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*The Business Edge*[PRINT](#)**THE WORKPLACE**

## **Appearance Does Matter: The Way You Look May Affect How People Perceive Your Competence**

By John Baldoni

A recent Princeton study of political candidates says it may. A survey was conducted of over 800 students who were shown one-second images of Senate and Congressional office seekers. Those candidates who appeared more competent most often won their election. According to the study, and reported last June in the *New York Times*, “the authors theorize that rapid judgments of competence based on looks... can prejudice subsequent thoughts about a candidate’s other qualifications.”

True? Not always, but most of the time. Competence was the only factor that people were able to perceive from a photograph. Honesty and likeability were less clear from quick photo impressions.

So does this have anything to do with things in your office? I think the sentiments reflected in the study, albeit confined to faces alone, may be relevant to those who aspire to leadership positions. How you look can indicate how well you can lead; or, put another way, how others perceive that you can. And when it comes to leadership, perception is essential!

## **Not About You**

Start with the premise that leadership is about results. If results ultimately come from the cooperation and collaboration of others, then it makes sense that leadership is less about the leader and more about the followers. No leader can achieve anything alone. The leader does it by working with others to achieve intended goals. Therefore, anything you can do to affect the relationship positively between leader and follower is critically important.

Here are some things to keep in mind when presenting yourself as a leader.

***Invest in your appearance.*** Take a long look at yourself in the mirror. Women and men do this differently. Women, I'm convinced, look in the mirror to see their flaws. Men I know look in the mirror to admire themselves. Women gain a pound and see themselves as rotund. Men see an expanding waistline as normal, or perhaps as an example of clothes that have shrunk in the wash. An exaggeration, perhaps, but women know better. If you expect people to follow you, give them reasons to follow your lead. Keep yourself well groomed. Dress neatly and smartly. Also take care of what's inside you. Good diet and healthy exercise are important to your looks as well as your health.

***Watch your expressions.*** The Princeton study focused exclusively on facial expressions. For leaders, the adage that the face is a mirror to the soul has validity. If you frown frequently or reply with a snarl, people will avoid you. Why?

Because they assume either you don't want to be bothered or you want to bite their head off. Often leaders have no idea how they look until someone, such as an executive coach or a trusted advisor pulls them aside. So lighten up. Before an important meeting, sit down, think a calming thought and, yes, check yourself in the mirror. And smile. It will reduce the tension in your face.

***Radiate authority.*** When Ronald Reagan walked into the room, heads turned and people gravitated to him. He had the movie star appeal. So did John Kennedy and Bill Clinton. Reagan may have looked the part, but he was also approachable. He was a superb storyteller, as well as a good listener. Clinton exemplified the active listening process. His eyes would draw a bead on the speaker and with the cock of his head he looked like he was melding with the person, soaking up what the person had to say. It is more than charisma; a form of radiant charm. Leadership listening is an ability to put yourself in another's shoes and make the person feel as if he or she is the most important person in the room. Watch your CEO stride through the workplace. If the CEO pauses to chat with people and really listens, he or she is someone to follow. Conversely, if the CEO blows by with a faux wave or cursory glance (and assuming he or she is not running for a plane), chances are that person is self absorbed and may not be liked or respected and could be moving on soon.

***Reflect the glory.*** Appearances matters. You want people to understand that you have an appreciation of what they do. In most organizations leaders lead; employees do the work. Good leaders know intuitively how to interact with others to make

them feel appreciated. Leaders who acknowledge the efforts of their people both privately and publicly are leaders who have their fingers on the pulse of the organization. They know what others do matters and they acknowledge it. Skeptics may be wondering if you can fake your appreciation of others. Certainly, but only for a short time. If you simply act the part, the part will wear out sooner than you think. Authenticity is not an act. It is an example of character.

Lead by example. Yes, looks matter. But, ultimately it is what you do as a leader that matters most. And even then, appearances matter. Be seen doing the heavy lifting. That is front and center to ensuring alignment and push for execution. When times are tough, good leaders are with their people more than ever; in the cafeteria, break room and the work areas. They also may take a more public stance, serving as the voice of the company to the outside world. When things are rolling smoothly, they are present in another way: sharing the glory with the team.

### **Look Beneath the Surface**

Appearances, of course, can be misleading. You have only to look at some of the rascallions of business scandals past to get that feeling. For example, Jeff Skilling, former Enron president, cut a handsome and dashing figure. His boss, Ken Lay, looked positively avuncular; the kind of guy you'd trust to watch your house if you were out of town. Neither Skilling nor Lay is a business manager that anyone would want to emulate. Both ruined the fortunes and livelihoods of thousands of people, not to mention the shareholder stakes they eroded. In this case, appearance took a back seat to integrity.

The way you as a leader present yourself is critical. It affects your ability to connect in a way that is authentic and leads people to give you the benefit of the doubt. Every leader must earn trust, but the door to trust can only be opened if people are willing to give you a second look, or, better yet, a long look and a good listen. That is why appearances matter. So if that new suit makes you feel more in control and in command, then by all means buy it. But keep in mind that what's inside the suit matters more. And don't forget to occasionally smile, too.

### ***About the Author***

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