

HOW TO GROW YOUR BOARD PRESENCE



A CEO Succession Coach Shares Some Inside Tips

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relationship with your board
already is, what if it were
30%...or even 50%... better?*



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Leadership. Influence. Presence.

How To Grow Your Board Presence

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Shares Some Inside Tips

No matter how good your relationship with your board already is, what if it were 30%...or even 50%... better?

How much easier would it be to:

- Engage in meaningful discussions
- Build trust and influence
- Accelerate the pace of getting things done
- Enlist support for critical business initiatives
- Help you and the rest of your team be perceived as strategic and business-savvy

If you're a senior-level or high-potential executive, strengthening your relationship with the board can significantly increase the level of success you have in your role, as well as be a rewarding experience on its own. And one of the most important means of doing this is by cultivating what we often call "board presence".

"Strengthening your relationship with the board can significantly increase your success in your role...as well as be a rewarding experience on its own."

But even though “board presence” is a commonly used phrase, it’s often hard to get a handle on what is meant by it ... and it’s even tougher to figure out how to develop it.

In my role as a leadership coach, I frequently work with CEO’s, their successors, or other members of the management team who are looking to enhance their board effectiveness. I also regularly meet with boards to better understand their needs.

These experiences have provided me with an insider’s understanding of what boards especially value in their interactions with management teams. It also provides me with an appreciation for approaches that give my clients the highest rate of return—i.e., easy-to-execute tactics that quickly and reliably increase their stature and influence at the board level.

In this white paper, I’m happy to share with YOU an array of those inside strategies and tips to help you improve your board presence.

“The tips that follow are the ones that give my CEO succession clients the highest ROI. In other words, these are easy-to-execute tactics that reliably increase a leader’s stature and influence at the board level.”

What Is “Board Presence” Anyway?

But before we get to the tips, let’s first clarify exactly what board presence is and why it matters. This will help you to more effectively use the tips that follow.

Credibility and influence----that’s the ultimate objective of any member of the management team in their relationship with the board. To achieve that you need:

- Mastery of the business topic and its implications
- Quality of judgment
- Trustworthy character

For the purpose of this discussion, I’m assuming that as a capable executive you already have mastery, judgment, and character covered. In other words, you most likely have built a solid foundation in these areas, and you continue to target your development through education, experience, mentoring and coaching.

You can regard subject mastery, judgment, and character as **WHAT** is needed to earn credibility and influence with the board. On the other hand, presence is **HOW** you demonstrate to the board that you have these essentials.

*“Subject mastery, judgment, and character is **WHAT** is needed to earn credibility and influence with the board.*

*On the other hand, presence is **HOW** you demonstrate to the board that you have these essentials.”*

Here's a graphic to help you visualize that.



As you can see from this graphic, board presence **AMPLIFIES** what you already have.

- The more you have excellent board presence, the more effective you will be as an executive.
- And the converse is true. The more rudimentary your board presence, the more you will struggle to be heard and accepted as a credible member of the leadership team. This is true **EVEN** if you already have good subject mastery, judgment and character. You ultimately may be successful in your role without good board presence. But it will take more time and more effort to get there.

So Why Does the Board Need to Be Reassured? And What Is It Looking For?

Well, the answers to those questions lie in the very unique experience of being a member of a board. Let's step into a board member's shoes for a moment to get a sense of how that experience feels.

- You are part of a collection of disparate individuals vs. a cohesive team. You and your fellow board members don't have much opportunity to work together, and you have different experiences, skills, concerns and work styles. As a result, the interpersonal dynamics may be a little awkward or challenging.
- Your job is episodic. Rather than having a continuous view, you generally have 8-10 snapshots a year. As a result, you have a narrow window through which to glimpse what is happening in the business, and you don't always have the larger context in which to fit the various glimpses you get.

"How does it feel to be a board member?"

- *A collection of disparate individuals*
- *Job is episodic*
- *Highly filtered information from management*
- *Too much data*
- *Too little judgment*
- *Stakes are very high.*

In short, an UNEASY experience.

So what helps to defuse that uneasiness?"

- When you do meet with management, you are generally receiving highly filtered information. You are aware that you often don't know what you don't know, and that you lack an independent perspective for changing that state. Most of the time, all you can do is simply trust that you are being told all relevant information needed to accurately assess the company's status and make good decisions.
- Ironically, you also can receive too much data. Management is often eager to demonstrate how knowledgeable it is on various topics. You appreciate the background and often ask a lot of questions that give the impression that you want more data. However, all those details can get confusing (though you never admit this), and you may worry that you can't see the forest for the trees.
- You are increasingly more aware of the fact that the stakes are very high if the board does not get things right. The downsides include not only major hits to shareholder value, but often sometimes to the long-term viability of the company. And the risks of personal liability and reputational damage have increased as well. As a result, you can be hyper-sensitive to risks of all kinds.

There are many other observations we can make about the board experience, of course. But when we consider the above, our understanding of the board as our audience deepens. We begin to realize that:

- Being a board member is not only a powerful and gratifying role. It often is a deeply uneasy experience, regardless of the façade that a board may present.
- If a management team member is not skillful in defusing that vague unease, the board is left wondering whether he/she is “enough”, regardless of credentials.

So, what will dial down that unease? What makes a board feel confident that you are a safe pair of hands and your opinion is worth considering?

Put another way, what attributes is the board looking for when judging board presence?

I’ve discussed this question with hundreds of board members in a wide variety of organizations, and fortunately for us, there is a clear consensus.

The attributes that make up excellent board presence are:

1. An appropriately relaxed and self-confident demeanor
2. Clarity of communication, particularly the ability to succinctly yet accurately discuss complex issues and situations
3. A strategic, senior-level perspective and behaviors

Put another way, boards are looking for PARITY when they are assessing board presence. What do I mean by parity? When members of the board leave the board room and go back to the lives that occupy the majority of their time, they want to know that they have left the company in the hands of management team members who think, behave and make judgments as they would (or would like to!), not the way a “junior” would. When a board feels this is the case, it can relax. The board knows you are highly capable and have its back.

“The answer?”

Boards are looking for the degree to which you demonstrate PARITY when they’re assessing your board presence”

What Are Some Simple Techniques YOU Can Use to Cultivate Your Board Presence?

So now we get to the good stuff...some specific tips and strategies that will reliably enhance your board presence.

A few observations first, however:

This list is merely a selection of some techniques that are simple, straight-forward, and easy to execute. Of course, there are also more advanced approaches to developing board presence. Regardless, when properly executed all of these techniques are effective in enhancing board presence...some surprisingly so.

While many of these techniques are simple, do be thoughtful in applying them. Some are best learned through supervised practice with a coach who can speed up the learning process, give you personalized feedback, and suggest how to adapt them to a range of circumstances. And selecting which techniques to work on can be a nuanced process that considers the particular dynamics of your board and what is a good fit with your own style. In general, if you're serious about developing board presence, it's worth investing the time to do that with an expert.

Techniques that demonstrate relaxed self-confidence

1. Body language

- Practices that dial down feelings of tension or nervousness prior to board meetings (Amy Cuddy's work; tips from the field of acting and sports; etc.)
- Postures that convey ease and confidence during board meetings (examples: weight of body centered and grounded rather than tipped forward; shoulders held broad with shoulder blades moving down the back)

2. Mindset

- Frame your role in a way that makes it easy to be a relaxed senior statesman and to avoid coming across as over-eager. LABEL this role with a title that you can repeat to yourself in a board setting. This is quick way of keeping you focused on how you want to show up.

3. Questions and call-outs

- Break through the artificial formality between board and yourself and create a connection.

- Example of a direct question:

Bill, I've noticed you've been quiet on this issue. Do you have any concerns?

- Example of a call-out

Mary, you mentioned X when we were having coffee before the meeting. I wonder if it would be helpful if the board heard more of your reasoning on that?

4. Emceeing

- A more advanced form of a call-out that notes a board dynamic and invites members to engage on that question

- Examples:

Linda, you raise a good point here.

John, I know you also are focused on this issue. What do you think about what Linda just said?

Several of the board seem to be leaning towards doing X. How do we ensure that we do X in a way that also aligns to our commitment to do Y?

Techniques that demonstrate clarity of communication

1. Bottom-lining

- Very easy technique with quick results
- Merely say something like “If you only remember three things from this presentation, remember this.” Or “If we only tackle three initiatives this year, they should be the following.”
- Bonus points for relaxed self-confidence if you do this immediately before your presentation and appear to be going off-script.
- Appear to be ready to launch into your presentation but then momentarily pause.
- Carry a pad or a sheaf of paper in your hands, and make a point of visibly putting it down.
- Then say “If you only remember three things from this presentation...”

2. Keep in-meeting presentations succinct

- You cannot overestimate how little data the board actually wants. Instead it wants the most relevant data, an understanding of the outcomes, and your considered judgment.
- Eliminate slides from your initial draft. Then eliminate a few more. And then a few more.
- Create appendices, pre-reads and post-reads for most background information you feel the board needs, and reference these in your presentation or discussion with the board.
- Use infographics and stories to convey information and illustrate your points.

3. Spell out the links to business and strategic results

- Most presentations make specific requests or recommendations without fully and compellingly articulating what this will accomplish for the business. The assumption appears to be that the positive result is obvious. Don't make that assumption. Take time to spell out the benefits in detail.

- For example, the statement: “We should invest in X to be in compliance with the law” is insufficient. A better phrasing might be: “We should invest in X to be in compliance with the law, thus building stronger trust with customers and gaining a competitive advantage in the marketplace.”

Techniques that demonstrate strategic, senior leader behavior

1. Change the order of your presentations to an outcome-oriented structure

- Starting with the outcome you are seeking (vs. presenting first the issue, then the recommended solution, then the outcome) is one of the most POWERFUL techniques you can use.
- This approach makes any presentation more persuasive, and it heightens the perception of the presenter as more strategic.

- And it's a remarkably simple technique, despite its power. Just be sure you get some guided practice in this approach over several presentations so that you get comfortable and skilled in executing this smoothly.

2. Share judgment as well as data

- A focus on data to the exclusion of judgment almost always reads as “junior” or “tactical” in the boardroom.
- Do not shy away from sharing your well-grounded subjective judgment. Just be sure to articulate your rationale for that judgment.

3. Be attentive to when and where it may be important to demonstrate gravitas

- While management team members can often err in being excessively formal or buttoned-up in board settings, certain occasions and issues call for formality in order to emphasize the seriousness of the discussion.
- Avoid appearing too relaxed on such occasions and pay attention to posture, attire and communication style.

How Do You Get Started?

I like to think of my board presence skills as a tool kit. Over time, I've collected these skills and a well-honed sense of which tools to use in a variety of contexts.

That might be a helpful image to have as you start to build your own collection of board presence skills. It's a step-by-step process vs. an immediate transformation. Normally we gravitate first to the technique that feels the most comfortable to us. Then we practice that technique in a few low-pressure settings, such as meetings or presentations with colleagues. Then once we feel greater ease with the technique, we're ready to incorporate it into our board interactions. We've also built the confidence to start practicing and mastering other techniques.

Of course, if you're guided and supported by a leadership coach as you practice, you'll be able to accelerate your growth and comfort-level with these skills. But even on your own, you can grow your board presence over time. All it takes is knowing some insider tips and then practicing these techniques with focus and consistency.

And if you have any questions as you do, no worries! At Significa, we love sharing information that helps leaders to better move their ideas forward and make a difference in their organizations. Just send your question on board presence to me at kdockry@significagroup.com, and I'll be happy to clarify or point you in the right direction.



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