

What It Means to Lead with Presence

By FC Expert Blogger [John Baldoni](#)

“John is a terrific leader. Management is very high on him, but there’s one thing missing.”

“Sally is a star. She knows her stuff, but not sure she has what it takes to move up – yet!”

These are comments that I hear regularly from human resource professionals who hire me to coach one of their employees.

Dollars to doughnuts, that missing ingredient is **Presence**, specifically Leadership Presence. Which I define as earned authority. Leadership presence is rooted in authority but earned through example. That is, you have the power to things and you have earned the right through your actions to lead others.

Presence is the radiance of authenticity. That is, you radiate sincerity and you have what it takes to make good things happen. It is different from charisma; charisma is a gift, but it’s the sheen on metal. Presence is the real deal – a person’s mettle.

Consider these examples:

- The plant manager who holds meetings on the shop floor to be close to the work;
- The school principal who walks down the hallway greeting by name the children who grin and send him a cheerful greeting;
- The CEO who works in an open plan office and eats in the cafeteria so he can stay in touch with people and listen to their concerns as well as their ideas.

You can think of many more examples from your own life. Whichever example you consider, it is important to understand that just as leadership is reflection of earned authority, leadership presence, which enhances the leadership moment, is derived from the support of others. It cannot be assumed through birth or heritage, though many kings and queens have acted as if they have it and don’t. Leadership presence is a form of communications and as such can be taught and put into practice.

Too often we attribute presence to male leaders. And it’s easy to see why. Presidents Kennedy and Reagan exerted command through their good looks as well as their bearing but neither were empty suits. We remember them for their accomplishments. Women leaders have a tougher time projecting authority, but not delivering on it. Did anyone doubt former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s authority? At the same time, consider Mother Theresa, small, demur and very old. Yet the strength of her advocacy for the poorest of the poor enabled her to create a religious order, fund her mission, and be of service to so many.

Character lies at the root of strong leadership presence. It is not a nice to have; it is a need to have. But character is not an attribute that leaders possess; it is fundamental to the way they act. Character emanates from thought, word and deed. Leaders prove their character when they insist on accountability for themselves and for those they lead.

Radiating presence

One story indicates what it means to lead through presence. During the birthing of our nation, post-American Revolution and pre-nationhood, one figure exerted considerable influence over all parties, from north, south and west. George Washington. As we know from presidential biographers Richard Norton Smith and Joseph Ellis, never was such respect more apparent than during the rancorous days of the Constitutional Convention during which delegates from all the Colonies met in Philadelphia in Assembly Hall to hammer out a framework for the soon to be United States.

Differences were more apparent than agreement yet, as we know from historians, many of these delegates wrote of Washington's presence in the room. Day after day he sat behind his desk minding his correspondence and saying very little. But he was fully present; his persona presided over the gathering. Witnesses said that it was Washington's presence that radiated strength and reassurance. No wonder he was subsequently elected President.

Leadership presence therefore is more than a nice to have. More than an exterior sheen, presence is a reflection of deeply held values and a belief in one's ability to do the job well enough so that people will want to follow.

Presence is projection not simply of power, but of sincerity, values and conviction. And as such it is something that leaders can use to leverage their influence in order to make themselves heard, understood and followed.

John Baldoni is an internationally recognized leadership development consultant, executive coach, author, and speaker. In 2010 Top Leadership Gurus named John one of the world's top 25 leadership experts. John's newest book is [12 Steps to Power Presence: How to Assert Your Authority to Lead](#). (Amacom 2010). Readers are welcome to visit John's website, www.johnbaldoni.com