
Finding Gravitas



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD Distinguished Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

Combining style and substance: Why developing genuine gravitas is important for your career.

The competition for succession at the Rosen Company was reaching closure. The “horse race” had run its course and the two candidates, Derek and John, knew the time had come when they would find out which of them would succeed the CEO.

What they didn’t know, however, were the goings-on at the most recent board meeting when at a heated moment during the intense discussion pertaining to their candidature, a member of the selection committee made it quite clear that he felt Derek was the more qualified of the two. Asked to elaborate, he noted that John did not really have the “*gravitas*” needed for the job.

Given the many challenges the company was facing, he insisted, gravitas was at the top of his list of “must have” qualities. After subsequent consideration most of the other board members agreed, although none of them asked for a clarification of what he meant by the word gravitas.

What is gravitas?

So what does gravitas look like in a leadership context? And how do, or can, we develop such a critical factor in leadership?

What someone really means when they use the term gravitas is not easy to capture. Some wits have likened it to pornography: you know it when you see it. For many, it refers to a mixture of poise, confidence and authenticity. The word itself derives from the Latin *gravitas*, meaning weight, and from *gravis* heavy, suggesting that people who display gravitas are grounded, possess sound judgment and are able to deal with “weighty” issues. No wonder that for the ancient Romans, it was rated among the highest of the fifteen virtues needed to attain a reputable position in society.

Clearly, gravitas connotes seriousness of purpose, solemn and dignified behavior, and being perceived as important and compelling. It’s something to aspire to as these qualities are assumed to be associated with leadership effectiveness. In organisational life, possessing gravitas is also seen as a key quality in the ability to yield influence.

In the world of corporate advancement, headhunters, talent managers, and HR professionals always ask themselves whether a person has the gravitas required of a role? Does the person have the necessary presence, speaking skills, and the ability to read an audience or situation? Does he or she have the emotional intelligence that enables him or her to easily influence others?

Generally, the assumption is made that people with gravitas lead better, manage better, present better, and network better. And often, it becomes the determining factor that makes or breaks careers.

In this case, the lack of it became the main reason that John, despite his technical qualifications, was not selected for the top job. The directors were looking for someone they believed could hold his or her own in sometimes difficult or unprecedented situations, handle various stakeholders effectively, and had the ability to make tough decisions. They were attracted to the person whose words would carry weight, who could speak with authority, was trusted, and was sought out for his or her opinions, insights and advice.

Where do we look for gravitas?

At this point, you may wonder whether you possess gravitas? Do you have executive presence? Are you considered a person of authority? Do people

stop and listen when you speak? Do you know how to engage and influence others?

One way of answering this conundrum is to make a distinction between the *internal* and *external* qualities that make up gravitas. In making this distinction, I am not talking about rigid boundaries. The internal and external qualities interact with each other, making for a dynamic equilibrium.

Starting with the more internal qualities; To radiate real gravitas we need to possess a modicum of self-awareness. We need to know what we are all about; to recognise our abilities, and our self-worth. Without this self-awareness, and by extension self-possession, we will never be able to master our passions; to discover the power within ourselves.

The other part of the gravitas equation is knowledge. We need to be truly steeped in the topics that we talk about. After all, knowledge creates power. Acquiring more knowledge and applying this knowledge correctly, will add to our gravitas.

The 3 Cs of gravitas

The more external qualities pertaining to gravitas refer to our presentation of self to the outside world. How do we come across to others? In many ways gravitas is very much a perception issue. It is a function of influence, how others assess our competence and importance. This assessment involves three factors: *how we are perceived in acting, how we are perceived in speaking, and how we are perceived in looking*. We can even summarise these factors as the three C's: Courage, Communication, and Composure.

To deconstruct these factors even further, "how we act" will be determined by our emotional intelligence to stay calm, cool, and collected when faced with tough situations. It also pertains to our ability to read and analyse a situation in order to deal with it effectively (this is particularly so in meetings where leaders are expected to be able to quickly identify the players, their engagement level and relevant issues).

Furthermore, people with gravitas know how to act when things run out of control. They have sufficient confidence and equanimity to deal with unpredictable situations; they know how to stand their ground when pushed in a corner.

“How we speak” is determined by our vision, and our ability to communicate that vision effectively. It concerns our ability to inspire others. Do we talk with passion and energy? Do we use an authoritative voice? Do we emanate integrity, trust and respect? Do we keep our promises?

The final factor, “how we look” is very much determined by our appearance. What is the first impression we give? How do others perceive our body language? How do they read our posture? Our reputation - or standing - will also be part of this equation. Again, the importance of having a stellar reputation, of being seen as subscribing to ethical behavior, is critical.

Can gravitas be developed?

Some of these characteristics can be developed easily, with coaching and skills intervention. Other aspects may take decades of learning, requiring wisdom that can only come through experience.

On the behavioural or surface level gravitas can be developed in a number of ways, such as:

- Actively looking for opportunities to hone presentation skills.
- Learning to speak on our feet.
- Practicing the ability to remain levelheaded, regardless of the situation.
- And learning how to acquire a unique voice. This can be done by asking for personal feedback from trusted colleagues, mentors, friends and family members.

The inner journey to acquiring gravitas, however, the one which touches upon our personality, does not come in the form of a quick fix. It takes place over time by gaining an understanding of our personal strengths and weaknesses through life experiences and reactions to challenges and hardships. It is laborious work, requiring constant self-reflection and progressive, often incremental, changes.

Beyond superficialities

People who pursue true gravitas are able to balance outside appearance with inside solidity. They pay heed to the old English Proverb, “Be not deceived with the first appearance of things, for show is not substance.” By going

beyond superficialities to cultivate the authentic person inside, they achieve gravitas based on substance, not merely shadow play.

Manfred Kets De Vries is the Distinguished Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and The Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus. He is the Founder of INSEAD's ***Global Leadership Centre*** and the Programme Director of ***The Challenge of Leadership***, one of INSEAD's Top Executive Development Programmes.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on ***Twitter*** and ***Facebook***

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/finding-gravitas>

About the author(s)

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus.