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The 'bald' business advantage

TALL PEOPLE with booming voices have an advantage as speakers, but you can compensate by focusing on fundamentals

THE OTHER DAY I came across an interesting factoid on USA Today's Web site. The headline read "The bald truth about CEOs." a survey of CEOs found that being bald is a business advantage. These CEOs felt that baldness conveyed leadership presence.

Steve Carley, the bald CEO of restaurant chain El Pollo Loco, told the newspaper that his baldness is "a point of pride and a personal branding advantage. ... It encourages approachability."

Now what's a communication skills coach to do with that? advise his clients to shave their heads?

This "baldness-leadership" nexus highlights a series of uncontrollable physical issues that impact leadership presence. The most common such issues are height, body type, gender, voice pitch and accent.

The most important thing that you can do to address such challenges is to focus on fundamentals. Keep your message simple and listener-focused, and speak with passion. But here are some more specific strategies.

• **Height.** Tall people have a natural advantage when it comes to leadership presence. For some reason, our society associates leadership with being tall. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book "Blink," said that 30 percent of chief executives of Fortune 500 companies are 6-foot-2 or taller, compared with only 4 percent of the general male population.

But short people can project leadership presence. My colleague and fellow coach Marilyn Ringo, a former CNN news anchor, is only 5-foot-1. But she has great presence. "I stand up straight, make big gestures and move around a lot," she says. "Because I'm short, I make sure that I walk tall."

• **Accents.** Many worry that their accents hinder their ability to connect with audiences. But we say celebrate your accent. My colleague and fellow coach Nancy Thomas is from Statesboro and has a classic Southern accent. "I love my accent," she says. "I wouldn't want to change it.

accents make you unique."

Of course, if people have trouble understanding you, then you need to play down your accent. There are coaches who specialize in such help.

• **Voice pitch.** Not everyone can sound like Barack Obama. To counter a high-pitched voice, speak with passion. I worked with the CEO of a medical products company who had a squeaky voice. He simply ignored the "problem" and spoke with total conviction and passion about his company. He also spoke with lots of energy in his face. He was highly effective. No one noticed his voice.

• **Body type.** During a workshop about a year ago, a participant cornered me during a break. "I know I'm heavy," he said. "Other than losing 30 pounds, what can I do?"

Some people who are extremely skinny also worry that they are at a disadvantage. The answer: Good clothes and tailors work wonders.

• **Gender.** Many women worry about projecting "leadership presence" in a male-dominated workplace. How women come across at work is a complex cultural issue that can't be fixed with a few tips.

But here are two things to help. First, don't try to present like men. Business culture has trained men to be restrained and low key. It's dull. Women emulate that style and come across as flat. Instead, we urge women (and men) to just be themselves, speaking with the same passion that they have when they're having an animated dinner conversation.

Second, avoid the classic "girly" gestures like tilting the head while talking, crossing the ankles while standing and twiddling the fingers and flipping the wrists. A good leadership stance for both women and men is with the hands relaxed at the side, the head straight and the feet shoulder-width apart.

Many things impact our presence. To project leadership style, focus on presentation fundamentals and minimize your weaknesses. After all, we can't all be bald. 