A SHEFFIELD INSTITUTE POSITION PAPER

Learn to Earn It

Executive presence as emotional intelligence in the age of AI

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Sheffield Institute | Elite Human Skills Development

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INTRODUCTION

Why Elite Human Skills Matter Now

As AI takes over more of the analysis and routine communication in professional life, the leaders who stand out will be the ones who bring something a machine can't: conviction, awareness of other people, and the discipline to say what matters clearly and briefly. That combination is what most people call executive presence. I'd argue it's emotional intelligence put to work, and it can be learned.

I'm writing this because the question I hear most from leaders has changed. For years it was "How do I get my team to be more concise?" Now it's closer to "Will I still be an effective leader if I use AI to write and analyze my material?" That's a fair question, and it deserves a direct answer.

In my earlier paper, *Human in the Lead*, I argued that AI should sharpen your thinking, not speak for you.[1] The human stays the editor in chief: you think, you communicate, you decide, and you own the outcome. This paper picks up where that one left off. If the human stays in the lead, the next question is: What skills does leadership require?

Elite human skills

At the Sheffield Institute, which includes The BRIEF Lab and the Quiet Workplace, we've built a framework around what we call elite human skills. These are seven critical professional skills that AI can support but cannot replace. The first four are about working with information: attention management, active listening and close reading, critical thinking and judgment, and prioritization and decision-making. The next three are about working with people: clear and concise communication, influence, and executive presence and emotional intelligence.

WORKING WITH INFORMATION

01 Attention management

02 Active listening and close reading

03 Critical thinking and judgment

04 Prioritization and decision-making

WORKING WITH PEOPLE

05 Clear and concise communication

06 Influence

07 **Executive presence and emotional intelligence**

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The framework is still evolving, and we're refining it with feedback from the people we train. But the logic behind it is steady. The first four skills help you think clearly. The last three help you connect that thinking to other people, so they understand it, trust it and act on it.

This paper focuses on the seventh skill, executive presence and emotional intelligence, and on how closely it's tied to the fifth, clear and concise communication. In my experience, you can't separate them. Presence is what people feel in the room. Clarity and brevity are what they hear.

These skills get tested in the moments AI can't handle for you: briefing a senior leader, presenting to a team, answering a hard question in front of a room, and sitting across from a buyer who has already done their research. Those moments decide whether people trust you. The rest of this paper explains what presence really is, why it matters more now, and how leaders can build it.

[01] SECTION ONE

Two Commanders

A few years ago I was scheduled to brief a group of people on a military base. I arrived early and stood in the back of a large auditorium while about 150 people filed in. A very senior commander was speaking before me.[2]

His briefing lasted an hour and fifteen minutes. I watched all of it, and it was painful.

He went on and on. He treated the room as a captive audience, because technically it was. They were in the seats, so he assumed they were listening. They weren't. Heads went down. Some people nodded, but it was polite, fake listening. He had the authority to hold them there. He had no idea he'd lost them.

What bothered me most wasn't the wasted time. It was the lesson he taught. A hundred and fifty people watched a senior leader communicate that way and learned that this is what leadership sounds like. Some of them will repeat it for years.

More recently, I was invited to lead a conference in Florida. Dozens of military leaders were in the room, and their commander gave the opening remarks.

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He was remarkably clear, and it was no accident. He had prepared. He knew how much time he had and what he wanted those leaders to take away. He stated his main point and why it mattered *to them* in the first 15–30 seconds. He sounded like himself, the same person I'd talked with one-on-one. And as he ended on time, on point, I remember thinking: I would follow this guy.

	THE FIRST COMMANDER	THE SECOND COMMANDER
Preparation	Assumed everyone was listening	Knew his time and what he wanted leaders to take away
Opening	No clear point	Main point and why it mattered in the first 15–30 seconds
Voice	Went on and on	Sounded like himself
Ending	An hour and fifteen minutes	On time, on point

Both were commanders. Both spoke to their own people. Both had the authority to hold the room. One had executive presence, and the other didn't.

Rank gives you a captive audience. It doesn't give you their attention. You have to learn to earn it.

People tend to explain the difference as charisma. I don't buy that. The second commander wasn't more charismatic. He was more prepared, and he spent that preparation thinking about the people in front of him instead of about himself.

That's what this paper is about. **Executive presence is emotional intelligence put to work in the moments that matter, and it shows up as clarity and brevity.** It matters more now than it did 10 years ago, because AI is changing what leaders are actually valued for.

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[02] SECTION TWO

The AI Human Paradox

AI now does a lot of what used to signal competence. It summarizes the report, drafts the memo, builds the deck and runs the numbers. It does them fast, and it often does them well.

That creates a paradox. The more machines handle analysis and routine communication, the more a leader's value depends on what machines can't do: read a room, stay steady when a meeting turns, read between the lines, and decide what this audience needs to hear.

This isn't a new idea. In 1998, Daniel Goleman published "What Makes a Leader" in *Harvard Business Review*. He analyzed competency models from 188 companies, most of them large and global. His conclusion was that IQ and technical skill matter, but mainly as threshold capabilities: the price of entry to senior roles. What separated the outstanding leaders was emotional intelligence.[3]

AI makes that threshold easier for everyone to clear. When anyone can produce a competent analysis in minutes, competent analysis stops setting you apart. What's left is how you show up with it.

The McKinsey Global Institute saw this coming. In its 2018 *Skill Shift* research, it projected that demand for social and emotional skills would grow by 26% in the United States and 22% in Europe between 2016 and 2030, as automation took over basic data processing.[4]

The other half of the paradox

Most people stop there. I think there's a second half that matters just as much.

AI doesn't only make analysis cheap. It makes words cheap. Every leader I work with is now buried in AI-generated drafts, summaries, slide decks and follow-up emails. The volume of information is going up, not down.

So clarity is getting scarcer at the same moment it's getting more valuable. The leader who can cut through the noise and say one clear thing will stand out more than ever. The leader who forwards the AI's output will sound like everyone else.

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The leader who can cut through the noise and say one clear thing will stand out more than ever.

That's the AI Human Paradox as I see it. Human skills become the differentiator, and the most visible of those skills is the ability to be clear and brief when it counts. This is executive presence.

[03] SECTION THREE

What Executive Presence Is Not

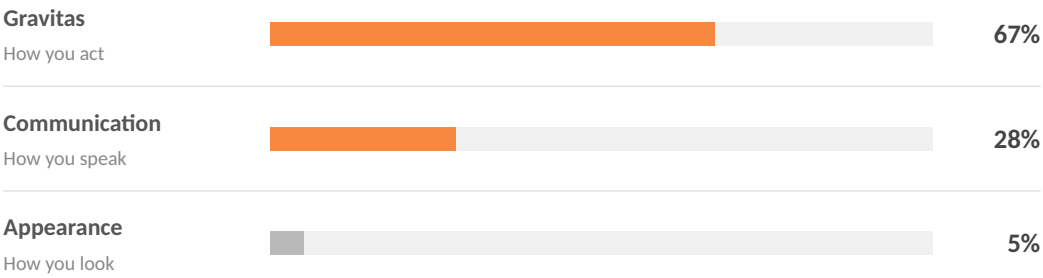
Ask 10 people to define executive presence and most will describe a personality. Charisma. Confidence. A big voice. Someone who "commands the room." Some will describe a look: the suit, the posture, the polish.

Those descriptions miss most of it.

A more useful definition comes from MIT Sloan Executive Education, which describes executive presence as **the combination of leadership capabilities that signal authority, credibility, and readiness to guide others**.[5] Each of those qualities exists in the eyes of other people. Authority, credibility and readiness are judgments the people around you make based on how you act and how you speak.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett's research on executive presence, published in her 2014 book *Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success*, surveyed senior executives and college-educated professionals about what presence actually consists of. She found three components. Gravitas, which is how you act, accounted for 67%. Communication, how you speak, accounted for 28%. Appearance accounted for 5%.[6]

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What makes up executive presence, according to Hewlett's research

In other words, about 95% of presence comes down to how you behave and how you communicate. Very little of it is about how you look or how loud you are.

I've seen the same thing in years of working with commanders and executives. Some of the most effective communicators I know are quiet. They aren't performers. When I've tried to name what they share, it comes down to three things: order, humility, and presence in the literal sense of being present.[7]

The second one, humility, is the one people miss. Effective communicators don't walk out of a room asking, "How did I do?" They ask, "Was that helpful?" In other words, they are thinking of others, not themselves. That small difference changes everything. A presentation stops being a performance and becomes a conversation. The audience stops being a crowd to impress and becomes people to help.

Effective communicators never ask "How did I do?" They ask "Was that helpful?"

Presence is also not dominance. Some leaders mistake volume and certainty for strength. They talk over people, fill every silence and leave no room for questions. The first commander in this paper had plenty of authority. What he lacked was any sense of the people in front of him.

If executive presence isn't charisma, polish or dominance, what is it? I think the best answer is emotional intelligence, applied under pressure.

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[04] SECTION FOUR

Executive Presence Is Applied EQ

Daniel Goleman defines emotional intelligence as **the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships**.[8] He described five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill.[3] On paper they can sound abstract. In a live briefing or a tense negotiation, they're anything but. You can watch them succeed or fail in real time.

Emotional intelligence is gravitas

Go back to Hewlett's research for a moment. Gravitas, how you act, made up two-thirds of executive presence. Gravitas is **seriousness and importance of manner, the quality that causes others to feel respect and trust**.[9]

That is what emotional intelligence looks like from the outside. When a leader reads the room, says only what the moment needs, and speaks with conviction, people perceive gravitas. They respect and trust that leader because the leader has shown awareness of them and control of themselves. Emotional intelligence is the discipline, and gravitas is how others experience it.

That makes emotional intelligence the underpinning of executive presence. It drives gravitas, the largest share of how executive presence is defined, and it also shapes the second-largest share: how you communicate.

I've come to see executive presence as three of Goleman's components showing up in behavior when the pressure is on. We describe it at The BRIEF Lab with a simple framework we call ARC: Awareness, Restraint and Conviction.[10]

Executive presence is emotional intelligence put to work in the moments that matter, and it shows up as clarity and brevity.

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ARC	WHAT PEOPLE SEE	THE EI SKILL UNDERNEATH	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
A Awareness	Listening and reading the room	Empathy and social awareness	“Let me make sure I’m hearing you” before responding
R Restraint	Saying what matters and leaving out the rest	Exercising self-control	A clear point in the first 30 seconds, then stopping
C Conviction	Standing firm without becoming defensive	Self-regulation	Defending a position calmly, even when others strongly disagree

Awareness

Awareness means thinking first about the needs of the people around you. What matters to them right now? How much time do they really have? What are they worried about that they haven’t said?

It also means staying in the conversation you’re actually having. I’ve been in meetings where we prepared carefully for one conversation and found ourselves in a completely different one.[7] The worst thing you can do then is keep delivering the conversation you rehearsed. Leaders with presence notice the shift and go with it.

Restraint

Restraint is the least glamorous of the three and the most underrated. It’s the self-control to not say everything you know. It’s choosing what this audience needs to hear over what you’d like to tell them.

Most long-winded leaders aren’t arrogant. They’re anxious. They worry that if they leave something out, they’ll look unprepared, so they include everything. That impulse is understandable, and managing it is a matter of emotional intelligence.

Most long-winded leaders aren’t arrogant. They’re anxious.

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Conviction

Conviction is self-regulation that other people can see. The ideal combination is strong conviction coupled with emotional flexibility: knowing what you stand for, communicating it confidently, and recognizing when circumstances or evidence warrant reconsideration.

Conviction doesn't come from personality. It comes from the strength of your beliefs and your willingness to stand behind them. The connection between conviction and emotional intelligence is in how you express and act on your convictions, particularly when they are challenged.

[05] SECTION FIVE

Why Presence Sounds Like Brevity

If executive presence is emotional intelligence in action, brevity is where you can hear it.

Being brief takes two kinds of understanding. You have to understand your audience well enough to know what they need. And you have to understand yourself well enough to notice your own urge to include more than they need. Both are emotional intelligence.[11] In my experience, leaders with real presence don't ramble.

For example, if you are addressing other senior leaders, remember: the more senior people are, the more they have on their plate. The more they have on their plate, the more protective they are of their attention. So the more senior your audience, the more you should prepare and the less you should say.[12]

The more senior the audience, the more you prepare and the less you say.

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When people tune a leader out, it's usually for predictable reasons.[13] Maybe the leader has a reputation for going on too long, so the audience checks out before the first sentence. Or maybe he never addresses what the audience is really asking: why does this matter to me? Or maybe he talks at people instead of with them, without knowing when to stop.

Each of those is a communication failure because it's an emotional intelligence failure. Each comes from thinking about yourself instead of the people in front of you.

What brief is and isn't

Brief doesn't mean curt. It doesn't mean one word and walk away. A one-line answer that leaves people confused isn't brief. It's incomplete.

Brief means measured. You lead with the point, say why it matters, add the two or three things that support it, and stop. It takes more preparation than rambling does, not less. That preparation is where the emotional intelligence happens. You decide in advance what this audience needs and what they can do without.

AI makes this more difficult and more important at the same time. It's easy now to produce a polished, complete, twelve-page document on anything. It's still hard to decide what matters. Leaders who include everything the tool generates aren't being thorough. They're skipping the job of deciding what's important, and that job belongs to the leader.

[06] SECTION SIX

Four Moments That Test Executive Presence

AI can now handle most of the written, asynchronous work of leadership. What it can't handle are the live moments where people decide whether to trust you. In my work with military units, Fortune 500 teams, and sales organizations, four of those moments come up again and again.

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The briefing

A briefing is where senior leaders decide whether you're worth their time. The first commander in this paper treated his briefing as something the audience owed him. The second treated it as something he owed them.

In this situation, emotional intelligence begins before you walk in. Find out what the decision-maker cares about. Talk to someone who has briefed them before. Open with your bottom line, and check in as you go: "I want to make sure I'm being clear. Any questions on what we've covered?" That respects a senior audience without talking down to them.[12]

The presentation

In a presentation, the first 30–60 seconds decide whether people lean in or check out. Leaders who hold a room do a few things consistently. They prepare in quiet before they speak. They state a clear point early. They sound like themselves, not like someone giving a speech. And they know how and when they'll end the presentation so they don't talk right through it.[2]

None of that requires charisma. All of it requires thinking about the audience first.

The hard question

A few years ago I brought a group of corporate clients to a military installation to trade best practices. At the end of the day, the commander opened it up for questions. One of my clients, the CEO of an iconic brand, stood up and asked a simple question: "How can we help you?"

The answer was fumbled. It wasn't even a tough question, and it should have been on any list of expected questions. There was no list.

Hard questions are where composure gets tested most directly. My advice comes down to three things.[14] Be prepared: write down the questions you expect and work out your best answer to each, especially the ones you're afraid of. Be courageous: if you don't know, say so, and if you do know, don't pretend you don't. And be brief: give the answer first, say why, add a couple of supporting points, and end it.

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Hard questions are where composure gets tested most directly.

The sales conversation

Sales leaders face a version of the AI Human Paradox that's especially sharp. Buyers can now research almost everything without a seller. Gartner's research on B2B buying found that buyers spend only about 17% of their total purchase time meeting with potential suppliers, and that's all suppliers combined. If you're one of three vendors, you may get 5%–6% of their time.[15]

That means the live conversation is rare and it's decisive. Buyers walk in already informed. What they're testing is whether this person understands their situation or is running a script.

Executive presence in a sales conversation looks like the same three behaviors. Composure when the buyer pushes back on price. Listening long enough to find the need behind the first request. And restraint: resisting the urge to walk through every feature and instead saying the one thing that matters to this buyer.

The seller who talks the most rarely wins. The one who listens to understand and then says something clear and relevant usually does.

[07] SECTION SEVEN

Executive Presence Can Be Built

The good news in all of this is that executive presence isn't a gift some people are born with. Most of us aren't born with it. The leaders who make it look easy have usually built it, deliberately, over years.

That matters more for leaders of teams than for anyone else. Gallup estimates that managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement across business units.[16] How you communicate doesn't only affect whether people listen to you. It sets the standard for how your whole team communicates. The first commander in this paper taught his audience what leadership sounds like. So did the second.

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HABITS THAT BUILD EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

These are the habits I see in leaders who have it:

- They think before they speak, and they prepare in quiet before important conversations.
- They write down the questions they expect and prepare their answers.
- They earn attention instead of expecting it.
- They understand what matters to the people in front of them.
- They lead with the main point and trim details that distract from it.
- They listen actively and let others speak.
- They follow up with a short note that summarizes what was decided.

There's a simple mantra under all of these: think, say, do. Great leaders get that order right. They think a lot. Then they say what they need to say, so their people can do what they need to do.[2]

Through our many courses and programs, The BRIEF Lab helps military units, government agencies, and Fortune 500 teams build these habits. The following courses map directly to this paper.

BRIEF Essentials	Covers how to brief, present, run a meeting, handle the room and field the question you didn't plan for.
BRIEF Communication with AI	Teaches professionals how to prompt, edit and communicate with clarity in the age of AI.
Masterclass: SITREP Storytelling	Helps leaders deliver updates that are clear, brief and built around what the audience needs.

The edge that stays human

AI will keep getting better at analysis and at producing words. I don't see that as a threat to good leaders. I see it as a filter.

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When everyone has access to the same analysis, the difference comes down to the person delivering it. Can they stay composed? Can they read the room? Can they decide what matters and say it clearly? Those are the elite human skills of executive presence, and they are emotional intelligence at work.

These elite human skills can be learned. And they're worth learning now, before the next briefing, the next hard question or the next buyer who has already done their homework.

Think. Say. Do. Great leaders get that order right.

ABOUT JOE MCCORMACK

Joe McCormack is the founder of the Sheffield Institute, The BRIEF Lab, and the Quiet Workplace. He is the author of three books: *BRIEF*, *NOISE*, and *Quiet Works*. He is an internationally recognized expert in concise communication and leadership clarity, advising corporate, military, and government leaders worldwide. He is the host of the *Just Saying* podcast. He helps professionals think better, communicate clearly, and lead without authority through disciplined preparation and intentional communication.

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