

Building Presence in Your First Leadership Role

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The specific pressure of a first leadership role

A first leadership role brings a particular kind of pressure around presence: the sense that you need to immediately look and sound like a leader, often without yet having the accumulated experience that makes presence feel natural in more senior leaders. This pressure leads many first-time leaders either to overcompensate, performing an authority that feels borrowed, or to underplay their role entirely out of discomfort with the shift.

Why performed authority tends to backfire early on

A new leader who adopts an unfamiliar, more commanding style purely to seem authoritative often comes across as inconsistent, particularly to a team that knew them before the promotion. The gap between the performed style and the person underneath it tends to be visible, and it can undermine trust faster than a more modest, authentic approach would have.

What builds real presence early in a leadership career

Consistency between what you say and what you do. This matters more for a new leader than almost anything else, since it is the fastest way to build the basic trust that presence eventually rests on. Following through on small commitments reliably does more for early presence than any single confident-sounding statement.

Clarity, even when you do not yet have full authority or experience. A new leader who communicates clearly about what they do and do not yet know, "I'm still learning the details of this process, here's what I understand so far and here's who I'll check with," tends to be trusted more than one who bluffs confidence they do not have.

Genuine preparation for recurring moments. Team meetings, one-to-ones, and status updates are all opportunities to build a track record of being organised and clear, which compounds into presence over time, even without any dramatic display of authority.

Listening visibly, especially early on. A new leader who is seen genuinely taking in what the team says, and occasionally changing their view in response to it, builds a different, often more durable kind of respect than one who arrives with fixed answers. This is not a lack of presence; for a first-time leader in particular, it is usually the fastest route to building it.

Allowing presence to be built gradually, not demanded immediately. Much of what reads as natural authority in experienced leaders is, in fact, the accumulated result of many small, consistent interactions over time, not an innate quality some people simply have from day one. A first-time leader who expects to feel and project full presence immediately is working against a realistic timeline.

What to do with the discomfort in the meantime

Some discomfort during this transition is normal and does not need to be eliminated before a new leader can be effective. Acknowledging it honestly, ideally with a coach, mentor, or trusted peer rather than suppressing it entirely, tends to be more sustainable than either denying the discomfort or letting it drive an overcorrected, performed version of leadership.

A realistic marker of progress

Presence in a first leadership role is better measured by whether trust and clarity are visibly building over the first several months, not by how commanding a new leader appears in the first few weeks. Leaders who focus on consistency, honesty and genuine listening early on tend to build a form of presence that holds up over a long career, rather than one that depends on a performance that is hard to sustain.