TRANSCRIPT

Episode # 27: How To Have Strong Leadership Presence in Meetings

You are listening to episode 27 of *Mastering The Power Skills*. Let's think of your typical work meeting. Generally, there are lots of other people talking as well, either following a well-structured agenda or all piping up and in dialogue. There's even usually a person or two who's dominating the air space.

So, how on earth do you get heard? And how do you get other people to understand that you're so much more than that quiet person in the corner? Join us in today's episode, and you'll learn some very simple and easy strategies to establish a strong leadership presence in a natural and helpful way.

How much more could you accomplish if you were 25% or even 50% more influential and persuasive? Welcome to *Mastering The Power Skills*, the podcast that provides you with the tips, strategies, and the inspiration to grow your own power and win support for your ideas. And now here’s your host, C-suite leadership coach Kathy Dockry.

Hi, everyone. You know, one of the things that are most characteristic of the work world, at least within large, complex organizations, is also the most mundane. It's all the meetings. Most of the time, we're looking at meetings as a necessary evil. They're necessary because they're one of the best ways to get aligned and make decisions when you have a lot of people working on different things.

Imagine the chaos and the confusion if we didn't have meetings. But they're often seen as evil due to their frequency, the lack of clear and focused structure, and often just the sheer boredom. Now, this isn't an episode about how to reform the process of having meetings. There are already a lot of resources out there on that. And I'm not sure that a lot of people are listening or following up on those resources.

But I would like to talk about how one of the most mundane and commonplace activities in our lives can be an excellent chance for you to demonstrate strong leadership presence, even when you're not leading the meeting yourself. And in fact, we often aren't taking advantage of this opportunity at all.

In formal meetings, we can be a little too deferential to others. We want to be respectful, of course. But often, that means we stay too silent out of fear we'll rock the boat. And in informal meetings, quite likely, we're stuck in a rut. We have a preferred way of showing up and interacting with everyone, and we probably haven't changed that up in quite a while.

Think about the routine meetings in your workplace. Quite likely, you can predict how many of your colleagues are going to show up simply because they're stuck in a rut as well. So why is this a missed opportunity for you? Well, first, because we're in meetings so often, our presence when we're there often dictates how we're widely perceived by other people.

In that way, you could think of meetings as a stage that you're on over and over again. The impression you make in meetings over time will be the general perception that people have of you. And it's also a missed opportunity because you don't have to do very much at all to show up in a different way. In fact, you don't want to change too dramatically. That's going to look disruptive and feel unnatural to you.

Instead, you want some simple and easy tactics to make others feel your leadership presence in a healthful and natural way. So I've got you covered on that. Today's episode provides you with three different techniques for changing your presence in meetings. Whether you use all of them or just even one of them, people will start to favorably notice how you're showing up. But you will still be you, just a better and more engaged version of yourself.

So, let's get started. Our first meeting tactic is the use of strategic questions. If you've been listening to this podcast for a while, you've heard me talk before about how questions are an underutilized and valuable tool in the workplace. In fact, in one of our earlier episodes, we explored how questions can be used to create and deepen relationships with colleagues, thus expanding our influence.

And in episode 26 last week, I told you how questions could be used to capture attention by leveraging our neurological predisposition as humans to be responsive to them. In the context of meetings, questions are often a more engaging way than statements to make your presence felt and to add value.

Properly used questions remind everyone to focus on the big picture or on overlooked issues. They guide people, and they make it feel less confrontational to colleagues than statements. Another reason why questions are a great tool is that we actually may not know as much as our colleagues do.

For example, if you're a functional leader, you may be very smart. But you may not know the numbers or the operations of the business as deeply and as fluently as your colleagues. And even the operational leaders that I coach are often reluctant to express opinions in meetings as to what a peer is doing in a different part of the business because they fear not being as well informed as that peer is.

However, what you do have going for you as a smart, capable leader, is your natural curiosity, your knowledge of the strategic goals, and your high-level perspective on the business and its various constituents. And you can use that knowledge to ask some strategic questions that add real value to the discussions, even if it's on a topic that you don't know inside out.

Here are some specific categories of strategic questions that are perfectly appropriate for anyone to ask in a meeting. So the first category is alignment questions. And what are some examples of alignment questions? Well, they're pretty much what the term says.

Here's a question that you could ask, how does this topic being discussed align with the strategy? Or how does it align with this year's competitive objectives?

How does it align with what the board has been focusing on recently? Or how does it align with various policies or processes in the company?

A second category of questions are what I call outcome questions. Here are a few examples, how will this topic drive strategic objectives? Or what will the impact be of this decision a year from now?

Or you could ask another category of questions; I call them perspective questions. In other words, these are questions that look at the topic being discussed from a variety of points of view. So here are a couple of examples, what will customers think of this topic? What about employees? What about the board? Or how about investors or shareholders?

Or you could ask accountability questions. Here are a few examples of those, how will we ensure that the decision we're making delivers what we expect it will? That goes to the processes and the accountability structure that you'll build around that. Another question that's an accountability question is, what sort of measures or monitoring or progress reports will be made?

And finally, you could ask resourcing questions. And those are great questions to ask. One is, do we have enough people to do this? Or do we have the right people to do this? Do we need to consult with experts or retain some expertise that we don't already have? And a great question along this path is, are there any best practices that we should check out?

So as you can see, there are a whole host of questions that we can ask in meetings that don't require deep knowledge of the topic and that add value by guiding the group to consider issues that are helpful to decision-making. My coaching clients love this technique and the results that they get from it. It's an especially good approach for someone who is an introvert and who dislikes talking all the time in meetings.

One or two well-chosen questions can often do more for your leadership presence than a time-consuming dialogue in a meeting. However, one concern that people sometimes have about this approach is how they can use this technique regularly without inadvertently sounding like a broken record or annoying colleagues. And I have several sort of practical recommendations on that.

First, limit yourself to one to two questions per meeting, especially at first when you're trying this technique out. Secondly, keep on switching up your questions from meeting to meeting. Don't ask the same type of question from the same category over and over again. And thirdly, it has to do with how you actually ask that question.

You want to introduce your question in a way that looks like honest and helpful curiosity. You don't want to look like you're cross-examining people. Some of my favorite openers are things like, “I'm wondering if,” and then I ask the question. Or “Help me understand how,” and then I asked the question.

Finally, when people answer your question, definitely you should engage with them. You shouldn't just sort of say nothing and let that answer sit there. Otherwise, it's the equivalent of a meeting mic drop, right? The person who answers the question and gets the last word.

Make an observation or ask a follow-up question. And at the very least, compliment them and thank them if they have a well-thought-out answer. And if they don't have a good answer, well, then be helpful. Offer them some suggestions or support in getting to the answer.

So let's move on to one of my favorite presence techniques at meetings. It's super easy. It's a good fit for those of us who are introverts or cautious about acting presumptuously. And it's almost always appreciated by our colleagues. If you use this approach regularly, you'll not only be perceived as having a strong leadership presence. You'll actually be better at the art of leadership.

This approach involves asking questions as well, but this time the questions are more overtly used to steer the conversation. I call this technique MCing because when you use it, well, people start perceiving you almost like you're the MC, in other words, the Master of Ceremonies at the meeting. It sort of resembles what we call facilitating, but I think there's a subtle difference, and I'll explain that further to you.

So here's what it looks like in action. Colleague number one gives an update, explains an idea, or offers an opinion. You then express a brief reaction. Something on the order of, say, that's interesting, or I like that because, or I'm wondering if, or even, well, I don't know whether I really feel the same way.

Just keep that reaction brief because what you're going to do next is then look at colleague number two and say something like, “Colleague number two, what do you think or feel about what colleague number one just said?” And that's it. That's all the technique is. It's pretty simple, right? But it's also deceptively powerful.

Without saying much at all, you're steering and deepening the conversation. You're getting others to open up and explore issues further. And you're just creating additional value. And it even gets better because how do we perceive a person who steers the conversation, gets everyone talking, and encourages deeper and broader exploration? Well, usually, we call that person the leader.

Instead of pontificating, you're behaving as the leader does. And as a result, you're going to be perceived as having a strong leadership presence. I think you can see why I love this technique.

And finally, let's move on to a slightly more advanced version of MCing. I call this technique the call out. When you MC, you're using at least two other people as you steer the conversation. First, colleague number one, and then colleague number two. When you do a call out, however, it's just you making an observation about someone else in the room for the purpose of expanding the discussion.

As a result, it takes a little more confidence to do a call-out since you can feel a little bit more exposed. So here are some examples of what a call-out looks like. Something gets said or discussed at the meeting, you then turn to a colleague, generally, someone who's been quiet, and you say something like, “Colleague, number one, what do you think about that?”

Or you can say, “Colleague, number one, I noticed the expression on your face just changed. What do you think about what we're discussing?” Or you can say, “Colleague number one, when we were talking the other week, you told me X, Y, and Z. Why don't you share that observation with the rest of the group?”

We tend to shy away from such direct questions for fear that we're going to put someone on the spot. But I believe we need to get over that fear and pay more attention to why and how we're doing the call-out so we can do it appropriately.

So what do I mean by that? Well, if our goal is really to be more inclusive and draw people out for the purpose of having a better discussion, then your intent is good. And all you have to do is declare your good intent so that people don't feel put on the spot.

In other words, you tell them that you're asking the question for the purpose of having a better discussion or a more complete discussion. In fact, sometimes I might even tell a colleague before a meeting that I might ask them their opinion during the meeting so that they understand that when I do so, I'm acting with good intent.

Of course, on the other hand, actually, sometimes my intent is a little bit more complicated, and I really do want to put my colleague on the spot. Why would I be feeling like that? Well, maybe that colleague isn't really aligned with the group but is trying to hide that fact so that he or she can work behind the scenes to undermine the decision. I want to shine a light on that so that that dynamic is out in the open. And my colleague is seen by everybody and is painted into a corner.

Or maybe I perceive that my colleague as not being especially competent. And I want to create a situation where the person actually displays himself, and the group can more easily understand that as well. That's a beneficial outcome for the group as a whole.

A call-out is a fantastic way to achieve either one of those two objectives. It's very fair and respectful. You're not doing anything underhanded or intentionally casting shade on your colleague. You're acting with integrity. What you're doing is merely providing visibility through the use of your question. How that colleague shows up when you make him or her visible is up to them.

But if you've assessed them accurately, then you're making it easier for the group to make the same assessment. And you're steering things in a direction where that colleague will be more clearly seen for who they are, whether that's positive or negative.

So you can see how using call-outs require a little bit more boldness. But any reservations you might have usually are just in your own head. In reality, almost all the time, you're perfectly safe using this technique. And because everyone else interprets call-outs as requiring confidence and strength, you will be perceived as having those attributes as well. In other words, your leadership presence will be greatly enhanced.

Okay, my friends, there you have three very simple ways to start showing up in meetings with strong leadership presence. Be sure to consistently use at least one, if not, all three techniques at meetings. And over time, you'll be perceived as a strong leader who can effectively steer things. In the meantime, however, I hope you have an awesome week ahead, and I'll see you in our next episode.

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