Presence. You have it. In fact, everyone has it. But not everyone is aware of it. And very few people take full advantage of its power. For starters, it’s one of those intangibles that’s easier to recognize than describe. We see it when some people enter a room and seem to create a magnetic field. Without even appearing to try, they capture everyone’s attention.

We encounter individuals with presence in just about every kind of situation. When people say, “Did you notice how she held everyone’s attention?” or “He seems larger than life,” they’re describing presence.

Take Colin Powell. When he walks into a room, he seems to fill it. Some of that may be attributed to his reputation as a military leader, his position as former U.S. Secretary of State, and his influence on the world stage. But it also flows from his ability to project an understated, but nevertheless commanding, presence that inspires confidence.

The Dalai Lama offers an intriguing contrast. Although he enters a room in a swirl of color that instantly attracts attention, his bearing and his body language project humility. But for this Nobel Peace Prize recipient, humility is a sign of strength, not weakness. Even though he’s been an exile from his native Tibet since 1959, people are eager to hear his message.

Both the Dalai Lama and Colin Powell have what we call ‘presence.’ And for leaders, this is a valuable commodity. When people observe a leader, they form an impression. The leader may, through his or her presence, convey a sense of competence, confidence, humility, or any number of other qualities. Leaders who are intentional about the presence they project are able to get people’s attention. They realize that people have a choice about whether or not to tune in and pay attention. They know that when they create a positive first impression, they open the door and create the conditions that enable them to influence the people whom they lead.

Quite striking, though quite different, each possess considerable presence.

Since everyone has presence—good, bad, or indifferent—it’s helpful to take a look at how first impressions are created. For instance, when a new person joins a group, those already there instantly, and often unconsciously, form an impression. Sometimes this impression is positive. At other times, it’s negative. If the newcomer appears to be at ease and generates positive energy, the group often grows larger as people are attracted to the upbeat environment. But if he or she gives off negative vibes, people tend to break away from a situation where they feel drained of vitality. These scenarios offer valuable insights into the power of first impressions—and in a larger sense, of presence. People who generate negative energy often have a difficult time fulfilling their goals. It isn’t unusual in organizations to have some individuals with a cynical view. These people typically criticize any new idea. Conversely, leaders who project positive energy seem to have the wind at their backs when it comes to achieving their leadership goals.
Just how important are first impressions? Their significance was brought home a while back when a major university launched a search for a new senior officer. Eventually, the search committee narrowed the field to two finalists. Both were from outside the university. Both had impressive backgrounds. But in the final round of interviews, one candidate offered a limp handshake to members of the selection committee. “A weak handshake will never make it here,” one interviewer observed. And immediately, the scales tipped in favor of the other candidate. Fair? Maybe not. Perhaps the runner-up would have been a strong leader. But we’ll never know because he never got the proverbial second chance to make a good first impression.

Presence is more than first impressions, but a powerful first impression goes a long way toward projecting a positive professional image and creating a positive presence. Presence is what you generate when you show up. Presence is a combination of your physical characteristics, the energy you generate, the attitude you demonstrate, and the way in which you conduct yourself.

Or, as the dictionary suggests in regard to stage presence: “The quality of self-assurance and effectiveness that permits a performer to achieve a rapport with the audience.”

Used together, these approaches enable leaders to create a first impression that enhances their influence, whether they’re part of an informal group, engaged in discussion around a conference table, or walking onto a platform to make a presentation.

Effective leaders realize that creating a positive first impression is only the first step—one that is necessary but not sufficient. They understand that the real work of leadership is to enroll people in the initiatives they are championing, persuade others to tackle daunting challenges, create enthusiasm for innovation and change, and build a culture that will be successful in a changing world. And they know that presence invests those who possess it with power as others assess their authenticity, credibility, and competence in real-life situations and conclude that they measure up to those positive first impressions.

Leaders operate in a competitive universe. Those who understand the power of presence, and who learn how to create and use it, enjoy significant advantages in their efforts to maximize their influence and achieve their goals.

**How can you use first impressions to build your leadership presence?**

**Here are a few guidelines:**

- **Be mindful.** Realize that you are not only creating a first impression, but also projecting a professional image. That professional image, encompassing everything from your bearing to your body language to the way you speak and make eye contact, should project a self-assurance that inspires others to have confidence in you.

- **Be intentional.** Have a clear understanding of the image you want to project and how to convey it through your presence. You may want to reflect on the way you hold yourself, your choice in attire, the way you greet others, and the voice or tone you use when you first speak.

- **Engage others.** Extend yourself by reaching out to others when you enter a room or join a group. This may come more naturally to extroverts, but introverts can also learn to greet others warmly, remember names, ask questions that show their interest in the other person, listening attentively to the answers, and make positive connections.

- **Be authentic.** We’ve all heard the advice: be yourself. Trying to be someone or something you aren’t simply doesn’t work. So let others know who you are. When your words and actions reflect your values and beliefs and are genuine, people respond positively. This creates the credibility you need to lead.

- **Be credible.** As a leader it’s essential that people believe in you, trust you, and want to engage with you. Leaders use their presence to project a credible image when they speak the truth, do what they say they will do, know what they’re talking about, know what they don’t know, and walk the talk. These qualities not only make a strong first impression, they also enable leaders to earn the respect and trust of the people over the long term.

**For further reading on this topic:**

- *Put Your Best Foot Forward: Make a Great Impression by Taking Control of How Others See You* by Jo-Ellan Dimitrius, Mark Mazzarella | Simon & Schuster

- *How to Play to Your Strengths* by Laura Morgan Roberts | Harvard Business Review