Building Executive Presence in Virtual and Hybrid Meetings

Executive Presence - 1 September 2026 - By Dr. Amitabh Kumar

A different medium, a different set of signals

Many leaders developed their sense of presence in physical rooms: reading body language around a table, using pauses and posture to hold attention, picking up on side conversations and shifting energy. Video calls strip away most of these cues, and a significant number of capable leaders find their presence noticeably diminished on screen, without fully understanding why.

What is lost, and why it matters

On video, peripheral vision disappears, so a leader cannot see how the room as a whole is reacting, only the small, often muted signals of whoever happens to be visible on screen. Pauses that would read as thoughtful and commanding in person can read as dead air or a frozen connection on a call. And the natural energy that builds in a room through shared physical presence simply does not translate through a screen in the same way, which is part of why long video meetings often feel flatter than equivalent in-person ones.

What actually transfers, and what needs rebuilding

Clarity of thought transfers well. A leader who can state a clear point concisely is, if anything, more valued on video, where attention spans are shorter and tolerance for rambling is lower.

Composure transfers, but needs to be more deliberately signalled. Because the usual physical cues of calm, posture, breathing, presence, are harder to read on screen, composure often needs to be communicated more explicitly through tone and pacing of speech.

Reading the room needs a new method. Rather than relying on ambient cues, effective virtual leaders build the habit of directly checking in: naming who has not spoken, asking a specific person a direct question, or explicitly inviting disagreement, since it will not surface on its own the way it sometimes does in person.

Silence needs recalibrating. A pause that would feel powerful in a physical room can feel like a technical problem on video. Leaders often need to verbally signal a pause, "let me think about that for a moment," rather than relying on the silence to carry the same weight it would in person.

Practical adjustments worth making

Camera position and lighting matter more than most leaders assume, not for vanity, but because eye contact and visible facial expression carry a disproportionate share of the signal that used to come from full-body presence. Speaking slightly more slowly and leaving more explicit space for others to respond compensates for the loss of natural turn-taking cues. And using people's names directly when addressing them helps recreate a sense of individual engagement that is otherwise easy to lose in a grid of faces.

The underlying principle

Executive presence was never really about a specific set of gestures or vocal techniques; it was always about clarity, composure and genuine attentiveness to the people in the room. Video calls simply require those same qualities to be expressed through a narrower channel. Leaders who understand this tend to adapt more successfully than those who try to force in-person habits onto a medium that does not support them in the same way.