

Executive Presence Under Pressure

By Carol Keers, Vice President, Change Masters, Incorporated

Executive presence under pressure can take place in mundane moments or miraculous ones. On Thursday, January 15, 2009 at 3:26 pm, a double bird strike took out both engines upon takeoff for USAir Flight 1549. Captain Chesley Sullenberger and his crew performed a miracle based on repeated skill practice and the wisdom of experience. The air traffic controller at LaGuardia told them first to come back, then to divert to Teterboro Airport, six miles away, but the Captain made the split second choice to land on the Hudson River – a decision that created heroes. His executive presence saved the lives of 155 people on that plane and countless others on the ground. You may never be called upon to navigate a 50 ton jumbo jet going 150 miles per hour onto a river crowded with ferry traffic as though it was a hang glider but you may feel like you're doing exactly that in these perilous times.

How others respond to you as a leader will depend entirely on their perception of you. Captain Sullenberger's calm demeanor and split second decisions were choiceful and deliberate. He had created the muscle memory of advanced mental and physical rehearsal in a flight simulator time and time again. They illustrate why it's critical to learn how to communicate and execute in realistic simulations prior to the life or death experience of a plane – or a company – going down.

How have you been trained to handle these most challenging economic times? You and your employees can learn and choose to show executive presence under pressure. During 23 years of coaching thousands of leaders at Change Masters, an executive leadership coaching firm, we have carefully calibrated seven behaviors shown by the most poised, professional leaders we've seen. They are illustrated in our book, *Seeing Yourself As Others Do - Authentic Executive Presence At Any Stage Of Your Career*, (Carol Keers and Thomas Mungavan, www.seeingyourselfasothersdo.com). We explain how to accelerate your capacity in these seven attributes to have the same unflappable picture of calm as Captain Sullenberger. We've clustered them under the acronym called CLEARLI.

Command of the Room

Leveraging Influence and Power

Expectation Setting

Audience Connection

Relationship Management

Listening Effectiveness

Inspiration and Motivation

Here's how these attributes played out with Captain Sullenberger:

Command of the room – this is how you impact those around you from a non-verbal and content perspective. It doesn't have to have a swagger - pilots are taught to speak with a calm tone and a deliberate pace to avoid panicked reactions among the hundreds of people sitting behind them. Passengers on Flight 1549 reported being told by Captain Sullenberger that they were going to land in the Hudson River, and given the directions on how to prepare themselves for the crash landing. The quiet, definitive vocal authority he used got them all to respond instantly.

Leveraging influence and power – this is how well you can create a sense of tactical and emotional trust through the way you understand those you’re trying to persuade. As Flight 1549 slowly filled with water and the passengers crawled onto the wing to await rescue, it would have been easy for panic to fill the plane. Instead, this even tempered, friendly man stood at the door of the plane, requiring each person to count off so he could insure everyone was accounted for, and remained a calming influence despite the orderly chaos around him.

Expectation setting – this is the ability to communicate a vision, a decision and the tactics to execute it. John Cox, former USAir pilot, described the Captain’s decision to land on the water this way, “When you’re in a glider, you’ve got one shot at it. You’ve got to plan your energy and of course your altitude is your energy, and that gives you one shot at the approach. The objective is to keep the wings slightly level and the nose up slightly, so the fuselage could skim on the water’s surface. Hit in a nose down attitude and the plane could dig into the water, potentially ripping the plane apart.”

Audience connection – this is the manner in which you are credibly perceived by your audience formally or informally. No one wants a nervous airline pilot – or a nervous leader. Captain Sullenberger connected with each tugboat and ferry involved in the rescue to make sure each of his passengers – his audience – was safe and accounted for. Now *that’s* connecting to your audience.

Relationship management – this is how you maintain connection with people remotely and locally. As Robert McFadden reported, “Twice checking the water-soaked cabin for stragglers before fleeing the sinking plane itself, [Captain Sullenberger] emerged as a singularly selfless leadership of a sort that seemed so removed from things like Ponzi schemes, subprime mortgages, corporate bailouts and deflected blame.” Most passengers on Flight 1549 will never again see their Captain, but because of the way he put their safety ahead of his own, they’ll never forget him.

Listening effectiveness – this is the ability to not just register information, but to let the speaker know what has registered. The crew listened intently to the tower, then the pilot told the controller, “We can’t do it. We’re going to be in the Hudson.” That split second decision was the last message transmitted from the flight deck. They not only heard the people on the deck, they let them know what they heard and what they would do about it.

Inspiration, motivation and praise – this is how meaningfully you impact people through your words and actions. Mayor Michael Bloomberg said the actions of Captain Sullenberger “inspired people around the city of New York, and millions more around the world”.

The Gallup Corporation noted that 70% of why people buy in and follow others is on how they manage the mundane moment. Because Captain Sullenberger had developed his executive presence and simulated how to respond, he was ready when the crisis hit. Building his skills and character through his career saved the lives of hundreds and made him a hero at his moment of truth. If you simulate challenging, inspiring or even mundane communication moments as a leader in advance through video coaching, you, too, can achieve executive presence under pressure.

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