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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Cracking the Code: Executive Presence and Multicultural Professionals



**Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Noni Allwood, Karen Sumberg  
& Sandra Scharf with Christina Fagnoli**



**Research Sponsors:**  
Bank of America, Chubb Group of Insurance Companies, Deloitte,  
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# Executive Summary

## What marks a high-potential professional as “leadership material”?

As 2012 Center for Talent Innovation research affirms, being a top producer or performer isn’t enough: you must have executive presence (EP) in order to be considered for positions of authority. Executive presence constitutes 26 percent of what senior leaders say it takes to get the next promotion.

Yet because senior leaders are overwhelmingly Caucasian, multicultural professionals (African American, Asian and Hispanic individuals) find themselves at an immediate disadvantage in trying to look, sound, and act like a leader. Their representation in the C-suite attests to this disadvantage: multicultural professionals hold only 11 percent of executive posts in corporate America, and they comprise a paltry 3.8 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs. Aware of the importance of executive presence, multicultural men and women are nonetheless hard-pressed to interpret and embody aspects of a code written by and for white men. And the feedback that might help them do so is markedly absent at all levels of management.

Executive presence comprises three universal dimensions: gravitas, communication, appearance. Gravitas is an amalgam of behaviors that convey confidence, inspire trust, and bolster credibility, such as exhibiting moral integrity, emotional intelligence, and calm in a crisis. Communication encompasses superior speaking and presentation skills, but also the ability to read—and command—a room.

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Appearance is not one look, as dress and style codes vary widely across industry, but rather the ability to convey through attire and physical attributes that you have the judgment to know what is both appropriate and distinctive.

We find that multicultural professionals prioritize, as do Caucasians, gravitas over communication, and communication over appearance. Yet, “cracking the code” of executive presence presents unique challenges for multicultural professionals because standards of appropriate behavior, speech, and attire demand they suppress or sacrifice aspects of their cultural identity in order to conform. They overwhelmingly feel that EP at their firm is based on white male standards, and that conforming to these standards costs them in terms of their authenticity. EP exerts an additional pressure on multicultural professionals to fit in by suppressing who they are—a new



version of “bleached-out professionalism” that contributes to feelings of resentment and disengagement. People of color already feel they have to work harder than their Caucasian counterparts just to be perceived “on a par” with them; meeting EP standards likewise imposes a higher bar.

Ultimately, our research shows that executive presence eludes multicultural professionals because they’re not likely to get feedback on their “presentation of self.” Qualitative findings affirm that their superiors, most of whom are white, hesitate to call attention to gravitas shortfalls and/or communication blunders for fear of coming across as racially insensitive or discriminatory. While sponsors might close this gap, specifically addressing executive presence issues with their high-potentials, CTI’s 2012 research shows that multiculturals are much less likely to have a sponsor than Caucasians. When multiculturals do get feedback, our data shows they’re unclear as to how to act on it, particularly if they were born outside the U.S.

In short, because feedback is either absent, overly vague, or contradictory, executive presence remains an inscrutable set of rules for multiculturals—rules they’re judged by but cannot interpret and embody except at considerable cost to their authenticity.

In a workplace where unconscious bias continues to permeate the corridors of power, and leadership is mostly white and male, multiculturals are measurably disadvantaged in their efforts to be perceived as leaders. Yet no company can afford to ignore their rich potential.

Winning in today’s fiercely competitive global economy requires a diverse workforce that “matches the market.” Such individuals are better attuned to the unmet needs of consumers or clients like themselves. New research from CTI shows, however, that their insights need a key ingredient to reach full-scale implementation: a cadre of equally diverse leaders.

To realize the full potential of the multicultural talent stream, organizations must intensify efforts to demystify EP, foster a robust culture of sponsorship—and change the face of leadership.

## GRAVITAS

67%\*

Exuding confidence & grace under fire  
Showing teeth  
Speaking truth to power  
Demonstrating EQ  
Burnishing reputation & standing  
Radiating vision, charisma

## COMMUNICATION

28%\*

Speaking persuasively  
Commanding a room  
Being forceful & assertive  
Reading a client/boss/room

## APPEARANCE

5%\*

Grooming with polish  
Dressing with flair

\*percentage of senior executives we surveyed who said this aspect was the core characteristic of executive presence

CTI's flagship project is the Task Force for Talent Innovation—a private-sector consortium focused on helping organizations leverage their talent across the divides of gender, generation, geography and culture. The 80 global corporations and organizations that constitute the Task Force—representing nearly 6 million employees and operating in 192 countries around the world—are united by an understanding that the full utilization of the talent pool is at the heart of competitive advantage and economic success.



1841 Broadway, Suite 300, New York, NY 10023 | [TalentInnovation.org](http://TalentInnovation.org)

