

# Executive Presence™

A Framework for Technical Leaders Moving into Executive Influence

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## WHAT IS EXECUTIVE PRESENCE?

After 25 years working with CEOs, research scientists, and higher education leaders through high-stakes inflection points, one pattern holds: there is a moment when technical expertise alone stops being enough.

Executive presence is what becomes essential at that moment. It is a set of mindsets, skills, and behaviors that allow technically credentialed leaders to influence, align, and move people. Not just problems. It is not about performance or polish. It is about the energy and judgment a leader brings into every room, every decision, every relationship under pressure.

Leaders with strong executive presence project confidence and competence while creating the conditions for others to do their best work. They hold their expertise lightly enough to hear new perspectives. They make decisions with clarity even in ambiguous circumstances. They are the leaders that people trust. Not just respect.

### Who this framework is for

This framework was built for leaders whose authority was earned through deep expertise, and who are now navigating the expanded demands of executive leadership. That includes senior leaders and administrators in higher education, directors and principal investigators in scientific and federally funded research institutions, and founders leading mission-driven or growth-stage ventures.

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## THE FOUR PILLARS

The framework is built on four pillars. The framework has three foundational pillars: emotional intelligence, technical competence, and conceptual thinking. The fourth, social intelligence, is where they converge into your individual brand of executive presence.

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### 1. Emotional Intelligence

#### *The discipline of knowing how you land*

In his foundational research, Daniel Goleman found that emotional intelligence (EI) was a stronger predictor of leadership success than IQ. For leaders whose careers were built on domain expertise, EI is often the most underleveraged asset, not from lack of care, but because the work rarely demanded it.

At the executive level, how you show up shapes outcomes as much as what you decide. EI is the ability to translate emotional cues (both your own and those of the people around you) into strategic thinking and behavior. Leaders with high EI are proactive

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communicators rather than reactive ones. They maintain healthy boundaries while connecting genuinely with the people around them.

This is especially critical in environments under pressure. A university dean managing a faculty restructuring, a research institute director navigating federal funding uncertainty, or a founder managing rapid team growth, each of these leaders needs the self-awareness to recognize how they are landing in the room, and the emotional adeptness to adjust.

## **In practice**

*A CIO in a university system navigates competing technology priorities between faculty, students, and administrators, often in the face of budget constraints and long development timelines. High EI allows this leader to hold space for competing frustrations, negotiate priorities with empathy, and keep the room from fragmenting under pressure.*

Self-awareness | Proactive communication | Presence under pressure | Courageous dialogue

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## **2. Technical Competence**

### ***Your deepest asset, and its expansion***

The most effective leaders arrive at the executive level as genuine experts in their fields. In higher education, this means esteemed contributors to their academic disciplines. In research institutions, it means leaders with deep credibility in their domain. In founder-led ventures, it means the technical or scientific insight that made the organization possible.

That expertise remains essential. But the currency that earns trust at the executive level expands. Technical competence at this level is not just subject matter mastery. It is broad intellectual capital: the ability to understand the macroeconomic forces reshaping your institution or sector, to read the constituent dynamics in play, and to translate what stakeholders need beneath what they say.

A provost must be an esteemed scholar and a skilled navigator of institutional politics. A research director must hold both scientific credibility and working knowledge of grant structures, workforce dynamics, and mission sustainability. A technical founder must lead with domain authority while building the organizational capabilities a growth-stage venture requires. In each case, the second pillar is about being fully prepared for the full scope of the role.

## **In practice**

*A newly appointed Vice Chancellor of Research arrives with an exceptional scientific record. Her technical credibility is unquestioned. What determines her success at the executive level is how quickly she builds fluency in the institution's financial pressures, the interests of*

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*her deans and development officers, and the policy environment shaping federal research priorities.*

Domain credibility | Institutional fluency | Stakeholder dynamics | Sector awareness

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## 3. Conceptual Thinking

### *From solving problems to shaping direction*

Technical leaders are often exceptional analytical thinkers. Conceptual thinking builds on that foundation but shifts the application. At the executive level, the task is less about solving well-defined problems and more about synthesizing ambiguous, incomplete information into a strategic direction that others can follow and act on.

Strong conceptual thinking is what allows a leader to cut through complexity. It means identifying patterns others miss, distilling them into language that moves people, and staying with uncertainty long enough to get it right. That combination is what generates novel approaches to problems that don't yet have established solution.

In higher education, this looks like a provost who can hold the tension between academic tradition and institutional survival and find a path that honors both. In a research institution, it is the director who can reframe a funding loss as a strategic pivot before the team sees it as a crisis. In a growth venture, it is the founder who can communicate a vision that is expansive enough to attract talent and specific enough to build toward.

### **In practice**

*When the funding landscape shifts, the leaders who navigate it best are not the ones with the most data. They are the ones who can rapidly synthesize what's changing, what it means for the mission, and what direction to set before the organization starts to fragment.*

Strategic synthesis | Ambiguity tolerance | Pattern recognition | Communicating complexity

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## 4. Social Intelligence

### *Not soft skills. The hardest skill.*

Social intelligence is the ability to accurately read people, dynamics, and rooms, and respond in ways that move the work forward. It is the fourth pillar and the one where the other three converge into your individual brand of executive presence.

For leaders whose authority was built on technical or scientific expertise, social intelligence is often the last skill developed, and the one that determines whether the transition to executive leadership takes hold. The credibility that got you here was

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earned through what you know and what you produce. At the executive level, results flow through people, relationships, and rooms you don't fully control. That requires a different kind of reading.

This means recognizing when your team needs your presence more than your answers. It means reading the difference between resistance and fear and responding to what is there. It means knowing which stakeholder relationships need protecting right now and investing accordingly. It means adjusting how you show up depending on whether you are in a board conversation, a funder meeting, a one-on-one with someone close to leaving, or a staff session where trust is already fragile.

Situational awareness is the core input. The most effective technical leaders who step into executive roles aren't necessarily the most analytically brilliant in the room. They are the ones who understand that every conversation is also a relationship, and that the mission, the organization, and the culture live or die in how those relationships hold up under pressure.

Social intelligence is learnable. Most scientific, research, and technical leaders simply haven't had reason to prioritize it, until now.

## In practice

*A founder who built a company on deep technical expertise reaches a growth inflection point: the team doubles, institutional investors arrive, and the board dynamic shifts. The science that created the opportunity is no longer what the room needs from her. What determines whether she successfully steps into the CEO role is her ability to read what each stakeholder needs from her presence, and to lead through trust, alignment, and strategic narrative rather than technical authority alone.*

Reading the room | Relationship capital | Situational awareness | Technical-to-executive transition

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## BUILDING YOUR EXECUTIVE PRESENCE™

When you strengthen your emotional intelligence, expand your technical competence, sharpen your conceptual thinking, and develop your social intelligence, your executive presence grows, and so does your capacity to lead effectively through whatever comes next.

These four pillars are not a checklist. They are a practice. The leaders who navigate inflection points most successfully are not necessarily the most technically brilliant. They are the ones who understand that every conversation is also a relationship, and that the mission lives or dies in how those relationships hold up under pressure.

What makes this framework distinct is simple: it starts where technical and scientific leaders are. Your expertise is not a liability to be managed. It is the foundation everything else is built on. The work is expanding what surrounds it: self-awareness, intellectual range, strategic clarity, and social fluency. Each pillar reinforces the others. A leader who develops all four doesn't just perform better. They become someone others

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want to follow through uncertainty. Their presence signals that the complexity is being held by someone who can carry it.

The transition from technical expert to executive leader is one of the most demanding shifts a career can ask of you. It is also one of the most consequential, for your organization, your team, and the mission you are there to serve. Executive presence is how you make that transition visible, credible, and durable.

## **Work with Dianna Sadlouskos**

I work with senior leaders in higher education, federally funded research institutions, and mission-driven growth ventures, through roundtables, executive coaching, and targeted team development. My practice sits at the intersection of enterprise consulting (Microsoft, PwC) and the deeply human work of how leaders show up, make decisions, and drive results.

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