First Impressions
The little things matter.

QUICK OVERVIEW

Some people seem to have a knack for making friends and closing business; they thrive in the spotlight. Whether at a cocktail party, in business meetings or at dinner with friends, their confidence positions them as people to whom others pay attention.

In Creating Personal Presence, Dianna Booher explains that these enviable people magnets weren’t necessarily born with a winning personality. Personal presence, the intangible qualities that make us take note of these people, comprises learnable skills and behaviors. In short, Booher says, we are attracted to such people because they are likable. The good news: Anyone can increase their likability and thereby their credibility.

Creating Personal Presence includes instruction in four primary categories: how you look, think, talk and act. Booher easily covers the basics (firm up that handshake and update your wardrobe), but she doesn’t stop there. Less commonly stated and more valuable insights on your speech, how you engage people in small talk, and how to know if you’re unwittingly monopolizing the conversation will help you evaluate and adjust the way you interact with people. This summary touches briefly on each of the four categories. If you’re tired of being a wallflower or want to command more attention from your audience, you’ll find it worth your time to read the entire book.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

Your appearance is the first thing people notice about you. This includes everything from the way you introduce yourself, to your smile, to your grooming and dress. While it may take some time to develop new habits when it comes to thought and speech, you can instantly change your appearance to make a better first impression.

Right now, do a quick evaluation of yourself. Examine your reflection in a mirror.

• Are you smiling? Or is your brow line furrowed with concern? Worry and stress written on your face may make you less approachable.

• Are your clothes clean, wrinkle-free and well-fitted? Do they match the type of impression you want others to have of you?

• Are your shoes scuffed or worn out? Are they suitable to your surroundings?

• When was the last time you updated your hairstyle?
• Are you slouching—shoulders rolled forward, head hung slightly? Standing tall can give you the impression of height (a quality that the general public finds attractive), as well as the perception of confidence.

These small changes may seem superficial, but they come together to create the initial (or general) impression people have of you. If you want others to perceive you as a confident, capable, trustworthy person, the first and easiest thing to improve is what they see. Be honest with yourself about your appearance. If everything you see in the mirror looks “just fine,” consider asking a trusted friend or business mentor for their opinion about their impression of your look. It could be fine (or even great!), or it could be that it’s time to make a hair appointment and stop in for a shoe shine.

Presence can help you get a date, a mate, or a sale. Presence can help you lead a meeting, a movement, a revolution, or a nation. Presence appears in all segments of society and all levels of an organization. Wherever you are and wherever you want to go, presence can help you get there.

Millions of Americans are facing the stark reality that being a skilled communicator—a huge part of personal presence—still grants social status and influence. In fact, communication makes leadership possible—in politics, in the community, in the workplace, in the family. Think how often pundits and voters alike point out a candidate’s speaking ability and social skills—or lack thereof. Not only do we expect our presidents and celebrities to speak well, but also that has become the expected norm for CEOs, system analysts, sales professionals, and soccer moms.

You can never measure presence in the same sense that you can measure someone’s heart rate or their running speed. Measuring someone’s presence falls more along the lines of measuring their health. Generally, physicians can check reflexes, do an EKG, give a stress test, check cholesterol levels, do a blood and urine analysis, give a vision and hearing exam, and then certify that someone is free of disease and physically fit or unfit. Beyond that baseline of health, subjectivity comes into play.

Individuals compete among themselves and against their own personal standards for healthy living according to the energy levels they want and lifestyles they want to lead. But there are substantive core concepts involved at some point as well as subjectivity. The same holds true for personal presence.

Presence is not an all-or-nothing commodity. Consider a continuum or a funnel, with your physical attributes, natural talents, communication skills, and character traits plotted along the way somewhere from one end to the other between “low presence/low impact” and “high presence/high impact.” All of us can inch a little closer to the high end every day as we present ourselves with awareness and intention.

To put it simply, your personal presence involves how you look (your body language, handshake, movement, dress, surroundings); how you talk (the words you choose, the physical qualities of your voice, how you use your voice); how you think and communicate your thoughts (how you organize ideas and information, what you decide to pass on or withhold, how you frame issues); and how you act (the attitudes, values, and competence your actions reveal).

As you increase your personal presence, you will strengthen your credibility and expand your influence.

As you increase your personal presence, you will strengthen your credibility and expand your influence. With that stronger impact, you’ll increase your chances of achieving your personal and career goals and the mission and goals of your organization.

HOW YOU LOOK

Buyers make purchases based on the personal presence and persuasiveness of the salesperson. Negotiators with the strongest personal presence, not necessarily the strongest argument, walk away with the best deals. People often start—or decline—a dating relationship based on first impressions. Organizations and nations often elect their leaders based on the power of personal presence as conveyed through the media.

People size you up quickly, and change their minds slowly. Researchers tell us that somewhere between eleven milliseconds and five minutes, people make judgments that do
not differ from impressions made after much longer periods. So instead of resisting that fact, understand how to make it work for you rather than against you.

Yes, you can increase your presence, and people do change their opinions of you. But the sooner you learn these skills and develop these attributes, the better. Changing impressions is not as easy as tossing away old business cards and creating a new image with different ones. Decide what first impressions you want to last and start there.

Take Notice of the Tangibles

You don’t have to be good-looking, but that perception helps. What’s good-looking? Forget movie-star looks. Here’s what most cultures consider attractive: a symmetrical face, a proportionately sized body, clear skin, healthy hair, and straight teeth.

Packaging and preparation can pay off handsomely. Consider the difference packaging makes in how much you’re willing to pay for an item, say, software—whether the program comes on a disk with a simple black-and-white label inside a clear plastic sleeve versus the program inside a colorful well-designed package, accompanied by a brochure, instructions, and online support. Similarly, physical attractiveness results in a fatter paycheck.

But wait a moment before you head off to the plastic surgeon. Although the correlation between looks and earnings has been evident for years, recent studies get to the heart of the matter: It’s not just that beautiful people bias their bosses. Instead, the increase in wages can be attributed to three things:

(1) Attractive people are more confident (about 20 percent of the cases).
(2) Attractive people are considered more competent by employers—although a wrong assumption (about 30 percent of the cases).
(3) Attractive people have certain skills such as communication skills and social skills that enable them to interact well (about 50 percent of the cases).

All that’s good news. You don’t need a plastic surgeon to build confidence, teach communication, or improve your social interactions. Presence has much to do with perception. To be perceived taller, stand tall, walk tall, and sit tall by adjusting your posture and using large gestures. Wear solid colors so you’re not “cut in two” at the waist. Women, if you’re wearing a jacket in a contrasting color, make sure the blouse or shell underneath matches your pants so that when the jacket hangs open, you still have the solid color from neck to ankle that elongates your appearance. Men, wear pinstripes for an elongated appearance. As the cliché goes, attractiveness or beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Package your appearance to best advantage: good grooming; clothing styles and colors to complement your body build, eyes, skin, hair coloring; hair styles to complement your facial shape; makeup to complement your natural coloring. Know what works—and what doesn’t.

HOW YOU TALK

An acquaintance of mine, Troy, can shut down a party quicker than a police raid. Worse, he has no intention of doing so. Take last Sunday afternoon for an example. About thirty of us gathered at a local golf club after church for a leisurely lunch. Seated on both sides of two long tables, first one and then another opened a new discussion topic. “What are you thinking about the elections?” Two or three jumped in with opinions. Then Troy. “You have to look at this upcoming election historically.” He waxed on for two or three minutes, providing historical

Booher’s Rules for Clear Communication

1. Strive for simplicity. Never use a long word when a short word will do.
2. Express your core idea with strong verbs and precise nouns.
3. Use active voice, unless you have a good reason for passive voice.
4. Stick with standard words instead of coining new words.
5. Check word usage and pronunciation.
6. Be prepared, but not canned. Talk, don’t recite. If people want to hear a script, they’ll go to a Broadway play or watch a documentary.
7. Speak fluidly, not haltingly.
8. Don’t let diction and dialect detract.
9. Speak up, then shut up.
“significance” for the elections rather than mere opinion.

Then someone asked for an update on the investigation into the latest terrorist threat. Troy gave a full report, including how-tos on prevention. Someone changed the subject to the latest movies. You guessed it: Troy gave us a lengthy rundown on all the reviews, told us which reviewers were most credible, explained how the movie got its funding, and ended with how much money the average movie made over its lifetime. By the fourth time Troy had hijacked the conversation to “explain” things to us, a deadly pall had fallen over the table. One by one, guests left the table to form smaller chat groups around the room.

As I said, Troy can disperse a crowd faster than a deranged gunman—with only his mouth loaded.

A little expertise engages—just not on every topic. Be conversational, but not captivating. Okay, if you’re dating, aim for captivating in the charming sense of the word. But otherwise, don’t take prisoners. Those around you should not feel trapped when you talk. Lessons learned from Troy? Just because you know something doesn’t mean you have to say something. If the thought occurs that you may be rambling on too long, you are. If people often cut you off with, “I’ve got it,” you’re probably being repetitive. If you see eyes glaze over, you’ve lapsed into lecture mode and lost your audience. As T.S. Eliot observed, “Words strain, crack, and sometime break, under the burden.” Heavy users should have to pay a licensing fee when they exceed their limit.

HOW YOU THINK

Strategic thinking sets you apart from the crowd.

Dr. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, professor of business administration at Harvard University, suggests an apt metaphor for two modes of strategic thinking: Consider the zoom lens on a camera. You can zoom in and get a close look at specific details—but be so close that you miss the bigger context and can’t make sense of what you’re seeing. Zoom out and see the big picture—but you may miss key details and subtleties that would prevent a bad decision.

In her Harvard Business Review article, Dr. Kanter points out the virtues and drawbacks of both perspectives for leaders. Like a camera with a malfunctioning zoom lens, some people get stuck in one mode of strategic thinking. That mode may be strategic in many ways, but still limiting.

If you’ve ever hired a professional photographer for an important occasion—like a wedding, family reunion, graduation, parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary cruise—then you know they’ll shoot hundreds of photos to end up with forty to fifty usable ones.

Close-ups catch the emotion, excitement, and energy. Wide shots capture the context and relationships. You savor both.

So people with presence can’t let themselves get stuck with only one view available—even if strategic. They keep adjusting the lens to see the facts, situation, problem, or decision from all vantage points.

Then they decide and take action.

Practice Intake Before Output

People with presence rarely rush to judgment—of people, situations, data. They make it a practice to listen first, to observe, to collect and assess information. As a member of two CEO forum groups and also in my consulting work, I’m continually reminded of this differentiator: People with a strong presence stay alert, take in information, and think before they speak. Those who lack presence are short on the intake, quick to speak their mind, and often regret their output.

Summary Succinctly to Be Clear

“If you can’t write your message in a sentence, you can’t say it in an hour.” That line came from my earlier book Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire, and Persuade, and I first tweeted it in early 2009 as one of my daily tips for presenters. As I write almost two years later, that comment is still being re-tweeted. Its long life in cyberspace, I think, can be attributed to the frustration people feel in being trapped in a conversation or meeting by colleagues who ramble on and on without making a clear point.

Sounds simple. It rarely is.

With tweets limited to 140 characters and people texting in syllables and letters because words take too long (R U OK?), people have little patience with those who can’t “say it in a sentence” and stop.
With the explosive growth of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn, information continues to bombard people. Your presence cannot be felt unless you can say or write your message succinctly.

**HOW YOU ACT**

Those who have presence strive to engage emotionally as well as physically. But emotional presence implies permission. Few people will permit you to barge in on them at will. In fact, life in the fast lane requires us to set our default drive to tune people out literally and figuratively. So what is it that makes people invite you into their life, so to speak?

Two things: credibility and likability. You may be credible and have others pick your brain and benefit from your work—but choose not to be around you if they don't have to be. On the other hand, you may be a likable, life-of-the-party sort whom everybody wants to hang out with. But people may not consider you credible in challenging times for critical information or competent performance.

The combination of both competence and likability characterizes a leader with presence. That’s why political pollsters construct survey questions to attempt to measure the candidates’ likability ratings as well as their competence scores. The perception of both leads to presence and the presidency. Likability may be hard to define, but we know it when we feel it. We like those who show interest in us and are interesting themselves. We like those who are familiar to us, similar to us, trustworthy, genuine, transparent, humble, positive, and accepting of us. So how do you demonstrate likability?

**Be approachable.** People do pay attention to those with power to reward or punish them. But people enjoy being around those who are likable, humble, and willing to give them the proverbial time of day.

**Listen like you mean it.** You can demonstrate that you’re listening in four key ways: (1) Using attentive body language; (2) Asking questions; (3) Answering questions; (4) Taking action on what you’ve heard.

**Express empathy.** To empathize with others, you have to know and understand their situation. Find commonalities. Instead of asking people the age-old question, “So what do you do?” probe with, “So tell me about your work” or “Tell me what you’re involved in currently.” When they respond in some global or vague way, ask: “For example?” Deal in specifics. Dig for the details. Demonstrate your interest.

Listen to their responses, and make your comments and questions genuine.

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**Use Humor to Open Hearts and Minds**

Humor, whether in a presentation or a conversation, doesn’t necessarily mean a joke or one-liner. In fact, jokes rarely work. If you’ve already heard them, assume that others have as well. Having a sense of humor simply means the ability to see life in a lighthearted way. Those who see everything as a matter of life and death wear a permanent frown and make those around them ill at ease. Personal anecdotes, humorous quotations or comments overheard on the street, a cartoon quip, a visual, a prop, a facial expression or gesture added at the appropriate moment—these are the humorous touches that work best after you’ve established rapport with your colleagues.

Simply your willingness and ability to “lighten up” can be invaluable in positioning yourself as a confident person, comfortable in unscripted situations.

Personal presence involves more than mojo and managing first impressions. Your presence involves your physical, mental, and emotional essence, as well as character. It encompasses what others think or feel about you, based on their interactions with you over time. When that feeling turns out to be favorable, you earn trust and credibility. As others experience the same thing in their interactions with you, buzz builds and social and business opportunities lead to personal and career success.
**ACTION STEPS**
Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned to your life. Here are a few thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. How do you want people to perceive you? What do you want your first impression to be?
2. What does your personal “packaging” say about you? Does it enhance or diminish your first impression?
3. Identify an outfit (from clothes already in your closet or purchased new) that boosts your confidence and portrays the confidence you want to project.
4. In every conversation you engage in today, practice active listening. Ask at least two questions about the other person or the topic at hand.
5. Honestly evaluate your behavior. Do you manipulate the conversation? Do you listen at least as much as you talk? If not, make sure you give others time to speak. If you don’t say much at all, speak up!
6. Describe your business succinctly. Try to write your message in one sentence.
7. If you conduct recurring presentations, consider adding in a lighthearted personal anecdote to your message.

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**About the Author**

Dianna Booher is a master communicator and author of more than 45 books. Named by Executive Excellence Publishing as one of the “Top 100 Thought Leaders” of America and one of the “Top 100 Minds on Personal Development,” she is also the founder and CEO of Booher Consultants. Her training and consulting firm helps Fortune 500 companies, government agencies and individuals alike learn to communicate more effectively.

Booher holds a master’s degree in English from the University of Houston and has been interviewed by a number of media outlets, including Good Morning America, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and SUCCESS magazine.

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**Recommended Reading**

If you enjoyed this summary of *Creating Personal Presence*, you may also want to read:

- **Mojo: How to Get It, and How to Keep It**
  by Marshall Goldsmith

- **Stand Out**
  by Marcus Buckingham

- **Brag: The Art of Tooting Your Own Horn without Blowing It**
  by Peggy Klaus