



DIANNA
BOOHER

Bestselling author of
*Communicate
with Confidence!*®

CREATING
PERSONAL
PRESENCE

**Look, Talk, Think, and Act
Like a Leader**

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CREATING PERSONAL PRESENCE

**Look, Talk, Think, and Act
Like a Leader**

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Dianna Booher

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Creating Personal Presence

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*To my parents,
Alton and Opal Daniels,
for their loving support
in everything I undertake*

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Preface

About fifteen years ago, in the middle of a keynote address before approximately 3,500 people, I asked for two volunteers to join me on stage to demonstrate the principles of presence. I'd never tried the experiment before in front of such a large group, and frankly, I was a little nervous. What if nobody volunteered? What if the volunteers were so timid that I couldn't help them? What if they were already so strong that I couldn't think of any coaching tips to increase their impact?

The first volunteer steps up on the stage, takes the handheld microphone, introduces herself, and overviews a key project she's working on. After thirty seconds, I call out, "Stop!" Then I pull her aside privately for sixty seconds and give her a couple of coaching tips. She returns to center stage and repeats her introduction.

After the "before" and "after" demonstration, I ask people in the audience to go to the microphones in the aisles and call out the difference in the speaker's impact. They call out adjectives I expect, "More confident." "More engaging." "More commanding." "More authoritative. More credible." All adjectives I expect, so I'm pleased. Yet I had used none of those words in coaching her.

"Did I tell you to be or do any of that?" I ask the volunteer.

"No," she chuckles, obviously pleased with her performance and feedback.

I ask for a second volunteer. Four or five people raise their hands, and I again select someone to join me on stage. As soon as he starts down the aisle toward me, I panic. His gait is halting, and he looks very stiff. Uh-ooooh, I'm in trouble. When he takes

the microphone, his voice sounds like a twelve-year-old. Again, thirty seconds into it, I yell, “Stop.” Same routine—sixty seconds of coaching tips.

He does version two. The crowd goes wild with applause and whistling. It’s like he turns into a rock star. He keeps performing.

“Plant.” “Plant!” “He’s a plant!”

It took me a couple of seconds to figure out what several audience members were chanting. The change was so miraculous that they thought I had planted that volunteer in the group and that he was playacting his transformation. When I finally got the handheld mic back from him, both he and I assured the crowd that this was the first time we’d met. We finished the experiment, and I thanked both volunteers and wrapped up my program.

Afterward, the volunteers waited until the crowd around the stage dispersed, and then they thanked me again. Both volunteers reported to me that several people from the audience had come up to them after the program to ask privately once again for their assurance that they were not “plants” and that the changes they’d made on stage were really just a result of doing only two or three physical things that I’d coached them to do in the sixty-second conference on stage.

The response to that demonstration was so dramatic that I began to include it in every talk I made on the topic of presence and personal credibility. It soon became my most requested speaking topic. Calls to our office typically started with, “I was in an audience where Dianna had volunteers come up on stage . . .”

But despite that positive reaction to the speech and even though I’ve written many books touching other aspects of communication, I continued to nix the idea of a book on this topic because I considered “presence” something that you have to see rather than just read about. Yet, in the intervening years since that first onstage demonstration, question after question has come up from coaching clients that has led me to decide differently.

Maybe I can, after all, put the essence of presence on a page. This book is that effort, and you can decide if I’ve been successful.

If you’ve picked up this book, you probably fit my definition

of a leader or an aspiring leader. Leaders never limit themselves by titles. You'll find them in all walks of life: CEOs and sales professionals, first-level supervisors and department heads, volunteers serving nonprofits, soldiers serving their country, homeowners organizing their communities, parents coaching youth teams. Anyone with a mission becomes a leader by persuading others to follow in achieving an important goal.

The book's purpose is to make the concept of personal presence concrete and thereby "doable." Of course, you can never measure presence in the same sense that you can measure, say, someone's heart rate or their running speed.

But consider for a moment how we measure a singer's ability. The long-running popular TV show *American Idol* comes to mind. Who's the best singer-performer of the season? Granted, these ratings are based on subjective opinions of the judges and the viewers—to a degree. But there are concrete assessments involved at some point as well. Contestants have to demonstrate some level of competence or they get booted off the show—many before the season even starts. They either can or can't sing on key. They have a definite vocal range—one that the judges assess to be adequate or inadequate for the competition. They can or can't keep a beat. Then beyond the baseline of those competencies in music, subjectivity comes into play.

The same holds true for presence. This book aims to capture these core concepts about presence. Beyond these, what you see and hear comes down to others' perception of our presence. The book will also delve into the subjective realm—what affects others' subjective perceptions about your presence and credibility.

The book falls easily into four parts:

"Part 1: How You Look" contains five chapters having to do with the physical aspects of presence: appearance, body language, dress, walk, your surroundings.

"Part 2: How You Talk" includes five chapters on voice quality, word choices, and your ability to carry on engaging and meaningful conversations.

"Part 3: How You Think" covers how you process your

thoughts and information and express those thoughts to others: your ability to sort the significant from the trivial, to summarize succinctly, and to respond to questions under pressure. This section also addresses the difference between strategic thinking and tactical thinking. Finally, you'll find a chapter on controlling your reactions and expressing emotions appropriately.

“Part 4: How to Act” deals with attitude and character traits that come across in your communication style—attitudes, habits, and behaviors that either support or diminish a powerful presence and your resulting credibility.

As I mentioned earlier, the goal is to help you increase your presence, so I've tried to be as specific as possible with tips, techniques, and anecdotes to make the principles understandable and practical. Please note, however, that although the anecdotes are factual, I've changed the names in each to protect identities.

If you're reading this book, chances are you already understand the power of presence to:

- Persuade others as you state opinions and answer questions.
- Position yourself as a thought leader when you champion a cause or a change.
- Communicate issues clearly in ways that engage others both intellectually and emotionally.
- Win others' trust by demonstrating your integrity and goodwill.
- Win contracts or promotions and generally get ahead in your career.

But your organization will benefit as well. The stronger your presence as their spokesperson, the better your chances to represent them well, to champion their cause, sell their product or service, generate goodwill, demonstrate integrity and win trust for their purposes.

To further increase your awareness of your own presence, I've created The Personal Presence Self-Assessment (available from

Berrett-Koehler Publishers at www.bkconnection.com/personal-presence-sa) to help you assess yourself in four key areas covered in the book. Take the self-assessment either before you read the book to guide you on where to focus first in the book or afterward when you're putting together your individual and organizational action plan.

As I wrap up here, I want to thank the team at Berrett-Koehler for all their efforts along the way in shepherding this book from idea to bookshelf to you. Specifically, appreciation goes to Steve Piersanti, editor-in-chief, who “got it” right from the beginning and understood how this book could be different from the bazillion others on communication, presentation skills, and interpersonal skills. Thanks also to David Marshall, Kristen Frantz, Marina Cook, Michael Crowley, Zoe Mackey, Katie Sheehan, Cynthia Shannon, Johanna Vondeling, Maria Aguilo, Catherine Lengronne, Dianne Platner, Rick Wilson, Bonnie Kaufman, Jeevan Sivasubramanian, and Neal Maillet.

Also, once again thanks to our Booher team of consultants who generate rave reviews in the marketplace. They continually accept new client challenges, develop strategies, and deliver results that help us fine-tune best practices in the many facets of personal and organizational communication.

Special thanks as well to Kari Gates and Polly Fuhrman for assistance with research and manuscript preparation.

Finally, my gratitude goes to literally thousands of you as clients who have provided us the opportunity to work with you on the strategies in this book, hear your feedback, see the results, and feel the satisfaction of your success. A heartfelt thanks!

—*Dianna Booher*

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Why Should You Care?

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Lydia (not her real name) told a different story from what I'd heard from the senior partner in her Washington D.C. law firm. "I feel as though I'm pushing against that proverbial glass ceiling," she said. "I just don't get the plum assignments. I put in the hours. On performance reviews, my director has given me the highest marks for attitude, legal competence, that sort of thing. But I'm just not getting the opportunities to network and deal with clients to bring in the business. Sure, I'm on the 'team,' but I'm never the *lead* counsel. That's what you have to do to make partner—bring in the business. And if I don't make partner in the next year or two, I'm out."

She paused reflectively before concluding, "Most all the partners in the firm are male. Whether intentional or not, I really think there's a bias there that's keeping me from getting in front of clients. It just has to be the gender thing."

It was not the gender thing.

The senior partner of the law firm had called a week earlier with his feedback on Lydia and his goals for our coaching session

together. The upshot of his call was this: “Lydia’s very competent legally. And she’s very willing to put in the hours. But to date, we’ve been hesitant to put her in front of our clients or in the courtroom. I can’t put my finger on what it is exactly, but she just lacks presence and polish. That’s what I’m hoping you can accomplish with her.”

He proceeded to describe several symptoms, including this particular comment that stands out in my memory: “Even the way she introduces herself when she and the team meet clients or prospects for the first time minimizes her experience and our expertise as a firm. I’ve tried to give her a few pointers myself, but she doesn’t take feedback well.”

Although dressed in a business suit as typical for her profession, Lydia arrived looking at least a decade out of step. In addition to the cold-fish handshake, her energy level seemed no higher than thirty watts. Her voice, too, lacked intensity. A permanent furrow seemed etched across her forehead. As I introduced her to others on my staff, she had difficulty chatting with them as they gathered for morning coffee. When I asked about interactions with clients and other executives in the firm, she rambled and lacked a strategic focus about the organization’s goals. To most of my suggestions, her responses were “yes, but . . .” followed by a justification.

The first few minutes into our coaching session, I arrived at the same conclusion as her boss: Lydia lacked presence, and unfortunately for her future with the firm, she didn’t take feedback well. Typically when clients leave a coaching session, they comment on how they plan to put the new skills and ideas into practice and promise to call back with the results.

I never heard from Lydia again.

On the other hand, Jon, CEO of a major aerospace defense contractor, profited handsomely from feedback. At the end of one of our coaching sessions, Jon said to me, “Okay, so tell me how to dress. I’m an engineer and I don’t usually pay attention to that sort of thing. I’m divorced. Don’t have a wife to give me opinions anymore. But I know it’s important. And Kathryn, our VP of

Communications, told me I need to get your opinion on dress for my first all-hands meeting and my speech for the conference in Germany. Colors? Button jacket or leave it open?”

We worked on his opening, a personal anecdote, for the all-hands speech for almost two hours, because his goal was to set the tone for the new direction for the company and inspire confidence in his ability to chart that new course.

Seemingly small things can make a big impact.

The “little” things can make a big difference in landing a job, getting a promotion, winning a contract, or leading an organization through change—as Jon, the new CEO, understood in successfully leading his organization to regain its position as industry leader. He won the hearts and minds of his organization with his first “state of the organization” speech to employees after assuming his office.

For the next six months as I was in and out of the organization, other executives commented on Jon as if he’d become a celebrity after his debut address. He had developed presence, and it had a huge impact—on him and his organization.

Personal presence may be difficult to define, but we all know it when we see it. Someone walks into the room and people step aside. Heads turn. Conversation opens up to include them. When they speak, people applaud or chime in. When they ask, people answer. When they lead, people follow. When they leave, things wind down.

People with presence look confident and comfortable, speak clearly and persuasively, think clearly even under pressure. They act with intention. People with presence reflect on their emotions, attitudes, and situations and then adapt. They accept responsibility for themselves and the results they achieve. People with presence are real. They present their genuine character authentically. What they say and do matches who they are.

Mother Teresa was as welcome and comfortable in the world’s boardrooms as the most articulate CEO, the best-dressed movie star, or high-earning sports celebrity. At just five feet tall, dressed in her traditional habit, with few earthly possessions to call her own, Mother Teresa had at least one secret that many imitators