Executive Presence for Women Bonus

The Blind Spot: How to Give and Receive Authentic, Actionable Feedback to Transform Your Executive Presence

by Coni Masciave

Why All Women Need to Read This

When people learn that I'm an executive presence coach, one of the most common questions they ask is 'How do I tell someone they need your help?' I wish there was a 'silver bullet' answer, but the fact is that it's a challenging conversation for anyone.

Whether it's a staff member, friend, or even your boss, giving feedback in this area is especially sensitive and challenging. Particularly for women in business, we're much more comfortable giving criticism around performance or even complete failure than we are giving input on how someone else looks, speaks or acts. This is why men get more feedback over time, and are able to make subtle course corrections to their presence.

Similarly, getting feedback on your presence isn't always easy. We choose surfaces to project ourselves to the rest of the world often based on deep-seated events or preconceptions. Hearing that we need to change or we aren't coming across as we'd hoped can be wounding and difficult. Resisting the urge to reject feedback completely or to go the opposite direction and obsess about 'the flaw' is a learned skill.

This guide gives you suggestions for how to give and receive feedback on executive presence. You can learn more about executive presence and how to improve in my series 'Executive Presence for Women' or contact me at coni.eden@gmail.com.

An Ever- Shifting Goal Post to Have the Whole Package

Ongoing feedback is the core of improving your executive presence. Some of my clients expect to work with me on their executive presence and then just be 'fixed.' I wish it were that simple. Like exercise, your executive presence is never 'done.'

What works for you at one company won't work at the next. When you're in your 20s you'll have different priorities and a way of presenting yourself than when you're in your 40s. We age, we evolve, and our executive presence must also. The key is that you must remain true to yourself – and keep your core authenticity – as you evolve. This comes from knowing your strengths, defining your essence or brand, and sticking to it – all tactics I cover in this book.

Working on your EP is the final polish. You have to have the good stuff – experience, results, education, etc – going on underneath to form a solid core but you EP is the refined, optimized, best authentic self that you can project. If you only have the raw stone, you're not projecting your full potential value.

It's not enough to see that you have the potential to be a leader. If you're a woman, they're not going to give you the job unless you have the whole package, slam dunk, no question. And your executive presence is the final rung on the ladder that you're climbing to show you have what it takes.

Making Sense of Well-Meaning Advice

Feedback on Executive Presence can also be hopelessly contradictory – which may be why, according to the CTI research, 81% of women say they're unclear on how to act on improving their presence.

According to Elisabeth Kelan, "From an equality perspective, appearance shouldn't matter. The reality is, that it does. A large percentage of success does depend on appearance for women. You need to be attractive but not too attractive. You should not be too feminine nor too masculine. It's difficult to transmit the right balance to others to have them perceive you as having the desired characteristics."

Sometimes when I tell people what I do, they say 'Oh, I've been on a course for that!' I find it very interesting to ask about this 'course' and what it entailed, because it usually illustrates just how complicated the subject matter can be and how many differing perspectives are available. Most often it's a course on presentation skills, which is great, but not necessarily about being leaderly or tackling the other facets.

There is a lot of information available to women on the various aspects of Executive Presence. Courses and books and programmes on what to wear, presentation skills, body language, fashion magazines, management magazines, all sorts of reports and points of view. Some will say that you can't get promoted if you wear heels higher than three inches while another will say to never wear flats.

Female politicians are constantly having their public images dissected. Hillary Clinton's hair and pantsuits. Angela Merkel's fashion choices. Sarah Palin's moment in the spotlight took the style debate to an unprecedented frenzy level. These women follow a legacy of image analysis that Margaret Thatcher and Madeleine Albright were also subjected to in their day.

Non-politicians are also analyzed. Michelle Obama, Queen Elizabeth, Kate Middleton all come under scrutiny for every fashion decision.

And now, in an era where it's not enough for a Disney princess to just be pretty – she also has to be an expert archer, completely independent and able to stand on her own fortune, and have an extensive wardrobe – the next fashion icons are the CEOs and COOs. Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer was featured in a *Vogue* fashion photo and article in 2013, coming under attack for posing horizontally on a chaise lounge wearing a conservative blue dress. The blogosphere went crazy saying that it was inappropriate for a CEO of a major tech company to pose for the photo, and eventually the mainstream media including Time Magazine chimed in as well. Mayer later apologized, saying she was pressured by the photographer, and backpedalled rapidly away from the controversy – but it clearly left a few bruises.

Meg Whitman former eBay CEO was appointed CEO of HP, reporters immediately began to compare her style with her predecessor, Carly Fiorina. I have yet to see a similar blog comparing an outgoing male CEO's choice of suits and ties with an incoming.

Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and author of the terrific guide 'Lean In', is analyzed as much for her clothes and hair as she is her ideas.

This is truly a woman thing. Aside from ridiculing of Barak Obama's 'mom jeans' and analysis of Nicholas Sarkozy's shoes – which were really more of an examination of his height, the one area of appearance or presence where men are scrutinized as or more heavily than women – the debate over men's style choices is relatively docile and limited to a cataloguing of sweaters versus shirts. Even then, much is read into the level of 'casualness' each presidential candidate presents with the understanding that these things actually do matter to voters.

Before Cutting The Stone: Planning To Maximize Potential Value

"It takes seven seconds or less to give someone a bad impression… and seven meetings to dispel it."
- Roger Ailes, political advisor

We all know that first impressions matter. When we encounter an opportunity to make an impression, it's up to us to make the most of it. We never know when these moments will come up. Again, go buy and read "Blink" if you want to know more about the science and psychology of first impressions.

In a nutshell, we all subconsciously form first impressions when we meet people. I do an exercise in my workshops [DO THE 'SNAPSHOT' FIRST IMPRESSIONS TEST ONLINE] where I put up photos of a variety of people and ask the audience is this person:

1. Friendly?
2. Likeable?
3. Trustworthy?
4. Competent?
5. Intelligent?

At first, they struggle with this exercise because their logical brain is attempting to override and doesn't want to acknowledge that they have formed an opinion about a person based solely on one photograph. But we do this all the time subconsciously – we're hard wired to scan a person and assess not just those five traits, but also their social standing (rich/poor) and social standing (influential/not influential.) We then decide what we're going to do about it – be receptive, neutral, wary or hostile. Only then does our logical mind kick in and collect 'evidence' that usually validates our initial impression and then we begin the relationship with this person.

There's one photo of a woman in a navy suit that I've been showing to audiences for over a decade as part of my 'Snapshot Test'. She's beginning to look a little dated, but I still use it because it almost always causes debate.

Look at this woman. Is she friendly? Well, yes – she's smiling and seems nice enough. Is she intelligent? Probably. Looks smart enough to have a nice watch and suit. Is she competent? Most often audiences say yes, she seems competent. Where she gets into trouble is the next questions – is she likeable? Hmmm. Not many people like her. Why? They don't know why. They just know that they don't like this woman. And the kicker, is she trustworthy? Hands down, audiences say 'No.' Women, in particular, say this woman is untrustworthy. Hmmm.

Okay, interesting, so let's dissect this. Why would people, and women in particular, so vocally find her untrustworthy and unlikeable? Are these things related? Even I wasn't completely sure why at first. I thought maybe it was the posture – a little cocky with the arms crossed in front is standoff-ish in Body Language 101.

Then, one day, probably the third time I'd used this particular photo, I was running a workshop to a group of senior leaders for the Internal Revenue Service. We'd warmed up with a few examples so by the time we got to our brunette business

woman in the navy suit, they were primed to be blunt. When I said, "Is she likeable?" I got the usual mixed feedback. But when we got to "Is she trustworthy?" for the first time a woman, in a heavy southern drawl, said, "Oh, no… that woman would steal your man!"

The group laughed but when I probed further, she said, "Just look at her nails. A woman with nails like that cannot be trusted." Amazing how divisive red fingernails can be.

For a woman in business, details matter and we have a very narrow window in which to operate. Fast forward twelve years and the CTI report revealed that indeed, 37% of the people they surveyed said 'overly done' nails are unleaderly while 42% said unkempt nails detract. Clearly, nails matter. And we don't just think, 'She needs a manicure' or 'Those nails are a bit bright' – we think 'She can't be trusted' or 'I don't like her.'

Giving yourself the 'Snapshot' test is your first real challenge from me. Look at the photo of yourself on your LinkedIn profile. How would you rank yourself from 1-5 as being:

1. Friendly?
2. Likeable?
3. Trustworthy?
4. Competent?
5. Intelligent?

Then ask yourself where are you strongest? Where are you weakest? Does it make a difference in getting your next role or the job you want? If so, how can you adjust to get the balance you need and want?

What's in Your Blind Spot Can Hurt You

Before you move to the next step, creating your action plan, we need to spend more time understanding how to reveal your blind spots. These are the 'Jaws' moments where we know something's underneath the water, but we are afraid to look. The trick is knowing it's a shark that can eat you before you see the dorsal fin approaching.

The Johari Window is the standard for understanding how blind spots work. Basically, there are four 'realms':

1. The Arena is what is known to others and known to you. If you look at my photo, you know and I know that I am a Caucasian woman with blonde hair in her mid-40s.
2. The Façade is unknown to others but known to you. So, I know that I have had my hair coloured since I was in my late teens and I'm mostly grey in

reality. If my colourist does a good job, you won't know that I'm not a natural blonde!

3. The Unknown is what you don't know and I don't know, so it doesn't really matter. Maybe I don't know that I have a spot on the seat of my skirt, but you can't see it because my jacket covers it anyway. It exists, but it's irrelevant.
4. The Blind Spot is what is known to others but unknown to you. This is the area we need to shine a bright light on and see what there is to see. If you don't take important things deliberately out of your blind spot and into the arena, you cannot succeed and are setting yourself up for failure.

One example of a Blind Spot in the Visual Facet is Victoria Beckham's breast implants. She had implants, fairly obvious ones, put in a long time ago – probably because she wanted them and liked them. She was a pop star married to a football/soccer star. She wanted cleavage so she bought some. There's nothing wrong with that and I have implants myself, so I understand the reasoning.

The problem came when she started her own fashion line and wanted to be taken seriously as a designer. The 'Playboy' aesthetic of an hourglass figure is not the same as the 'Vogue' aesthetic of a rail thin model. She found she couldn't wear her own designs without looking overly sexy. She found when she looked overly sexy, people didn't take her seriously as a designer and businesswoman.

This must have existed in her Blind Spot for some time before she acknowledged it, brought it into the Arena, and then decided to have the implants removed. You don't need to do something so extreme, but it illustrates the point.

Blind Spot reveals require bravery and grace when they're pointed out to you for the first time. The executive who fails will do so because she has a knee jerk reaction to reject the 'reveal.'

I realize this is easier said than done sometimes. A few weeks ago I was running a workshop with a group from Procter & Gamble for around a dozen participants. All the participants knew the very professional and lovely Irish woman who'd organized the course, but I'd not met her before the event. We'd exchanged multiple emails, however, about my travel and logistics.

On the day, she introduced herself to me and I thought she said 'Claire' when in fact her name was Cleo. I'm American and the accent threw me, plus I'm terrible with names and always have to employ tricks to remember names, such as writing notes. After she introduces herself, I wrote 'Claire' at the top of my notes for the day, completely blanking that I'd been corresponding with 'Cleo' for weeks.

For the first three hours of the course, I referred to her repeatedly as 'Claire' – as in 'Thanks, Claire,' 'Claire, do you know when the lunch break is scheduled?', 'Claire was so helpful in sorting out all the arrangements for today.'

Eventually, I referred to 'Claire' when she was out of the room and a participant in the front raised her hand and said, 'Did you know she's called Cleo?' I was embarrassed, of course. But when Cleo came back into the room I said something like, 'Oh, my gosh, Cleo – I'm so sorry I've been calling you 'Claire' all day. I need to work on my Irish! You're all on task to correct my pronunciation throughout the day.' I then apologized again in private and it was fine.

When it came to the Blind Spot discussion in the workshop, I used this as an impromptu example of how Cleo's name was in my blind spot. It was awkward for everyone, every time I said it, until we brought it into the Arena. How I dealt with it, in this case a relatively benign issue, sets the tone for the rest of the course.

For you, you may think you are open to blind spots being revealed, but I guarantee some of them will be a bit bitter. Pay close attention and make sure you don't shut down the giver.

Finding a 'Blind Spot Buddy'

I love to SCUBA dive and it's something I've been lucky enough to do around the world. When you learn to dive, you're taught that one of the keys to diving safely is having a buddy, someone to help you out of a situation, share air if needed, or get help. In return, you help them if they find themselves in a bind.

I would advise you to get a 'blind spot buddy' to help you bring things that may be blocking you into the Arena. As you think about who you may recruit for this role, you're looking in your social and professional network for someone who's mutually dependent – that is, if you drown, they drown. Ideally, your buddy would be more than an acquaintance, so you know them well. Your relationship shouldn't be professional only, so someone who you just know at work but haven't connected with emotionally at all isn't a good choice. Similarly, you don't want a buddy who's purely social. While you may be able to trust and share with this person, he or she doesn't know you in a professional context and can give a limited perspective.

Your buddy needs to know you professionally and also be someone supportive, who you trust and respect. You should also both have some sort of dependence that binds you – possibly being on the same team, having the same targets, working in the same field, etc.

I've had multiple buddies over the years. My friend Robin Marrouche is a longstanding blind spot buddy who knows me personally and professionally. She gives great advice and insight and accepts the same from me. I know I can safely give her any feedback and she will still like and love me. I also know that I can hear anything from her and I will still like and love her.

Early in my career I was a grant writer for a non-profit Catholic hospital. My blind spot buddy came from an unusual place, Sister Stephanie, a nun who was about 20 years older than me and the only nun on the Board of Trustees. She told me when

my skirt was too short or when I talked too much in a meeting. I told her when she came across as too emotive in leadership meetings and needed to add more data instead of stories. For some reason, she listened to me. It was a great relationship and she was a pivotal person in my development as a professional.

When Carla, the prestigiously educated, young Public Relations director at this rural hospital, was painfully self-sabotaging her career with an arrogant attitude and crazy crying jags at the copy machine with all the lights off, Sister Stephanie used these as teachable moments to illustrate what a more effective response would have been in the situation. Sister Stephanie also tried to talk to Carla, who responded by arguing with her about how everyone hated her and then brought her Cornell mug to her office so that people would take her seriously.

When I realized my first real boss was a complete idiot and sinking the small ship that we were on together, Sister Stephanie, who had a vested interest in ensuring the successful voyage of this ship despite this man's incompetence, strategized with me about what to do and how to handle it. I remember her telling me that she was praying for him to get fired. When I said that didn't seem very Christlike for a nun, she replied, 'God wants everyone to succeed and do their best. This is not his path so I'm not praying for him to fail, I'm praying for him to find a place where he can do some good.'

When Sister Stephanie had to give presentations to all 500 employees about the Mission of the hospital, "To care for the sick as if they were Christ in person", she would ask me to read her speeches and make sure they didn't sound too 'nun-ish' as many of the staff were Mormon, not Catholic, or not religious at all, and would resonate with the younger staff.

It was a successful, mutually dependent relationship that worked very well for us both.

Another option is to hire a blind spot buddy. I've hired two people to help me with my blind spots over the years, MJ Ryan, a noted author and thinking partner, and Dr Lynn Johnson, also a writer and prominent psychiatrist. I pay them to tell me the hard truths that no one else will. Even if it isn't pretty.

Nose Blowing and Other Problems

As a presence coach, people hire me to basically be their 'blind spot buddy.' Sometimes this is simple, and other times it's a little surprising what we find in the blind spot. I worked with a female CEO who had a problem in her Sociability Facet. When I started working with Laura, I did a series of interviews with some of her team members, colleagues and external stakeholders – an Executive Presence 360 of sorts.

The first thing her PA said to me was, can you get her to stop blowing her nose in public? I was a bit surprised that this had come up, and asked for clarification.

According to the PA, Laura would regularly get out a tissue and blow her nose very loudly in the middle of meetings. Not just staff meetings, meetings with people from outside the company, with senior leaders, with the Board of Directors, with the Chairperson. So, yeah, that's a bit of a problem.

The next issue was how to deal with it? Taking that from the Blind Spot to the Arena was delicate. The PA didn't want to do it and it's something that Laura was unlikely to do by herself because if she knew it was inappropriate, she'd have done something about it already – a bit like Scarlett not writing on her arm anymore.

I thought about how to bring this into the Arena quite a lot. I couldn't tell her that her PA had mentioned the nose-blowing as that would betray confidentiality. I also felt like telling her that someone in her 360 had raised it as an issue would rattle her and shake her confidence because it's a bit embarrassing and she could potentially get a little paranoid about it. We were in a delicate place, new to the coaching relationship, so caution was paramount.

My moment came when we were shopping for outfits for her to wear in a corporate photo. She was in the fitting room and I was waiting outside. From inside, I heard her blow her nose. This was not genteel. This was loud. This was seriously loud. Like when someone has a really unusual laugh that reverberates, Laura's nose blowing was really, really, really loud. I suddenly realized why her PA had raised the issue as it was not something that would go unnoticed in a public setting.

"Laura, what was that?" I called out into the fitting room. "Oh my gosh, do you have a flock of geese in there with you?"

"No, why? Was it loud?" she said as she opened the door to show me the suit she'd been trying on.

"A little loud," I said. "Good thing it's just me. You'd never do that in front of 'real' people so I'll take it as flattery that you feel comfortable with me. Now, let's look at that jacket."

As we carried on, I could see her processing my comment about the nose blowing: (1) it was loud enough for me to comment on; (2) it wasn't appropriate with people who aren't friends or family. Immediately, it went from blind spot into Arena.

Later in the day, she said, "Sorry about blowing my nose earlier. I think I have allergies."

I laughed and reiterated that I took it as a sign that she and I were getting along well, but, yes, as long as her 'allergies were acting up' she would of course excuse herself from a meeting and go to the ladies room if she ever had to make that sound again.

That's what a blind spot buddy does and what you do for them. You carefully and directly reveal things that could be blocking them from being their best self. You show them the flaws in their facets as caring and compassionately as you can, with

no malice or judgment. What they do with it is up to them. Your job is just to tell the Empress that she has no clothes.

In general, I only give feedback when asked for it. People are usually a little paranoid or overly aware when they meet me, so I'm aware that my comments can come across as having more weight than usual. So I try to restrain myself and not offer unless asked.

How to Reveal the Hidden Truth to Someone You Think Needs It

The second element here is the giving of feedback. I so wish that I had a silver-bullet answer to give when people ask me how they can tell others about their executive presence 'issues'. Later on I'll talk about getting a 'feedback buddy' and how to give/receive feedback for yourself. But the truth is, you can't give someone feedback who doesn't ask for it and expect them to listen. Even if they do ask for it, you have to tread lightly or they may not hear it at all, anyway.

You also need to consider why you want to give the person feedback. Does this really come from a genuine place of wanting to help them? Is there any whiff of competition, or one-upwomanship that could taint the input, anyway? If you're not sure, I recommend taking that feedback, writing it down in excruciating detail, and then giving it back to yourself. Odds are, you're trying to tell yourself something in the guise of 'feedback' to someone else.

Kate (the woman who blew it on the podium in front of everyone with her short skirt, etc) didn't ask me for feedback. I tried to give it to her, anyway, and even with my skill and expertise in this area, she didn't want to hear it.

I think of giving input as similar to therapy, where you have to have your own breakthroughs, or like an addict who has to hit rock bottom before they can address the problem. You can point out areas for improvement, but these elements are so touchy, tender, and raw, that it is like navigating a minefield. There are land mines, barbed wire, and a host of issues that have nothing to do with a woman's work or her job and everything to do with how she sees herself or what she's ignoring.

Giving Personal Presence Feedback: When It's Not About You

According to CTI, 81% of women, when given feedback on my personal presence, I am not always clear on how to correct for it. Similarly, 81% of women surveyed are willing to make the changes, if only someone would tell them. The issue is being told and being brave enough to be the one who opens up another person's blind spot.

One time I was dating a guy who was a senior executive at a nameless company, but it basically is the concert juggernaut and dominator of all events in the universe. He negotiated contracts. He was a fairly important dude. He wanted to be an even more important dude. He also had a weird white scar across his front teeth from being hit

by a hockey puck when he was younger. It didn't help that his front teeth were crooked and slightly pronounced, making it the one thing you couldn't help but look at when he spoke. So, when he was talking, part of your brain was looking at the teeth, trying not to, wondering where else to look, and wondering just how that happened.

I knew that he was sensitive on the subject and it didn't bother me, so I didn't mention it. Until he was asking for my professional advice on a video he was going to give, and I said, as gently as I possibly could, 'Have you ever thought about veneers?' He got very offended, said I was superficial and rude, and broke up with me.

So.

The truth was that ignoring this was holding him back. The CEO of a big company can't have scarred teeth. She can have bad teeth, can have a scar on her face would be better – we can work with that and it's understandable. But this is something so easy to fix that it's odd for it <u>not</u> to be fixed. And that little question niggled away and detracted from his Executive Presence.

But the point is that he didn't want to hear about it. Maybe he didn't want to hear about it from his girlfriend, but the reality is he knew it and he knew others knew it – it was in the open domain – but he had a host of other issues around it that made it a sore spot.

In hindsight, I also found this a really interesting case study about strength and weakness. I am terrible at Excel. Truly awful. I do my invoices in Word, much to my accountant's shock and dismay. This guy was an Excel genius and I asked for his help to put together a worksheet for a company called Boart Longyear that had asked me to help them create a branding process for newly acquired companies. It was complicated for me, easy for him. He helped me and the results were great. I had no problem admitting that I lacked a skill where he excelled (literally) and could help me grow and succeed. Yet, when my area of expertise was brought into the equation, he couldn't accept my help because it was too sensitive to admit a 'failing' in this arena.

Don't be that person who can't get feedback. Also, don't be that person who wanders into the minefield, uninvited, without a flak jacket.

If you do want to give feedback to someone who is not your blind spot buddy, these are the basic steps to follow for success. Let's imagine we have Hannah, a great gal who dresses too sexy and isn't going to get promoted. What to do:

1. Ask if you can give feedback and wait for permission. They have to say yes. So say, 'Hannah, I know making a good impression is important to you, do you mind if I give you some feedback?' Then listen to her words and her body language and her entire vibe. If she says 'Yes' and seems genuine, then proceed. Frankly, it's unlikely that she's going to say 'No' – so your listening

is important. If she says 'Yes' and crosses her arms and legs and clenches her jaw and sits back in her chair and looks at you with daggers, you need to do damage control and say 'I think you've got a lot of potential and I just have noticed that you're on a good path for success. If there's ever anything I can do to support you, I'm happy to help.' If she asks about the feedback, that means she really does want it. If she shy's away, then let it drop.

2. If she's said 'Yes', then offer an honest observation and try to be specific. Don't say: 'I've noticed you dress a little sexy in the office' – Do say: "The skirt you wore yesterday was short.'
3. Explain the impact of the observed behaviour. This is the 'So what?' moment. "When you wear shorter skirts than most of the other women, it stands out but not necessarily in a good way. You don't want people to look at your legs instead of listening to your ideas."
4. Suggest actions and an alternative – and the 'What's in it for you' factor. "So, you know, I always look at Mary who dresses very classy and had a great style when I'm not sure about what to wear. She seems to wear longer skirts and trousers, so that's a good guide. You can see how people listen to her and respect her."

This is hard, isn't it? It's hard to say and hard to hear. I know, because Sister Stephanie, my wonderful blind spot buddy, had to tell me when I was 22 that my very cool skirt was two inches too short, and showed me the fingertip rule (if it's shorter than your fingers when you're standing up with your hand by your thigh, then it's too short to sit down in like a lady – the nuns know these things from years of Catholic school corrections!) I'm so glad she told me that at 22 so I didn't have to learn it ten years later. It was embarrassing, but it was also true and it came from a place of generosity and support.

Some other guidelines to keep in mind before you dive in:

- Don't say it in public – find a private moment.
- Find the right messenger. Maybe it's not you? Who will they be most receptive to – ideally someone they trust and have a connection with is best.
- Be honest and specific about the behaviour.
- Lead with sincere compliments, knowing that the negative will likely be the only thing they remember or hear, but still give them anyway.
- Use humour and smile if you can and it feels sincere.
- Give a boost at the end so it ends positively.
- Be an example. Before you throw a rock, make sure your own house isn't glass in this Facet.
- Be gentle and monitor their body language – your voice is 'loud' in this moment. If they back away, shut down, or start resisting, you need to pull back. You may not reveal everything at once and choose to just give some feedback.

She Might Cry – or Why Women Don't Get as Much Feedback as Men

One of the biggest issues with women and executive presence is that they are less likely to have received feedback incrementally over the span of their career. Whereas one man will say to another man 'Dude, your breath reeks. Here's a mint.' before the big meeting, women and men are reticent to give feedback to a woman.

Why? For men, there's a fear that she may become emotional and cry or something really awful. For women, there's a fear that the other woman will think she's being rude and will dislike her for her it. The 'why' doesn't necessarily matter, because either way, the woman with the bad breath loses.

After I wrote my first book, 'Beauty Rehab' to address confidence and self-esteem for women, I met with a very smart man and writer who heads up one of the UK's biggest PR and communication firms. I gave him a copy of the book and we talked about my work. He could not wrap his head around how he would ever advise a woman to use my services, even though he believes Executive Presence matters and is, in fact, critical to success. This is a man who advises CEOs, royalty, and public officials on what to say when they do horrible things like embezzle money, cheat on their wives, or get caught with hookers.

He asked me to write down words to use to introduce the need for executive presence coaching for a woman – a sort of 'cheat sheet' script. This is what I wrote:

"Is there anything that you think may be holding you back from getting the job/result that you want?"

If you ask that question of senior woman, someone who you know has a Presence issue, I guarantee that on some level she is aware of the gap. What you are testing is if she's ready to do something about it.

If she says, "Yes" and then raises something that has do to with how she looks, sounds, acts, behaves, or relates to others, that's your 'in' to guide her toward feedback.

If she says, "Yes" and then raises issues of competence or qualification, either she is unaware or unwilling to approach the presence issues at this time. You may want to probe a little and see if she expands and leads the conversation toward Presence, but do so gently and thoughtfully.

If she says, "No" and shuts down the conversation, then you have no room to move and anything you say will not only not be heard, but could cause damage to your relationship whether it's personal or professional.

Why Giving Unwanted Feedback Isn't Such a Great Idea

What if you feel really strongly and you really want to give her feedback? In just about every workshop I teach, someone asks me this question. They see someone amazing, talented, smart who is holding herself back, but isn't receptive to feedback.

My answer is: "You can't be more committed to someone's success than they are." If they aren't open and ready, you can't make them change. It simply won't work. If you do try, you may create a 'hydra effect', where you attempt to cut off one head by giving well-intentioned feedback, but you then create a whole host of new problems as new heads pop up because she resents your input or otherwise acts out.

About the only thing you can do in this situation is to attempt to correct the issue behaviourally without giving insight directly. After you witness the behaviour, try to determine what precedes it (the antecedent) and what follows it (the consequence.) If you have any influence or control over either the antecedent or consequence, that's the place to apply an intervention.

For example, what do you do if an otherwise qualified, intelligent and talented woman is continually droning on in meetings and is seemingly unaware that her behaviour is boorish or inappropriate – and is doing herself no favors?

If you don't get any open footing with the initial inquiry and have to go the behaviour route, you would want to observe her before and after she speaks (drones.)

For an antecedent approach, consider: Is she usually filling in silence? Is she usually talking over other people? What is usually happening just before she speaks? Use that moment before, to shift the energy and flow. If she's filling silence, you fill it first and then hand over to her saying, "Pam, do you have anything to add, given that we only have a few minutes?" If she's just trying to prove herself because she's insecure, try to pre-empt her speaking with "Pam, I know you have a lot of knowledge on the subject. If you want to give a quick overview I'm sure others would want to connect with you afterward to hear more."

For a consequence approach, consider: What are the others usually doing while she's speaking – ignoring, being hostile, avoiding? What usually happens after she speaks – everyone goes on and ignores what she's said, the meeting ends, someone says something snarky? Then find a way to shift the energy to something very opposite when you're with her one on one and she rambles.

You can choose to simply give her no feedback at all – just say 'Huh.' and then go to the next topic. You can also choose to change the dynamic to interrupt her flow and then reward her for a shorter answer – so say 'I'm sorry, I dropped this thing', bend down and hold up a hand to silence her, then when you come back up and reconnect, say 'I think I've got that, thanks for explaining it so succinctly when we're all so busy.' Every time she gives a short answer in a meeting, make sure she's rewarded for being brief, something like 'Thanks, Pam, that was really spot on.'

It's very important that you recognize her other strengths and amplify them, or you will shut her down or isolate her. So find other ways to give a lot of praise and she will hopefully be more receptive to your suggestions for blind spot improvements as she comes to trust you.

Of course, it may be easier to just say, 'Pam, you talk too much and lose the entire group.' And maybe you should and maybe she'd be receptive. But if you're reticent and think you'll alienate her or cause her to withdraw, you still have an obligation to try and help her, to give her the feedback and input she needs to succeed as best you can.

Next Steps

1. Go forth and find a blind spot buddy
2. Be brave and listen to what he/she has to say and think about one thing you can stop, start or continue to do to make a difference
3. Look at the women in your world that need support or insights in this area – how can you help them?

For more information on how to improve your executive presence to get the job you deserve, check out the Eden Image Coaching ebook series by Coni Masciave.

The first volume, 'Executive Presence for Women' is available for purchase here.