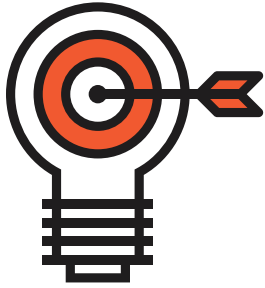# HCI
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TALENT PULSE
PROPRIETARY RESEARCH FROM HCI

Executive Presence: Desired but Ill-Defined

TRACOM Group—The Social Intelligence Company—has helped millions of people around the world to uncover hidden barriers and identify strategies that enable more positive outcomes and professional success.

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Talent Pulse from the Human Capital Institute (HCI) explores the latest trends and challenges in strategic human capital management. Through quarterly research reports, *Talent Pulse* provides practitioners and decision makers with insights and tools to work better today and prepare for the future of work.

INSIDE THIS REPORT

SUMMARY

"Executive presence is a term that is difficult to define, yet leaders expect their leaders to have it. I believe that executive presence has different meanings to different people."

—Survey Respondent

Executive presence is associated (often synonymously) with leadership. Of the more than 350 HR professionals we asked, 92% agree that executive presence is an important part of leadership. While only 15% say a lack of executive presence can derail a career, most agree (51%) that it is an accelerator that propels a career forward by differentiating individuals from others. Further, 77% of respondents agree that those with high levels of executive presence progress quickly in their careers.

Most HR practitioners (51%) agree that it is difficult to *define* executive presence, but despite this lack of clear criteria, only 19% of respondents agree that it's difficult to *identify* people with executive presence. Executive presence continues to be an "*I know it when I see it,*" concept—identifiable but undefinable.

This vagueness is problematic. When organizations are unclear or not specific about what behaviors constitute effective leadership, development becomes an impossible task. Perhaps more importantly, in the absence of an agreed-upon definition, individuals are left to construct their own meanings of leadership. This invites stereotypes, biases, and assumptions to cloud the definition further, creating an unfair standard by which to evaluate leadership or its potential.

Often, leaders make promotion decisions, particularly at the C-suite-level, based on unstated criteria or ill-defined concepts like executive presence.[1] Because of concerns about a lack of executive presence, leaders may stall in their careers or be passed over for a promotion.[2] Also, executive presence issues may be perceived as trivial or sensitive and thus, feedback is withheld or not solicited. In our study, half of the respondents (50%) reported never receiving any feedback about their executive presence.

HCI believes in leadership development transparency. To attract the best talent and retain high performers, organizations need to be clear about leadership expectations at each level (i.e., first-time manager, director, executive). We need to make talent decisions using clear

criteria, not vague concepts. If the term executive presence is used within organizations and talent decisions are made on its basis, we need to define, measure, and develop it.

To develop a clearer perspective on executive presence, we asked HR professionals to define executive presence and indicate what knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics are important for its meaning. Our study found that **executive presence** is the combination of three key factors: interpersonal aptitude, professional affect, and technical competence. In sum, it is how you interact with people, how you present yourself, and what you know.

In addition to defining the construct, in this *Talent Pulse* research, we found:

✔ Survey respondents at high-performing organizations (HPOs)[3] are more likely than all other organizations to have executive presence as a formal leadership competency.

✔ HPOs compared to all other organizations place a higher importance on technical competence; what you know is as important as who you know and how you present yourself.

✔ HPOs are more likely to measure executive presence and develop it in their people.

✔ Executive presence is developed through stretch assignments, 360-degree feedback surveys, and coaching.

DEFINE

Executive presence has been variously defined as self-confidence[4] and as a combination of gravitas, communication, and appearance.[5] One group of researchers found ten core characteristics that influence executive presence in which they noted the complexity of the construct.[6] Another review defined leadership presence as "displaying of a set of key behavioral practices to achieve desired impacts."[7] Executive presence has been operationalized and measured as character, substance, and style.[8]

Because of the many definitions in the popular press and academic literature, we are interested in the use of the term and its definition according to HR practitioners and leaders. Human Resources professionals plan, acquire, engage, and develop their workforces. From their position, they are the most responsible for the accurate definition, measurement, and development of executive presence.

Sixty percent of respondents' organizations use the term executive presence (Figure 1). The term is applied more often within high-performing organizations (HPOs). Organizations use executive presence more often as expression than a formalized leadership competency. Only 26% of respondents report that there is an official definition of presence as a leadership competency, but it is operationalized by 45% of the HPOs (Figure 2). This finding is in line with previous research that HPOs, in general, are more likely to have competencies that outline what knowledge, skills, and abilities are critical to leadership success.[9]

FIGURE 1   **Is executive presence, as a term, used at your organization?**
(Percentage responding affirmatively.)[10]

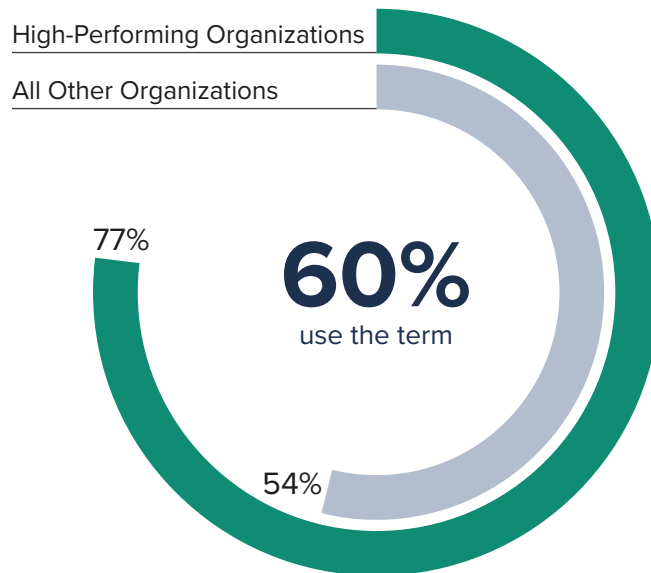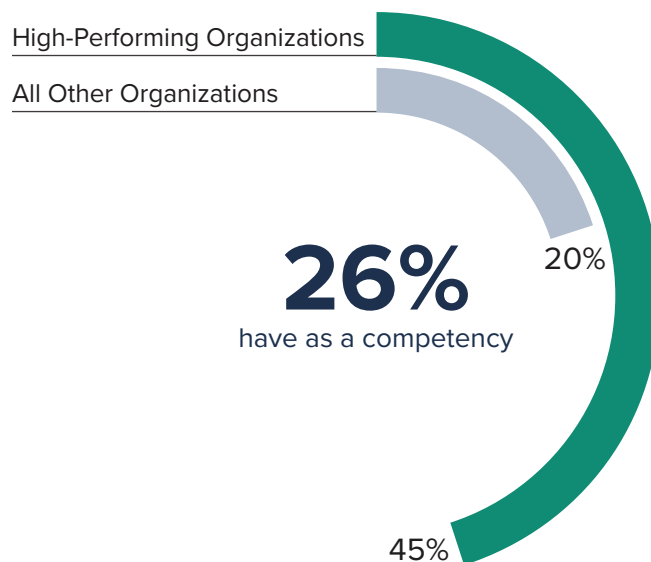High-Performing Organizations

All Other Organizations

77%

60%
use the term

54%

FIGURE 2   **Is executive presence a formal leadership competency at your organization?** *(Percentage responding affirmatively.)*[11]

High-Performing Organizations

All Other Organizations

26%
have as a competency

20%

45%

For the few organizations with an executive presence leadership competency, it provides a framework for aligning leadership behavior to an organization's culture and core values (Figure 3). Increased organizational performance and better management are additional benefits of leaders with presence. Although the term executive presence implies that it is reserved for those at the highest levels of leadership, just 12% of respondents agree that only people in leadership roles display executive presence. Interestingly, at organizations with executive presence as a competency, 26% require it of their individual contributors (Figure 4).

FIGURE 3

For what reasons is executive presence a leadership competency at your organization? (*Select all that apply,* n = *100*.)

It enacts behaviors aligned to our core values and culture	60%
It contributes to increased organizational performance	60%
It helps leaders manage their teams better	56%
It enables better client/ customer relationships	47%
It provides a framework for leadership development	42%
It helps us select and promote people	30%

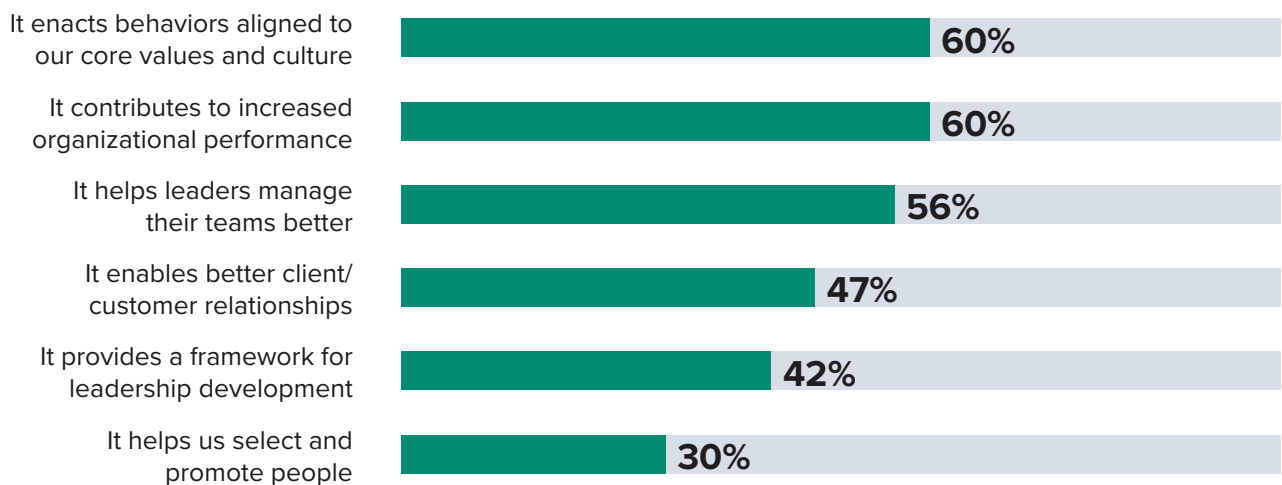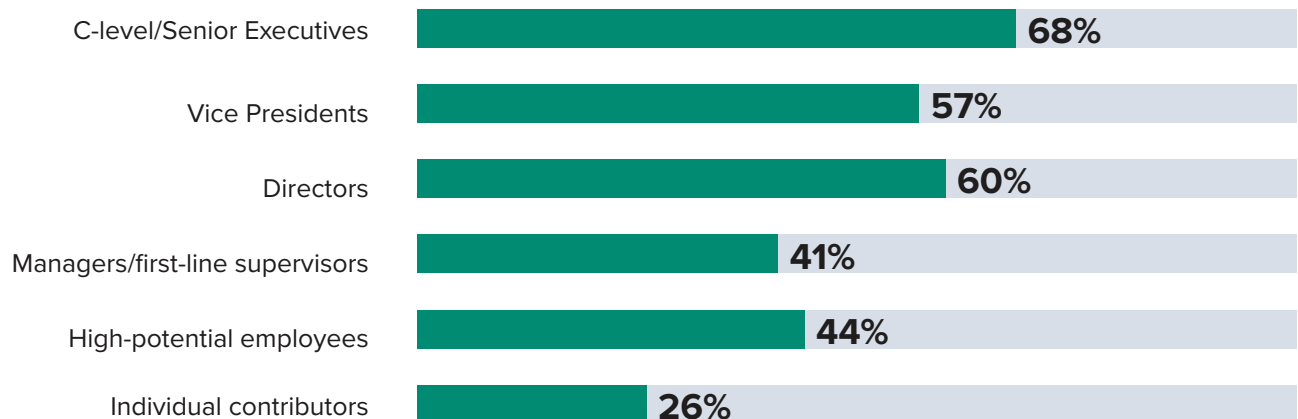**FIGURE 4**

At what levels is executive presence a required competency at your organization? (*Select all that apply,* n = *95*.)

C-level/Senior Executives	68%
Vice Presidents	57%
Directors	60%
Managers/first-line supervisors	41%
High-potential employees	44%
Individual contributors	26%

According to our HR respondents, what is the formal definition of executive presence? From our quantitative and qualitative analysis, we identified three key factors: interpersonal aptitude, professional affect, and technical competence (Figure 5).[12, 13]

Interpersonal Aptitude is the ability to relate to and connect with others. For example, a survey respondent describes an individual with executive presence as, *"Someone that consistently models the behavior they want to see in others. This person is focused on people and has a lot of emotional intelligence."*

Professional Affect is how a person shows up in a situation and appears to others. This response in our survey articulates professional affect: *"We define executive presence as perceiving an individual to have substance and authority, being capable, trustworthy, and 'in charge' and inspiring followers. Executive presence is how you present yourself to highlight your talent, your knowledge, and skill."*

Technical Competence is applying knowledge and skills to deliver results. As one respondent wrote, *"Executive presence connotes a spectrum of knowledge of the current industry plus some experience of other pertinent industries."*

FIGURE 5 **HCI's Executive Presence Framework**

Interpersonal Aptitude
How you are with people

Professional Affect
How you show up

Technical Competence
What you know

EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

All three factors were rated as important to executive presence; however, HPOs are more likely to emphasize technical competence (Figure 6). Connecting with others and looking the part is not enough for executive presence at HPOs—what you know, and how you deliver results, matters too.

These three factors are comprised of distinct knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics (Figure 7). Respondents rate some, such as communication skills, self-confidence, and the ability to execute as more important than others. HPOs place greater importance on strategic thinking, inclusiveness, assertiveness, and decisiveness.[14]

FIGURE 6 **Average index score by High-Performing Organizations** *(Asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference.)*[15]

High-performing Organizations   All Other Organizations

Interpersonal Aptitude
86%
82%

Professional Affect
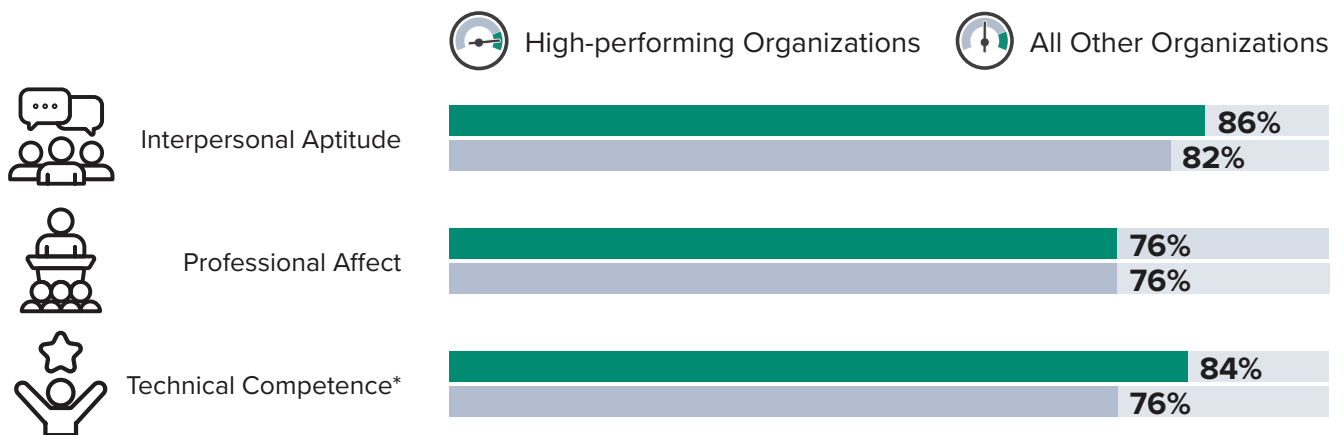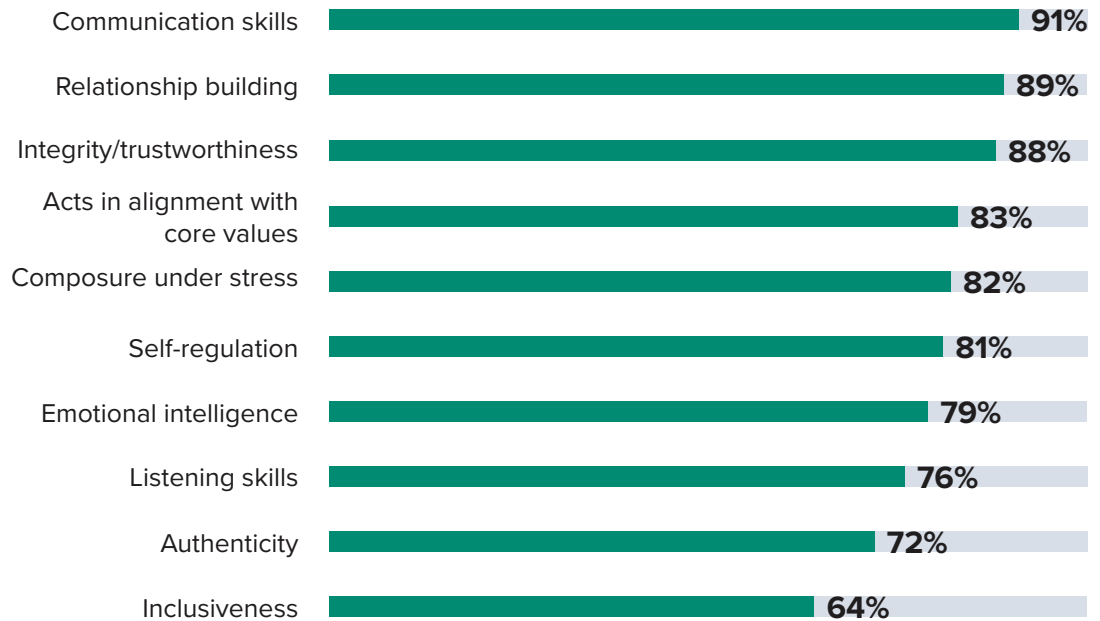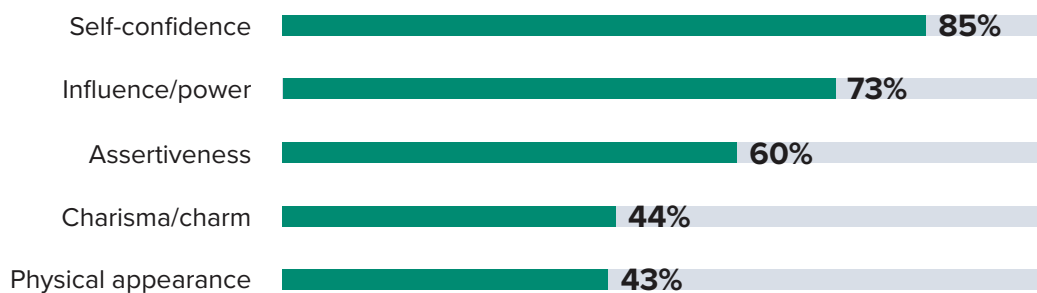76%
76%

Technical Competence*
84%
76%

FIGURE 7   **How important are these knowledge, skills, and abilities to the way your organization defines executive presence?** *(five-point scale, percentage very and extremely important.)*

Interpersonal Aptitude

Communication skills	**91%**
Relationship building	**89%**
Integrity/trustworthiness	**88%**
Acts in alignment with core values	**83%**
Composure under stress	**82%**
Self-regulation	**81%**
Emotional intelligence	**79%**
Listening skills	**76%**
Authenticity	**72%**
Inclusiveness	**64%**

Professional Affect

Self-confidence	**85%**
Influence/power	**73%**
Assertiveness	**60%**
Charisma/charm	**44%**
Physical appearance	**43%**

Technical Competence

Delivers results	**89%**
Strategic thinking	**81%**
Expertise	**79%**
Decisiveness	**74%**
Visionary	**68%**

While we outlined the three factors within the executive presence construct, the actions and behaviors within these categories may look different across organizations. As one survey respondent shared,

"It is important to distinguish characteristics of executive presence which can be objectively and accurately measured, as opposed to characteristics which can be subjective and may even create barriers for individuals of diverse backgrounds, as they can be culturally influenced (such as appearance, manner of speech, charisma, etc.)."

A diverse and inclusive workplace empowers individuals to bring their full selves to work. Someone approaching a situation differently or behaving in a style that is comfortable to them may not mean they are unsuccessful leaders, but rather, authentic ones. As we explored in our values and culture research,[16] in today's organizations, there is a fine line between fitting with the culture and behaving true to yourself or authentically. Our environment continuously shapes our social selves, empowering HR practitioners to set the conditions so that our workplaces are more accepting of different ways of being, while at the same time clearly stating performance expectations that are irrespective of gender, personality, culture, or religion, etc.

> "I found the term of executive presence too subjective and difficult to measure. As for my experience and feedback, I received both [positive and negative] at the same time from different team members which shows the subjectivity of the fact."
>
> —Survey Respondent

MEASURE

Although a definition enables measurement, very few organizations measure executive presence (Figure 8). However, HPOs are more likely to measure individuals' levels of executive presence. Leaders and HR professionals evaluate levels during talent reviews, performance reviews, and promotion decisions (Figure 9). To restate a previous point, using executive presence as a qualifier or disqualifier in a talent decision without definition and accurate measurement is not a fair or valid practice.

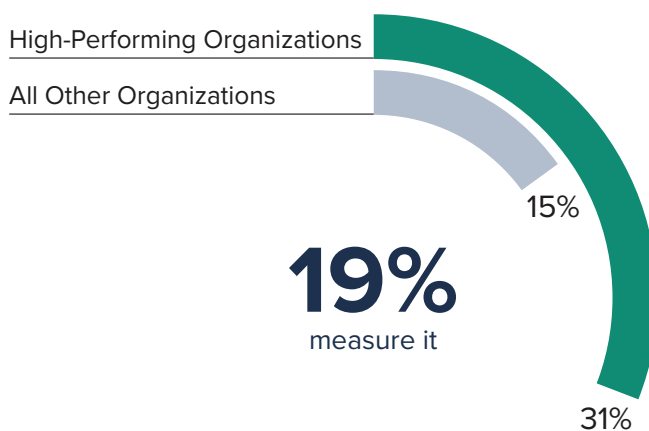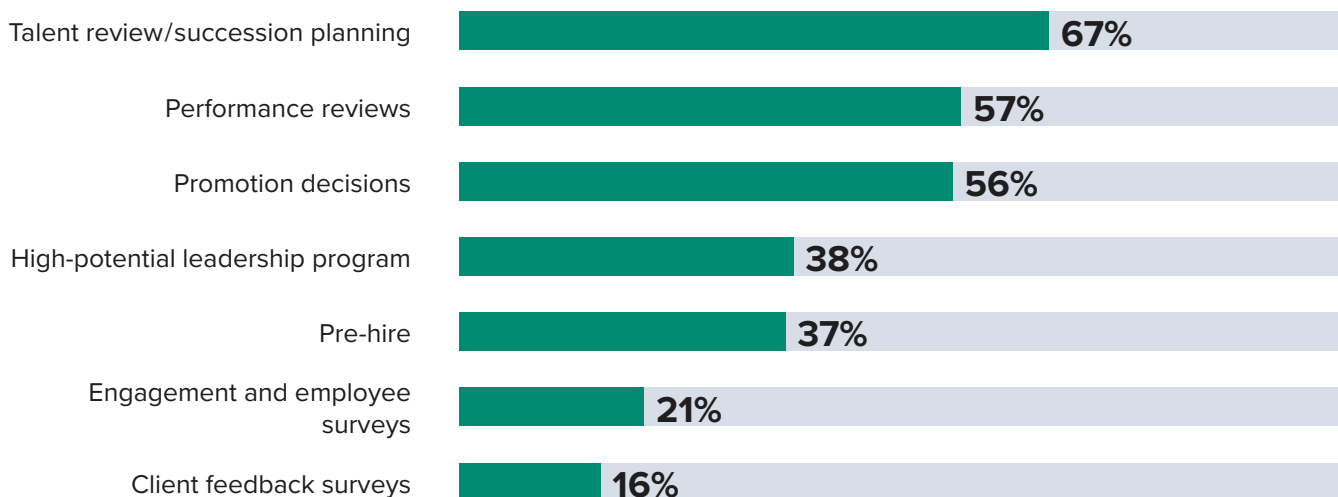FIGURE 8   **Does your organization measure executive presence?** *(Percentage responding affirmatively.)*[17]

High-Performing Organizations

All Other Organizations

15%

19%
measure it

31%

FIGURE 9   **When/how do you assess for executive presence at your organization?** (*Select all that apply,* n = 63.)

Talent review/succession planning	67%
Performance reviews	57%
Promotion decisions	56%
High-potential leadership program	38%
Pre-hire	37%
Engagement and employee surveys	21%
Client feedback surveys	16%

DEVELOP

Definition and measurement are precursors to development. One researcher created a four-phase framework to maximize presence to improve personal brand perceptions, career growth, and organizational impact.[18] The four phases are: defining and assessing, affirming and understanding, optimizing and integrating, and measuring and evaluating. Seeking feedback, practicing presence, and monitoring change are critical to the development and improvement of presence.

At most organizations, executive presence is not developed (Figure 10). While some researchers' conceptualizations of executive presence characterize its attributes as un-trainable/innate or intangible,[19] the three factors within HCI's executive presence framework can be developed. Through awareness, practice, and monitoring, leaders can improve how they relate others, present themselves, and of course, increase their knowledge. Page 17 of this report includes questions to solicit feedback on your executive presence.

A combination of formal training, experimental opportunities, and learning from others are the ways organizations develop executive presence. Most often, executive presence is developed through stretch assignments, 360-degree feedback surveys, and coaching (Figure 11). HPOs are more likely to have formal mentoring programs for developing executive presence.[20]

FIGURE 10 **Does your organization develop executive presence in its people?** *(Percentage responding affirmatively.)*[21]
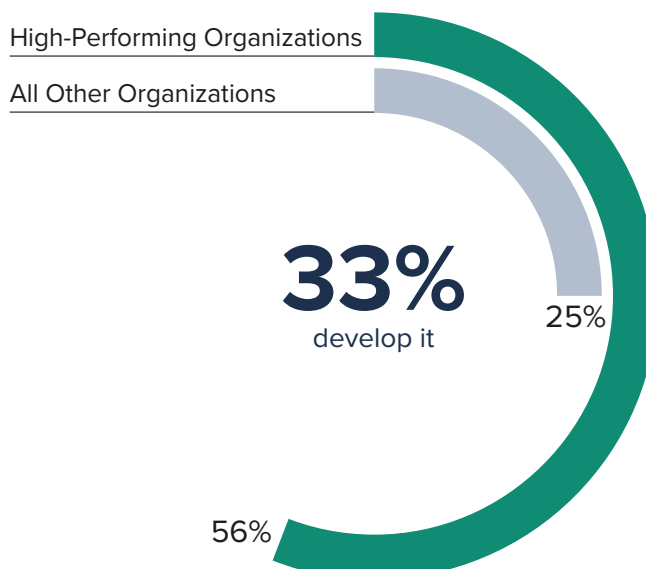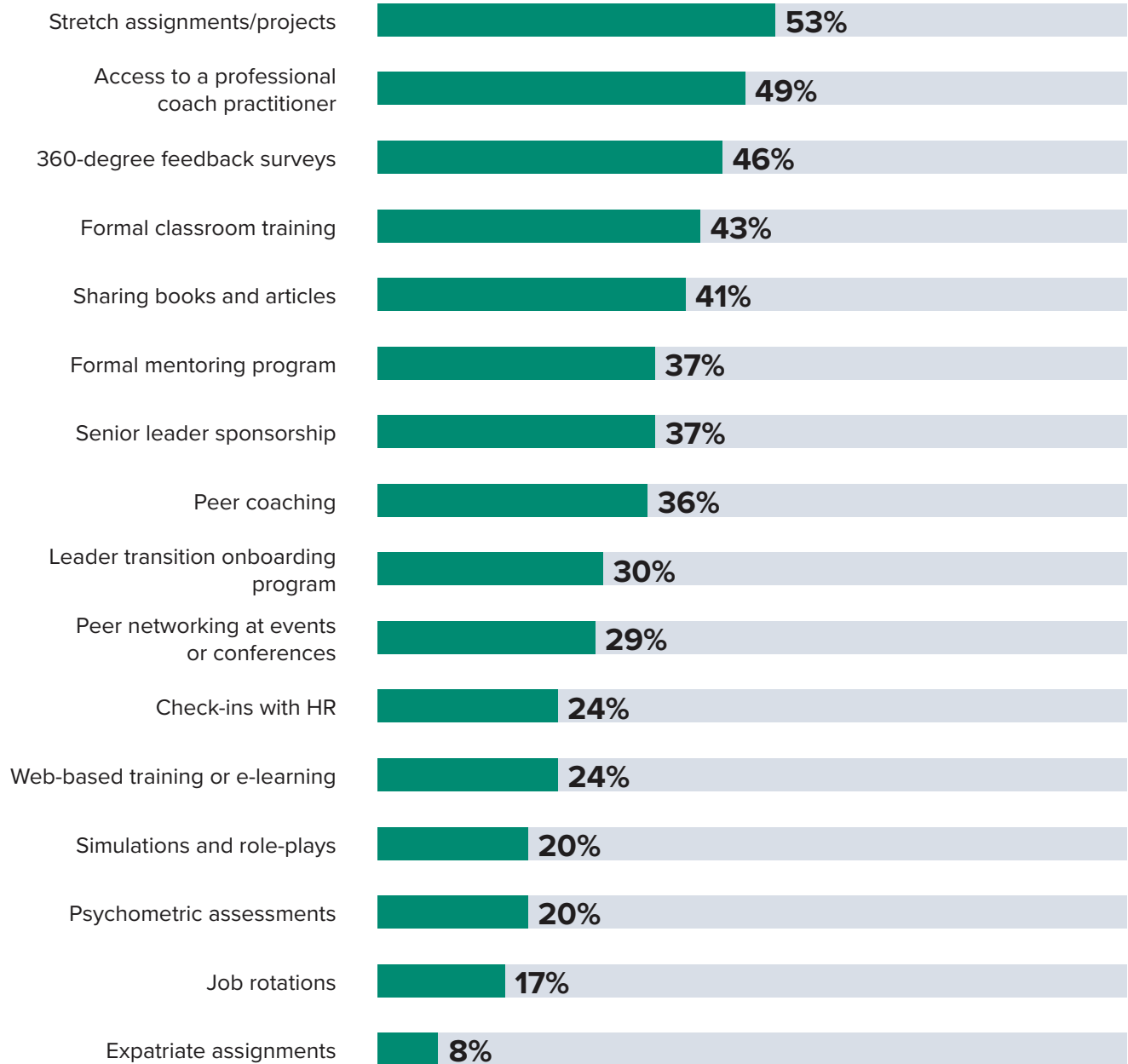
High-Performing Organizations

All Other Organizations

33%
develop it

25%

56%

FIGURE 11

Through what methods is executive presence developed at your organization? (*Select all that apply,* n = *122.*)

Method	Percentage
Stretch assignments/projects	53%
Access to a professional coach practitioner	49%
360-degree feedback surveys	46%
Formal classroom training	43%
Sharing books and articles	41%
Formal mentoring program	37%
Senior leader sponsorship	37%
Peer coaching	36%
Leader transition onboarding program	30%
Peer networking at events or conferences	29%
Check-ins with HR	24%
Web-based training or e-learning	24%
Simulations and role-plays	20%
Psychometric assessments	20%
Job rotations	17%
Expatriate assignments	8%

PRESCRIBE AND APPLY

Our survey respondents share their lessons learned in defining and developing executive presence.

Understand that the construct is subjective without definition and measurement	"Executive presence is problematic. 'Presence' is very much preference oriented. What might be valued by one person may not be valued by another."

"While I believe executive presence is extremely important, it is not widely understood and can be mistaken for being the most forceful person in the room."

"The challenge is not about the definition alone but gaining an aligned definition among different stakeholders."

"The organization has spent little time looking at leadership competencies. Recently, a list of leadership competencies was developed but no measuring stick was developed with them." |
| **Consider how executive presence may exhibit differently based on gender, culture, and personality** | "We often hold a traditional construct of leadership that involves strong, confident voices. Styles that relate to appearance, gender, and introversion may be impacted when being assessed for this quality if there is formal measurement."

"We measure it in an executive development center, and introverts were predominantly identified as having to develop in this area."

"Executive presence is perceived differently based on gender. Females need to be more charismatic than their male counterparts to be considered as having equal levels of charisma and presence." |

| **Authentically develop executive presence and leadership ability** | "The pitfall of relying on the term 'executive presence' is how it can be so easily misinterpreted to be about how you come across to others when true effectiveness can only emerge from the inside out. Taking charge of one's professional self-identity is an 'inside job,' not an 'image job.' Self-leadership quickly devolves into dysfunction when it is based on guessing what other people's opinions of you are and aiming to please by adopting their priorities."

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"We should be careful to think about how to build an executive presence that takes into consideration the different cultural norms that the person comes from and to find ways to balance and still be authentic." |

| **Primarily focus on results and team engagement and inclusion** | "I believe there may be a disproportionate rate of promotion for people with executive presence, but executive presence doesn't necessarily belie authenticity, ability to execute, or other key leadership behaviors."

· · · · · · · · ·

"I think executive presence, which I consider a combination of good communication skills, high emotional connection with people, a solid understanding of the business combined with an ability to articulate strategy, is necessary for effective leadership. My observation is that often executive presence is equated to high self-confidence, which is not necessary and can sometimes even be harmful to effective leadership."

· · · · · · · · ·

"Executive presence isn't a magic bullet, but it's an important part of how you show up as a leader. An individual can be incredibly effective without it, but they may struggle to navigate the politics, emotions, and difficult decisions and situations that being a leader entail without executive presence." |

ORANGEBOX DIGITAL TOOLKIT BY HCI

Questions for Executive Presence Feedback

In our research, we found three important factors that constitute executive presence. To get a complete and accurate picture of your executive presence, ask these questions of trusted people in your network. When you seek feedback, focus on asking people who know you, and can observe your work.

Interpersonal Aptitude
How you are with people

✔ What suggestions do you have for me to improve my listening skills? Or my communication skills?

✔ Acting with integrity and building trust is very important to me. Can you share an example of how I display that with you?

✔ How do you feel during our conversations?

✔ What do you notice about my ability to form relationships with you and others?

✔ When connecting with others, what do I do very well? Or not so well?

Professional Affect
How you show up

✔ What impression(s) do I make at work?

✔ What three words characterize my style?

✔ If you were speaking with a colleague about me, how would they describe me?

✔ What change would have the biggest improvement in how I show up at work?

✔ For what strengths am I known?

Technical Competence
What you know

✔ In what areas am I perceived as an expert?

✔ What problems would you bring to me to solve?

✔ What knowledge or skills should I develop to be more effective in my role? For my next role?

✔ How have I added value to your team/function/organization because of my skills and experience?

✔ What is my decision-making style?

ORANGEBOX
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Coaching Questions for Leaders' Development

In coaching conversations with your leaders, ask these questions to understand their current state, goals, and plans. Using the answers to these questions, you can work together to build a development plan.

Awareness of the Current State

✔ On what aspect of your career would you like to focus?

✔ In what ways are you "*insert feedback comment here*"?

✔ What would happen if you weren't "*feedback comment*"?

✔ In what ways does "*feedback comment*" serve you? And not serve you?

✔ What does this situation tell you about yourself?

✔ What is that situation like for you?

✔ What is the biggest change you would like to make?

✔ What do you want instead?

✔ What's next for you?

✔ What do you need to do differently?

✔ What is the problem that needs to be solved?

Action Planning and Goal-Setting for the Future

✔ What specifically are you committing to?

✔ If you say yes to this, what are you saying no to?

✔ When and where are you going to start doing it?

✔ What is important to you about achieving this goal?

✔ How does your goal support or not support the organizational strategy?

✔ How does what you value fit here?

✔ What will happen if you don't achieve it? What won't happen if you don't achieve it?

✔ On a scale from 1-10, how confident are you about your ability to make this change?

✔ How achievable/realistic is this goal for you currently?

✔ Who can help you with this?

✔ What is the next action that will move you towards your desired outcome?

✔ How will you measure progress?

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

From November 15th to December 2nd, 2019, a survey link was distributed via e-mail to opt-in members of HCI's Survey Panel and electronic mailings. The results of this questionnaire and secondary sources form the basis of this research. We filtered duplicate entries and careless or partial survey responses out of the dataset for a total sample of 380 respondents. Seventy-eight percent are headquartered in North America. Only categories describing at least 5% of the survey sample are displayed below.

Survey Respondent Demographics

What is your functional area?	
Human Resources	38%
Talent Management or Organizational Development	11%
Learning and Development	10%
Employee Engagement and Experience, Workplace Culture	6%
Coaching	6%

What is your current level of responsibility?	
I manage my own work and contribute to teams and projects.	28%
I am responsible for a business unit or function.	28%
I manage my own work and lead a team of people.	17%
I am responsible for an entire organization.	16%
I lead and am responsible for other people managers below me.	10%

How many employees are in your organization?	
Under 100	26%
> 100 and ≤ 500	21%
> 500 and ≤ 1,000	8%
> 1,000 and ≤ 5,000	21%
> 5,000 and ≤ 10,000	6%
> 10,000 and ≤ 50,000	12%
> 50,000	5%

What is your industry?	
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	19%
Other Services (except Public Administration)	13%
Health Care and Social Assistance	10%
Manufacturing	9%
Finance and Insurance	9%
Educational Services	7%
Public Administration	6%

End Notes

1. Beeson, J., & Valerio, A. M. (2012). The executive leadership imperative: A new perspective on how companies and executives can accelerate the development of women leaders. *Business Horizons*, *55*(5), 417-425.

2. Botelho, E.L. & Creagh, K.S. (2018, December 18). What to Do If Your Career Is Stalled and You Don't Know Why. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2018/11/what-to-do-if-your-career-is-stalled-and-you-dont-know-why

3. HCI researchers developed an index of seven talent outcomes (investments in training, internal mobility, employee engagement, diversity and inclusion, quality of hire, retention, and leadership bench strength) and seven critical business dimensions (customer satisfaction, regulatory compliance, talent attraction, innovation, profitability, shareholder value, and productivity) for evaluating the relative strength and weakness of respondents' organizations. These inventories are composed of items with five-point rating scales. Scores from these items are aggregated to create a composite score that reflects the overall strength of each organization in terms of its performance. Those scoring 52 or greater on this inventory are considered high-performing organizations (HPO) and consisted of 26% of the total. HPO status had no relationship with the number of employees within an organization nor the respondents' seniority.

4. Beeson, J. (2012, August 22). Deconstructing Executive Presence. *Harvard Business Review.* Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2012/08/de-constructing-executive-pres

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7. Kerns, C. D. (2019). Leadership presence at work: A practice-oriented framework. *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness*, *13*(3).

8. Bates, S., & Weighart, S. (2014). Executive presence: The X factor in employee engagement. *Employment Relations Today*, *41*(3), 47-52.

9. Filipkowski, J.N., & Heinsch, M.F. (2019). Developing Sustainable Leadership Pipelines. *Human Capital Institute.* Retrieved from https://www.hci.org/research/developing-sustainable-leadership-pipelines

10. x^2 = 10.569, v = .210, p < .05

11. $x^2 = 15.871$, $v = .249$, $p < .01$

12. In respondents' descriptions of executive presence, there was overlap among the three factors. However, professional affect was cited most often (85%), followed by interpersonal aptitude (76%) and technical competence (23%).

13. Maximum Likelihood extraction method with Direct Oblimin rotation method. Factor 1 (interpersonal aptitude) was comprised of 10 items reported on a 5-point Likert scale that explained 35% of the variance with factor loadings from .642 to .836. Factor 2 (professional affect) was comprised of 5 items reported on a 5-point Likert scale that explained 9.3% of the variance with factor loadings from .519 to .638. Factor 3 (technical competence) was comprised of 5 items reported on a 5-point Likert scale that explained 4.6% of the variance with factor loadings from .588 to .751.

14. Strategic thinking: $r^s = .19$, $p < .05$; inclusiveness: $r^s = .17$, $p < .05$; assertiveness: $r^s = .17$, $p < .05$; and decisiveness: $r^s = .20$, $p < .05$

15. Interpersonal aptitude: $F_{(1, 142)} = 2.12$, $p = .147$; Professional affect: $F_{(1, 142)} = .919$, $p = .339$; Technical competence: $F_{(1, 142)} = 5.71$, $p < .05$. Percentages in Figure 6 were calculated by the averaged summed score divided the total possible score for that factor.

16. Filipkowski, J.N. (2019). Talent Pulse 6.3 – Defining and exemplifying organizational core values. *Human Capital Institute.* Retrieved from https://www.hci.org/research/talentpulse63

17. $x^2 = 7.946$, $v = .179$, $p < .05$

18. Kerns, C. D. (2019). Leadership presence at work: A practice-oriented framework. *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness*, *13*(3).

19. Dalavai, E. (2019) Executive presence: Myth, meaningful or mastery? Presented at Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Engaged Management Scholarship.

20. $x^2 = 4.238$, $v = .229$, $p < .05$

21. $x^2 = 19.636$, $v = .283$, $p < .01$

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