

Your Launch Pad: Strengthen Your Executive Presence with These Five Shifts

Career Development



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Cheat Sheet:

- **Prioritize precision over volume.** Executive presence comes from concise, well-timed contributions — not speaking more, but saying what matters.
- **Lead with influence, not authority.** Strong presence comes from calm tone, active listening, and creating space for others to contribute.

- **Use humility as a strength.** Admitting what you don't know — and following up thoughtfully — reinforces trust and business credibility.

- **Align body language with intent.** Nonverbal signals, from posture to eye contact, shape how your judgment and confidence are perceived.

A general counsel does not earn trust only by being legally right. The role also demands calm judgment under pressure, the ability to influence senior leaders without overpowering them, and the credibility to speak into moments of ambiguity when the stakes are high. That is executive presence.

Yet executive presence is often misunderstood. Many lawyers picture it as polish, perfect delivery, or commanding the room on cue. In reality, it is usually quieter than that. It is steadiness. Discernment. The ability to make others feel confident in your judgment, especially when the answer is not simple.

For in-house counsel, executive presence is often what elevates a strong legal technician into a trusted enterprise advisor. The good news is that it is not reserved for a certain personality type. It can be developed, refined, and strengthened over time. Here are five shifts that matter most.

The stakes for developing this capability have never been higher. According to the 2026 ACC Chief Legal Officers Survey, 84 percent of CLOs now report directly to the CEO, and 49 percent identify advising the CEO or shaping overall business strategy as their greatest organizational impact. Nearly 70 percent of CLOs manage at least two additional corporate functions beyond legal — including risk, compliance, privacy, and ethics — and in the 2025 survey, 58 percent reported being heavily involved in mergers, acquisitions, and other corporate transactions. The in-house counsel role has fundamentally expanded and is more demanding than ever, requiring immense agility. Executive presence is no longer a soft skill; it is a business-critical competency that determines whether a legal leader is seen as a strategic partner or a legal technician.

1. Speak less. Say more.

Peek your head into any meeting, and you will notice one person talking at length but saying little and another using a single, well-timed sentence to shift the conversation. The second person is intentional, and their message is deliberate.

Executive presence isn't about airtime; it's about impact. Leaders with presence are thoughtful and deliberate. They don't rush to prove value; they trust their contribution will land.

Silence matters, especially for corporate counsel, where restraint signals judgment. Filling every gap with words will signal anxiety, but a pause before responding shows you're weighing risks and thinking beyond the moment. That pause carries steady authority.

This discipline is particularly consequential in the highest-stakes rooms. With 58 percent of CLOs heavily involved in mergers, acquisitions, and other corporate transactions, and nearly half regularly advising the CEO on overall business strategy, the ability to speak with precision — and to know when silence is the most powerful contribution — is a defining characteristic of legal leaders who are trusted at the enterprise level.

***Coach's Tip**:* Before your next meeting, pause before speaking and state your point concisely. Observe how this shifts attention to your message.

2. Don't be the commander.

Tone is important. The most effective corporate counsel do not use a "command voice." They speak authentically, with clarity, calmness, and measured delivery. Confidence is demonstrated through coherence, not projection.

Consider presence as orchestration rather than amplification. Your goal is not to be the loudest voice, but to set the rhythm, clarify priorities, and discern when to contribute and when to listen.

This is especially relevant as in-house counsel are increasingly called to lead cross-functional conversations, and even departments. The 2025 ACC CLO Survey found that CLOs are actively seeking greater collaboration with operations (29 percent), finance (18 percent), and sales (15 percent). In those rooms, a commanding or legalistic tone will alienate rather than persuade. The orchestration model — setting the rhythm, asking clarifying questions, and creating space for others — is precisely what effective cross-functional leadership requires.

***Coach's Tip**:* Focus fully in every meeting, whether in person or virtual. Presence begins with attention.

3. Give space to others.



Leaders with strong presence do not overpower others, and they share their perspective without defensiveness.

When in-house counsel leaves the room, what will remain is not necessarily the brilliant legal insight, but how the others felt during the conversation. Did they feel heard? As corporate counsel, did your

presence bring steadiness to the conversation? Did you balance advocacy with inquiry?

Share your perspective, then invite others to contribute. This approach demonstrates both presence and leadership.

This shift carries particular weight when in-house counsel are operating outside their core legal expertise. With nearly 70 percent of CLOs now managing additional functions such as risk, compliance, privacy, human resources, and ethics, many are regularly leading conversations in domains where they are not the deepest subject-matter expert. In those settings, giving space and the floor to others is not a sign of weakness — it is a demonstration of sound judgment and trust. Leaders who ask thoughtful questions and draw out the expertise of others build far more credibility than those who overreach.

***Coach's Tip**:* Before contributing to a discussion, pause and ask yourself: "Why am I talking?" (Remember the acronym WAIT.) Ensure your input provides clear value.

4. Practice humility.

In-house counsel are initially hired for their knowledge of the law, and it is terrifying to admit when we do not know something. It seems counterintuitive, but humility enhances presence. Admitting what you do not know, asking thoughtful questions, and inviting other viewpoints does not weaken your authority; it strengthens it. As outside counsel, you were paid for legal advice. As a General Counsel, you are expected to be both a businessperson and a legal advisor.

The 2026 ACC CLO Survey makes this expectation explicit: 68 percent of CLOs identify business acumen as the top skill they want their legal teams to develop — ranking it above communication skills, industry-specific knowledge, and even technological fluency. In-house counsel are being asked to understand P&L statements, evaluate strategic trade-offs, and engage meaningfully with finance, operations, and sales — often without formal training in those disciplines. Many describe the experience as constructing the ladder while climbing it. In that context, humility is not a liability; it is the foundation of credibility. Asking a well-considered question in a business discussion signals intellectual honesty and earns far more trust than projecting false certainty.

Coach's Tip: If you do not know the answer to a question, say: "That's a good question. My team will find out and follow up with you by Friday."

5. Be mindful of body language.

Your influence is shaped as much by your body language as by your words. Body language plays a significant role in how judgment, confidence, and credibility are perceived. This is true in both in-person and virtual settings. Virtual and hybrid meetings are now a permanent feature of in-house legal practice; virtual body language such as having your camera on, eye contact with meeting participants, and leaning into the discussion carries the same weight as physical presence in the meeting or boardroom.

Here are common body language mistakes to avoid in both in-person and virtual meetings, along with strategies to ensure your nonverbal signals reinforce your impact.

- **Inconsistent or avoidant eye contact.** Eye contact signals attentiveness and confidence. Avoiding it suggests disengagement or uncertainty, while staring can appear confrontational. Aim for steady, natural eye contact, and be cognizant of losing eye contact while you are thinking. On video calls, look directly into the camera rather than at the screen when making key points — this creates the perception of direct eye contact for your audience.

- **Poor posture.** Slouching, leaning back, or collapsing into your chair can signal low energy or lack of interest, while rigidity can appear tense. Sit upright with a relaxed posture, remaining composed but not stiff. Imagine that a string tied to the area between your shoulder blades is being pulled upwards.

- **Closed body positioning.** Crossed arms or a tightly folded posture often appear defensive, even if that is not your intent. Keep your arms relaxed and open, and rest your hands on the table to signal receptivity and confidence.

- **Excessive fidgeting.** Tapping, swiveling, or pen-clicking can be distracting and signal nervousness. Practice stillness and use intentional movement to convey calm authority.

- **Mismatched facial expressions.** When facial expressions do not align with spoken words, this may create a threat response in the listener, especially during challenging conversations. Maintain a neutral, attentive expression, and use small nods or brief smiles when appropriate to reinforce engagement.

- **Lack of responsive listening signals.** Failing to nod, adjust your expression, or acknowledge others can make you appear disengaged. Subtle nods, paraphrasing, asking relevant questions, and giving acknowledgments reassure others that you are listening.

- **Visible device distraction.** Checking devices during meetings signals divided attention and erodes trust. Keep devices out of sight to demonstrate respect and presence, even if others are using theirs.

- **Overly animated hand gestures.** Gestures can enhance communication, but excessive movement is distracting. Use intentional, controlled gestures to emphasize key points.

Additional tips for virtual presence*:* Ensure your background is clean and professional, your lighting is adequate, and your audio is clear. These details signal preparation and professionalism before you say a word. Have your camera on, even if no one else does. This signals respect and establishes engagement with your presence.

Final thought: Presence is a practice.

The 2026 ACC CLO Survey confirms that the expectations placed on in-house counsel have

fundamentally changed. Almost half of CLOs are now helping shape overall business strategy and two-thirds want their teams to develop better business acumen. Having executive presence is critical for credibility, and these statistics make it clear that executive presence is no longer a finishing touch on a legal career; instead, it is the bridge between legal expertise and enterprise leadership

In the end, executive presence is not about trying to look more powerful. It is about becoming more trusted. For in-house counsel, that trust is built in the quiet choices: the pause before responding, the discipline to say less, the humility to ask a better question, and the steadiness to lead others through ambiguity. These are small shifts, but they carry outsized weight.

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