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Right Sizing: Honing Our Own Leadership Presence

There is something exceptional about Grace. She is a nurse executive with whom I have worked for several years, and recently she was promoted to the CEO role.

Grace was somewhat taken aback by her colleagues' choice. Her surprise was not an expression of immodest (and perhaps false) humility. Rather, it was a statement of curiosity—what led the leaders of this esteemed tertiary facility to select her?

Although Grace was a bit startled, I was not. As her leadership coach, I have seen examples of her potent ability on many occasions, and I'd like to share her approach with you. I am convinced that the essence of Grace's leadership strength is available to each of us. No matter what our roles, all of us possess the capacity that she has truly mastered. I call it her leadership presence.

What does leadership presence mean? For Grace, it means that she is aware of herself as a powerful individual, and she is intentional about continuing to understand her strengths, challenges, and influence as a leader. She regularly exhibits her willingness to be a learner. This decision keeps Grace current with the impact of her talents. It also allows her to be at choice; she can skillfully select her approach to given situations in her work.

Grace has an artful leadership style that is based on honest self-assessment, feedback, practice, and acceptance of her own abilities. It is certainly true that Grace has the requisite skills, knowledge, and experience that technically qualify her to be a senior leader. But, that is not what is most compelling about her. We all know individuals who are technically qualified yet not strong and successful leaders. What is compelling about Grace is that she is so effectively integrates ongoing learning as she relaxes into being who she is.

Let's get specific about some of the ways Grace demonstrates this quality. First, let me offer several caveats. In isolation, none of these behavioral images does Grace justice. Second, it is the combination of these approaches that makes her an exceptional leader. Third, these descriptive comments may make Grace seem superhuman. That is certainly not true. On some level, writing this or any example lifts Grace's

presence out of reality and places it into the realm of "study."

That said, let's move ahead. In each interaction between Grace and other hospital leaders, I see her adept approach to creating and managing relationships. She collaborates effectively with the many others upon whom the organization depends for its success. When she engages with peers, subordinates, and other senior leaders, Grace is clear, to the point, warm, open, inviting, and decisive.

She is also steady and respectful; I have never seen Grace appear arrogant or treat others with anything less than complete dignity. She has an uncanny ability to understand organizational dynamics and work with others in ways that leave them both enabled and inspired.

Here are other ways in which Grace exhibits leadership presence:

1. She is genuine with herself and others. The people with whom she interacts perceive her to be real, and this quality invites and builds their trust. They may not like every position she takes, but they take her at her word. Grace is right-sized about who she is. In other words, Grace is genuine, and that is a natural part of her fabric as a human being. It is also a strategic choice. She knows that people respond well and on a deep level to integrity in a leader.
2. She does not overly distort what she says or what she hears. Although some filters are inherent in all of us, Grace does a skillful job of managing hers. She has made it a point to develop awareness about the biases and experiences that shape her beliefs and values. She does her best to remain aware of these influences. In other words, she vigorously manages herself.
3. Grace listens to understand, and she intentionally reflects on what she has heard. She actively monitors the stories she tells herself. She is diligent in her efforts to clearly represent her own or others' actions and intentions. She takes care to avoid misrepresenting others and herself. Grace is also committed to withholding judgment until she has enough

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4. Grace is not overly focused on herself, and therefore, she is available to pay more attention to those around her.
5. Grace believes in self renewal. This was not always so. She was always a hard worker, and assuming the role of CEO demanded nothing less. After an initial period of intense 12-hour and longer days as the new CEO, she found that she was less energetic than normal. She decided to pare her workweek from 60-plus hours. As she implemented this difficult choice, she was not unrealistic. Sometimes working less is not possible. But whenever it is, she does it. Every few weeks, she takes a day away from the office to work at home. She schedules vacation time; she gets sufficient sleep on most nights; she engages in regular exercise, and she is learning to meditate. Most of us recognize the difficulty of combining organizational leadership with personal well-being. These are not easy commitments to keep, but Grace is disciplined about making exceptions. Most of all, she is aware that self-care significantly enhances her own work and her ability to support others. She also realizes that she is a role model in every respect, including this one.

Finally, Grace possesses the courage and tenacity to find out what is most true in a given situation. For example, when tapped to be CEO, she was puzzled and serious about her question. Why did they select her?

To find out, she pursued a line of inquiry that most of us miss. Were the skills that helped her in previous roles the same skills that were needed in her new position? She spent several months exploring this question. She found answers by uncovering the complex challenges and opportunities facing the institution. As she learned, she reflected on the knowledge and talents that would be most useful. She sought feedback from trusted others, and she directly asked her new bosses, at appropriate times, how they felt she was doing and what advice they had for her.

During those initial months, she focused on these lessons and she began to own the reality of her role. She began to see what she brought to the job and what she needed to let go. The more she accepted the full measure of her fit with the position, the more she relaxed into being herself.

None of us can be a wholly conscious and intentional leader in every waking moment, and Grace is no exception. She is not perfect, yet she is a first-rate example of a leader who deliberately develops, manages, and cares for herself as a leader. Her practices can assist all of us as we develop our own right-sized leadership presence.

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1541-4612/2009/ \$ See front matter
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doi:10.1016/j.mnl.2008.11.003