



TRANSCRIPT

Episode # 5: How Not to Appear Junior

Well, good morning, everyone! Today, we're going to talk about one of my favorite topics..... how not to appear junior.

So, what do I mean by appearing "junior?"

Well, have you ever had this experience?

You're asked to make an important presentation. Maybe it's just to your boss or to a cross-functional team. Maybe it's to the management team or to the Board.

Whatever it is, you want to do a good job. So, you think everything through, and you prepare well, and you do it. In fact, you do a pretty good job if you do say so yourself. And everybody thanks you for your hard work.

And yet..... how come you feel like something was missing?

Sure, everyone told you it was a good job. But you kind of feel like they were patting you on the head when they told you that.

I certainly felt that sometimes. It felt like “Good job, Kathy—now sit there quietly while we have the discussion and make the decision.” It wasn’t “Good job, Kathy—we can see you’re going places.” or “Good job, Kathy—we can see you’re one of us.”

I was left feeling a little on the outside. I was left feeling a little, well..... “junior.”

So how do we turn that around? How do we avoid looking and feeling junior?

Well, first here’s a reminder of what we’re really talking about.

Any time we’re talking about how we want to appear or how we don’t want to appear, we’re talking about the issue of “presence.” And you’ll recall from Episode 2 of this, “presence” is the combination of all the big and little signals we’re sending out as to whether or not we are a person to be taken seriously.

So, when you don't want to appear junior, you're actually asking yourself, "How do I grow my leadership presence?" "How do I start getting taken seriously?"

Now, of course at some point in our careers, we are all in fact junior. Most workplaces are hierarchies, so we almost always have someone above us who is technically more senior than we are. We even tend to emphasize this by using that word senior explicitly—like "senior mgt team" or "senior vice president."

But just because we are junior, we seldom want to appear junior. You don't climb to the next rung of the ladder or have your ideas taken seriously if you appear junior.....or at least you have to work a lot harder to get there.

You instead need to appear ready to be taken seriously and ready for larger roles. You may in fact be doing stellar work. But you also need to be signaling that you have the sound judgment and skills that we expect in a good manager or leader.

As I mentioned, the issue of not appearing junior is a pretty common one. It's not just something we deal with when we're first starting out and low on the totem pole. It comes up whenever our credibility is at stake.

For example, I often hear about it when I'm working with executives who are in functional roles like HR or Legal. They can worry about their credibility with operational colleagues and whether they appear junior in that context.

And leaders who are members of groups that historically had to fight for credibility in the workplace, like women or minorities, are sensitive about being perceived as junior.

And at the very top of most corporations.....well, even a leader there can struggle with the perception of being junior. A classic example of this is someone who is in line to succeed the CEO. He or she must respect the chain of command and acknowledge the CEO as the boss.

But if that person doesn't demonstrate they are their own person and shows up as too junior to the Board.... well, often they don't get the CEO role. They might be appreciated and respected, but not perceived as having the gravitas and strength necessary for that final promotion.

So, let's get back to you.... what do you need to do not to show up as junior?

Let's first look at what we usually do when we're presenting to an individual or group that is above us in the hierarchy and we want to impress those people.

Here's an example. I was once coaching a senior leader----let's call her Amy—who had been told she would probably be offered an expat assignment in southeast Asia in the next year. We were discussing her plans for strengthening her team and preparing her successor in the time she had left.

Amy had a high potential direct report named Mike who she thought would be perfect for her job. But she wasn't sure her peers on the management team shared her opinion that he was ready. And she was hesitating about having him present to them regularly in the time she had left.

He had good ideas and experience, but she worried about whether he had earned enough credibility with the mgt team. She felt like she still needed to provide some cover for him whenever she took him to meetings. But she couldn't explain to me why she felt that.

So, because she was stuck, I asked Amy some very specific questions about what Mike did and didn't do in those settings, and here's what she told me. See if this sounds familiar to you.

He came to meetings incredibly well-prepared and ensured everyone had all supporting data and understood it well. He was very attentive to the group. He leaned forward, watched each member of the team intently, and nodded his head

vigorously whenever anyone said anything, so that they understood he was listening carefully.

He was very respectful of everyone's position in the hierarchy. He wrote down what they said, offered alternative points of view, but never pushed back firmly or debated them. So, nothing too surprising there. We've all seen that behavior in management team meetings. It's characteristic of someone who is a good soldier.

But looking at those tactics as a whole, what impression does it leave you with? It feels like that person is trying to please and placate you. It feels like that person is junior.

Now at this point, you might be saying, "But isn't that what senior management wants---to be respected and deferred to?" Well..... no.

Sure, lots of us like respect and deference. It's not as if we dislike that. But when you're thinking about whether someone is ready for a bigger role, I would argue that it's even more important for senior management to feel reassured.

You want to be reassured that the person is a safe pair of hands—that they have good independent judgment and can effectively act as your proxy. If someone shows up trying to placate and please you, they seem junior. You might like them,

but you're going to feel vaguely uneasy about whether they're ready for a larger role.

So, what was the answer for Mike? How could he eliminate that uneasiness and make sure the management team saw him as a strong successor to Amy?

This the point where the Mikes of this world say, "Well, I'm not going into these meetings and swagger. That's not me. It would look fake and come across as disrespectful."

And I agree with that. It does look fake if that's not the way you're wired, and even if you're wired that way, it's risky behavior. Some people might accept it, but you can be sure that others will be put off by it.

But.... there is a middle ground. And it's an approach that's perfectly respectful to senior executives..... while also reassuring them that you too are credible and have your own power.

The phrase I use to describe this approach is "relaxed self-confidence." Before I give you some specific tips about how you can use this approach, let me tell you a little about why it works so well.

So, picture this.....you're watching a nature documentary with the sound turned off. On the screen is a pride of lions on the African savannah. Nothing much is going on—just a group of them hanging out together.

Quick question.... which lion is the most powerful?

Think about it—what's the visual clue?

The answer? It's the lion that's lying on its back. It's so powerful, that it can relax with no worries of being attacked. It knows that others would be foolish to take advantage of it.

It's a cool dynamic, and I've sometimes used it myself when I've walked into a meeting room and didn't know who was who. Generally, the person who is the most relaxed and showing the least need to impress others probably has a lot of power, whether because that power is from their title or the result of how much influence they have.

Now, many people don't consciously know that relaxed self-confidence is a sign of power. In fact, they might tell you that in the boardroom setting, you show up as the exact opposite.

However, I can say as someone who has sat in on thousands of board meetings, management team meetings, and work meetings of all kinds, that's not great advice. Yes, you should always be respectful in those settings. But respect doesn't require excessive formality or people-pleasing.

Instead, senior people find relaxed self-confidence an enormously attractive and reassuring trait. And the person who displays relaxed self-confidence is invariably perceived as someone worth listening to and a likely candidate for larger roles. He or she has eliminated the risk of being perceived as "junior."

So, how do you start showing a little relaxed self-confidence? Well, there are a whole bunch of tactics for doing this, and I'm going to go through a short list of them with you now on this episode.

There are lots of others, of course, and in my coaching engagements and in my online courses we explore some of those in depth. I'll share even more of that with you down the road in future podcast episodes. But for now, this is a good starter kit for you.

Tip #1: Have the right mindset.

What's the wrong mindset? That you're in the room to impress people with your knowledge, or that you're in the room to please everyone.

Each of those mindsets might get you liked or appreciated. But they also make you look junior.

So, what's the right mindset?

That you're there to help them arrive at a good decision. That you're there as a facilitator for good decisions, not as a lackey.

Tip #2: Come prepared for two things.

To cut to the chase. It's pretty common for senior leaders to hurry things along, and if you're not prepared for that, you can get flustered and appear junior.

A good way to prepare is to ask yourself before an important meeting or presentation: What are the top 2-3 things this person needs to know to make a decision?

The other thing you should come prepared for is to offer your judgment and opinions, not just data and expertise.

You may have great data and expertise, but so do a lot of other people. What makes you unique and someone worth listening to is your well-informed judgment and opinions.

A good senior person knows this, and he or she often will ask you for your personal point of view. If you aren't able to provide a thoughtful answer..... well, again you look junior.

Tip #3: Your body language at the meeting

We could go down a big rabbit hole when we talk about body language, and we don't have the time for that in this episode. But there are a few basics that are really helpful to remember, and that you should always try to do.

First, be careful about leaning forward.

We've all seen that person who is so intent on pleasing that he or she is leaning forward the whole time with their shoulders hunched and hanging on every word.

It looks terribly earnest and well... junior.

Instead, stand or sit straight. There's nothing wrong with leaning forward occasionally for a minute. I personally think it's a great way to show genuine interest, engagement or passion from time to time about something that's being said. The mistake is leaning forward consistently during the meeting.

Secondly, keep your shoulders down and rolled back, which relaxes and opens up your chest.

Remember that powerful lion lolling on the African savannah? You're demonstrating that same relaxed stance, but in a much more professional way, of course.

And do also try to keep the core of your body tight and strong. That will ensure that not only do you look relaxed—you also look self-confident.

Finally, think about your face.

Don't allow it to get too tight and tense, the way it often does when we're focusing and thinking really hard. Again, that's the expression of a junior person, trying hard to impress.

Instead think about keeping it relaxed and open, even when you feel intimidated by the setting or voices get raised or abrupt, as sometimes happens in workplaces.

For me, when I have the right mindset.... that I'm there to steer everyone to a good outcome—my face looks open and my eyes are warm automatically. I look confident but relaxed. In fact, if things start getting a little unnecessarily tense, I'll sometimes show a tiny touch of amusement in my eyes.... without cracking a disrespectful smile, of course. I'm signaling "No big deal. It's just business, and I'm confident enough not to take things personally. In fact, I'm a little amused that you thought I might."

Tip #4: Engage with the senior people and ask questions that help facilitate things.

So, our typical behavior when we're with people who outrank us is to get quieter and let them lead the discussion. I definitely was guilty as charged of that during the earlier part of my career.

But if we're on the sidelines when the senior people speak, then where does that leave us? It leaves us looking junior.

Now, often we're reluctant to jump into the middle of things because we think it will look presumptuous or disrespectful. Or we're just plain nervous and intimidated. But even when we're too nervous to make statements and debate, we usually feel better about asking questions.

Not just any old questions, of course. The best ones to ask are things that help make important observations, clarify things, point out hidden challenges that need to be addressed, or create alignment around next steps.

Questions like, "John, you haven't weighed in yet. What do you think of the proposal?"

Or "How does the position you're taking square with our strategy in Europe?"

Or "If we move forward with this, who will be the most important constituencies and how will we keep them in the loop?"

Asking questions is an easy way to participate in the discussion. And it has the added benefit of showing your ability to steer things in a productive way. That's the hallmark of a leader.

So, there you have 4 tips that will help you show up at your next important meeting more like a peer who needs to be taken seriously, and less like a dependable junior person.

Try 1 or 2 of them out for yourself, or even try them all. You'll start noticing that the atmosphere changes, and that people start taking you a little more seriously. And that's always a very good thing!

OK, my friends, here's to a good week ahead for you, and I'll see you in our next episode!

We're celebrating the launch of the podcast here, and I'd like to include you.

I'm going to be giving away AirPods Pro to five lucky listeners who follow, rate, and review the show. Now, of course, you don't have to give the show five stars, although that would be awesome and I do hope you love what you've heard so far. But I'd also love your honest opinion and feedback as well as your questions so I can create a show that's a valuable resource for you.

So visit [significagroup.com/podcastlaunch](https://www.significagroup.com/podcastlaunch) to learn more about the contest and how to enter and I'll be announcing the winners on the show in an upcoming episode.

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