

Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

February 28th, 2014



Topic: “What Leaders Say about Visibility, Promotions, & Presence: An Insider’s View” featuring Sally Williamson, President of SW&A.

Sally Williamson walks in a room and is immediately noticeable. She is confident, knowledgeable, and very genuine. Sally is the President of SW&A, an Atlanta-based company focusing on improving communication skills and executive presence in corporate settings. As Sally spoke about executive presence and what leaders say creates visibility, everyone was hooked – clearly she knows what she’s talking about!

Sally began by stating that there are two kinds of small business owners, 1) Those who start with a vision and build a business strategy for that vision, and 2) Those that start with a client and trust that a business strategy will follow. Sally was the latter. Since starting her business, Sally has written *The Hidden Factor: Executive Presence How to Find It, Keep It, and Leverage It*, and she is currently working on her second book, which she gave us a glimpse of on Friday. Here are some of the key points from *The Hidden Factor*:

- Does presence really matter? 90% of people said presence is a critical matter determining if someone gets ahead.
- Does not having “presence” hold people back? 78% of people said a lack of presence holds people back.
- At what level does presence have the greatest impact? The CEO, C-Level, Upper Management and Management groups were perceived as needing the most presence. Interestingly, the management level is where a lack of presence can stall a career.

One of the pressing questions in everyone’s minds at this point was, “Is presence innate?” How can someone gain presence? Sally explained that 95% of people believe that deliberate effort is how one has presence. It is something they have to think about and practice, and the need for presence is drawn from an awareness that one needs to make an impact with groups of people. Presence can be gained from observation, coaching and development, and leadership programs.

After explaining the value of presence, Sally discussed the difficulty of answering the question “What is presence?” Most people, when asked that question, answered “I’m not sure, but I recognize it when it walks in the room.”

Sally has her own method of defining presence, the 3 C’s of Personal Style:

1. Confidence: be knowledgeable, credible, composed, and focused
2. Commitment: be involved, passionate, interested, charismatic, and energetic
3. Connection: be engaged, honest, authentic, sincere, and approachable

This is Sally’s tried-and-true method of building personal style, and interestingly enough, many executives have reinforced these 3 C’s when describing who stands out to them. A majority of executives stated that they form an impression within the first 10 minutes, and that impression lasts until the next meeting. To successfully communicate with an executive, Sally recommends keeping the

topic relevant and timely, having a clearly defined “ask” of the executive, having recommendations that are tied to the topic, and making sure your topic is aligned with business needs.

To improve audience attentiveness and interest, Sally recommended understanding what is important to the listener. The “Threshold 30,” or the first 30 seconds of interaction, are critical for pulling someone in and engaging your audience with a compelling message. Second, it is important to frame your story to set direction for your conversation. The final part of your conversation should focus on the details and data points – it is always important to keep these points relevant to your audience.

Q&A

- **How do you frame a presentation for different people, for example introverts vs. extroverts?**

The main message you want to get across is why you’re there and what’s in it for the other people. Make sure you have measurable business outcomes and you are organized in terms of thoughts, situations, solutions, and impact. Don’t spend time giving background on how you got to a solution, but give background on why you got to that solution – this is more important!

- **Is there a difference for you as far as gender and culture dynamics in coaching?**

Yes, gender issues exist in coaching. In my experience, men don’t like to give women feedback. Every company has a culture, but that culture is embedded in how they communicate. Feedback ends up being the key to development!

- **If presence is not innate, how does someone get noticed for advancement in an organization?
How do you get moments of visibility?**

Well, executives watch more than you think they do. Moments of visibility are all over companies, but most of the time, we’re so busy that we don’t really see them there. Executives are much more likely to notice someone out of their role, so take on new projects or invest time in new things to gain moments of visibility.