

Beyond your attire: Are you Presidential?

You may have great vision and experience, but does your image reflect that?

Your professional image speaks volumes and leaves lasting impressions. Have you stopped to evaluate yours lately?

Several years ago, I was working for a woman owned consulting firm. After a leadership meeting one Monday morning, the VP of Business Development and I were reflecting on the meeting. We hated these meetings. It seemed like the whole point was to beat us up and to talk about how much we were able to invoice. As we were talking, my colleague John said, "She's not very Presidential." She was, Katherine, the President of the company, but her entire persona was anything but leadership material. She was tough and prided herself on being the proverbial "bitch" (her words, not mine).

In spite of her professional looking business suits and practical haircut, the way she represented herself was not inspiring or respectable. Katherine was crass, dishonest, and unreasonable. There was a high turnover rate with employees and clients. She bullied productivity out of her staff and cheated her clients out of money. As she ran one company in the ground, she would close it and create a new one. Businesses were bought and sold like candy. I'm sure she wouldn't care what we thought, but maybe she could have been more successful with some image changes.

One year for Christmas, Katherine bought me a tiara with the word "Bitch" on it. She said that she was passing the crown to me. As compelling as this might have been, I knew that there had to be a better way. I didn't want to emulate her management style. She was not a leader. Not long after that, I left the company aspiring to be more than I could ever be working for Katherine.

It is very difficult to respect someone who you think has integrity issues or who doesn't respect the value of the other team members. Whether you are the President of the company, or an aspiring CEO, your long term success is dependent upon your credible image. You can have the most innovative vision in the history of your industry, but you will have difficulty effectively selling if people don't have respect for you and your direction. This respect is often founded on image.

In my next engagement, I was working for another female CEO. In some early meetings I noticed that she wore very short skirts. Often, she would sit in the chair with her feet tucked up under her. During the meetings, she would lay her head on the table in frustration, rub her temples, and pout when the conversation didn't go her way. This professional woman was running an organization with a fiscal budget of several billion dollars, and I was surprised to see her representing herself this way.

The same CEO also had a tendency to be a little flirty with men. In the middle of a meeting she would play with her hair, giggle, and give little taps on the arm to whatever lucky fella happened to be sitting beside her. Add to that the inappropriate comments and innuendo and it sure made for some interesting meetings. How much respect do you think the men or women had for this woman? Do you think she was able to be effective, with her direct reports given this image? Of course not! After the meetings they would snicker and talk behind her back. She was not viewed as a leader. Most people just worked around her.

Many people are not aware of their individual mannerisms, or the affect of them on their professional image. Your professional image begins at the core with character. Character is something that you either have or you don't. You cannot fake it. The people around you will catch on quickly if your actions are not sincere and genuine. You may be temporarily successful without character, but it will not endure.

Some mannerisms can be attributed to being nervous. Often, being nervous is manifested subconsciously into physical ticks or gesticulation. The CEO twirling her hair is a probably a good example of this type of mannerism. Once you become aware of the tick, it is easy to manage by consciously controlling it. Your staff is not likely to point this out to you. So how can you become aware of it so that you can fix it? Tape yourself or ask someone to observe you and give you feedback. In general you should be sitting tall, actively listening and speaking, and focusing on the agenda. Show others that you are a leader they can look up to and that you are committed to the mission at hand.

You must look like a leader in order to be perceived as a leader. Perceptions, right or wrong, have been the downfall of many talented people. Your image helps you to establish credibility, until people can get to know you on a deeper level. This may sound superficial, and because of that, you may



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reject the importance of this topic. There is science backing my position. For example; statistics show that tall people are more successful leaders, attractive people are more successful in sales, and people who wear glasses look smarter.

Whether you are already positioned leader in your organization or if you aspire to be one, putting effort into your image can make a big difference in how you are perceived. Invest in the entire image package from the core to the wrapper, to ensure optimal impact in your leadership activities. How you carry yourself tells a story about the person you are or want to be. It may be cliché, but remember first impressions are lasting impressions.

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