case involved a defense manufacturer whose pipeline of business was shrinking due to DOD budget cuts that looked like they would have lasting effects. Management believed that it must develop new markets globally, look for opportunities in the commercial sector of the economy, and pursue some of these avenues by means of acquisition. Meanwhile, they must find ways to consolidate operations and improve efficiencies. It was time for all to sacrifice in the service of a greater good. Legacy issues that divided business units must be transcended.

To enter commercial markets requires a new way of thinking. Federal procurement procedures caused the firm to mirror the bureaucratic style and pace of the public sector. In that world, engineering often becomes over-engineering, and leadership and governance often takes the form of command and control. In commercial markets, leaders must model a *Practical Wisdom* that places a premium on time-to-market considerations. In the face of dramatically changing market conditions, initiative and decision making must be shared and silos broken down (*Inclusiveness*) as leaders facilitate decisions made by team members with diverse backgrounds and varying points of view.

The management of these firms believed that unless they could deploy their leadership in concert as one SLT they would not be able to navigate the challenges and changes ahead. They felt a rising sense of urgency. In this context, questions of EP take on a more collective meaning.

The fundamental questions of EP go something like this: “How must I/we show up to effectively signal the need for change? What do those we lead need in order to decide that my/our leadership is worth following? Will they find what they are looking for in the manifest quality of our *Integrity*, *Practical Wisdom*, and *Confidence*, and in the *Intentionality* of our approach to execution?”

For the SLT, the questions also include, “How must we as individual members of the SLT show up to our respective units and to the enterprise and its stakeholders when it really counts?” No doubt, the CEO faces a unique challenge in forging this kind of a team dynamic. Structures that define and reinforce their common goals, complementary roles, and vital contributions are critical, and so too are the evolving dynamics that create cohesion and build team discipline.

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Description of the ExPI Assessment Process

Administration:

- The ExPI questionnaire is set up for online administration, and participation is guided by established procedures.
- We provide guidance on how to select raters—the appropriate mix of supervisor(s), peers, direct reports, and, potentially, other key stakeholders.
- Assessment participants receive an email message inviting them to complete the ExPI as a self-rater or other-rater. The message provides a link to the site where they sign in and complete the survey.
- Reminder emails are sent and tracking information on the number of completions to date is captured to monitor progress. Those who have not completed the survey are prompted by email.
- A help number is provided in the original email to participants for questions concerning online access to the questionnaire.

ExPI Questionnaire:

- The questionnaire is completed by the individual leader (self-rating) who is receiving feedback from others. It is also completed by the individual's manager (where applicable), peers (3-5), and direct reports (3-5). Individual ratings are shown for self and manager; peer and direct report ratings are aggregated.
- In order to encourage candor, individual ratings of peers and direct reports are not revealed.
- But attention is given to points of variability and convergence of ratings between groups and within groups during interpretation of the feedback reports.
- The results of the ExPI questionnaire are intended to support the individual development of leaders who receive the feedback. Therefore, we recommend that leaders being rated also are empowered to decide when and how they disclose ExPI results to others.
- The ExPI contains 90 items and 3 open-ended questions. Results are reported by scale (15), by item, and by dimension (3). Mean ratings by rater group are graphically represented. Several of the highest and lowest rated items as well as comments are included in the report.

Summary Description of the Pilot

Pilot Participants

- Twenty companies participated in the ExPI pilot, representing a broad range of industries (financial services, life sciences, professional services, manufacturing,

insurance, consumer products).

- 55% of the leaders in the pilot were senior executives (C-level, EVP, SVP); 45% were mid-level executives (VP, Director).
- All participants were appraised as in good standing or high potential.
- While most of the leaders in the pilot were based in North America, the United Kingdom, Continental Europe, South America, and Asia were also represented.

Business Context

- Most of the participating companies were public corporations from the Fortune 500 to Fortune 1000, and most of these companies were global enterprises.
- Organizational conditions varied, but most were experiencing significant challenges with growth and change.
- Several participating companies were undergoing restructuring driven by market situations on a global level.
- All business functions were represented: marketing, sales, finance, legal, operations, engineering, IT, and HR.

Validation of ExPI

- Analyses revealed very good reliability and robust construct and content validity.
- The reliability performance was especially impressive in light of the considerable breadth of the items for each facet.
- Administration and feedback procedures proved to be highly effective.
- No essential change to items or constructs was indicated.
- Practices for linking results to the business context proved effective.

Compatibility of ExPI

- The Bates Model of Executive Presence has been mapped to several proprietary competency models with ease.
- The ExPI has been recognized as a complementary tool to use with other executive development assessment tools (e.g., Hogan and Leadership 360s).
- The ExPI structure explodes and provides finer-grained insight into EP-related variables in other assessments (communication, influence, vision, etc.)
- The ExPI is distinctive in adding facets of Character that are less often represented in other competency models and assessment tools.

In summary, the pilot showed us that we can proceed with confidence, knowing that the ExPI is a reliable and valid instrument that provides a way to measure and take action on specific aspects of a leader's EP. And it can be leveraged for use with leadership teams!

ⁱ Some of this descriptive language used by executives was also captured in a recent survey conducted by CTI. See S. Hewlett, L. Leader-Chivee, L. Sherbin, J. Gordon and F. Dieudonne, “Executive Presence,” white paper, Center for Talent and Innovation, New York, 2012.

ⁱⁱ See W. L. Gardner, D. Fischer and J. G. Hunt, “Emotional Labor and Leadership: A Threat to Authenticity?,” *Leadership Quarterly*, 20, no. 3 (2009): 466-682.

ⁱⁱⁱ See M. Eberly and C. Fong, “Leading via the Heart and Mind: The Roles of Leader and Follower Emotions, Attributions, and Interdependence,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 24 (2013): 696-711.

^{iv} See B. Avolio, “Full Range Leadership,” 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011); and T. A. Wright and J. C. Quick, “The Role of Character in Ethical Leadership Research,” *Leadership Quarterly* 22, no. 5 (2011).

^v See for example, J. Collins, “Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve,” *Harvard Business Review* (July 2005): 66-76; B. Bass and R. Riggio, “Transformational Leadership,” 2nd ed. (New York: Psychology Press, 2006); and R. Boyatzis and A. McKee, “Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion” (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

^{vi} For an example of the normative and prudential uses of practical wisdom, see Kilburg “Executive Wisdom: Coaching and the Emergence of Virtuous Leaders” (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2006).

^{vii} Macaux has characterized this mature form of leadership as “generative leadership.” See W. Macaux, “Generative Leadership: Responding to the Call for Responsibility,” *Journal of Management Development* 31, no. 5 (2012): 449-469. For a recent effort to apply wisdom research and classical ethics to executive development, see R. Kilburg, “Executive Wisdom: Coaching and the Emergence of Virtuous Leaders” (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2006).

^{viii} For an example of how dialogical communication promotes timely, effective action in the world and flatter, more networked, and more global organizations, see B. Groysberg and M. Slind, “Leadership Is a Conversation,” *Harvard Business Review* 90, no. 6 (2012): 76-84.

^{ix} Philosophical and psychological identity theorists propose that character, being rooted in moral values, answers more directly than any other layer of our being, the question of who we are, what we stand for, and why we should be trusted, respected, and believed as leaders. See E. Erikson, “Childhood and Society” (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1950/1963); R. Kegan, “The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development” (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); and C. Taylor, “Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity” (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

^x See J. R. Katzenbach, “The Myth of the Top Management Team,” *Harvard Business Review* 75 (Nov. 1997): 82-91; Katzenbach, “Teams at the Top: Unleashing the Potential of Both Teams and Individual Leaders” (Boston: McKinsey, 1998); and Katzenbach, “The Irony of Senior Leadership Teams,” *The Journal for Quality and Participation* 21, no. 3 (1998): 8-15.