

# THE LOOK OF LEADERSHIP

Leaders come in many guises, but the one thing they all have in common is presence. If you want to maximise yours, says **Julia Champion**, you need to look – and act – the part

IN THIS VERY VISUAL WORLD, WE are influenced first and foremost by what we see. Your outer appearance needs to reflect what's on the inside – your values, your personality and, crucially, your leadership expertise. Otherwise, you send mixed messages. The ability to manage your image is a critical skill and one that you can easily learn, ensuring that your appearance consistently projects your capability as a leader.

Just look at effective leaders – they all have 'presence' or that indefinable X factor. They exude quiet authority or obvious power, according to their personal style. It's not only appearance, but posture, demeanour and the way we interact with people that all contribute to our personal presence. Impressive leaders are often described as 'taking up space'. They stand, move and dress confidently and assertively. They are well aware of the subliminal messages of non-verbal communication, such as image and body language, and will use these tricks effectively.

Leaders also make the rules rather than follow them and have the confidence to dress to reflect their personality and business. Think of Sir John Harvey-Jones with his natty suits and flamboyant socks, Richard Branson's early years in his approachable knitwear or Anita Roddick's style which echoes her individuality and ethical interests. Each of these leaders has a very



A smart outfit and a confident demeanour ensure your credibility shines through

distinctive personal image. You need to develop your personal style to suit your style of leadership. Whatever look you choose, you must be true to your personality and remain individual to ensure you're memorable.

## FEEL THE QUALITY

Whether you believe money is the measure of success or not, when it comes to appearance, quality counts. That doesn't mean you have to buy the most expensive items you can find – it's about seeking out clothes and accessories where the quality of the material and craftsmanship is evident. A perfectly fitting lightweight wool suit, an immaculate silk tie or a beautifully stitched handbag in softest

leather – they all ooze quality. Too often in corporate life, an individual's impact is marred by the inclusion of an item that jars. A smart tailored suit and crisp shirt can be undermined by a cheap plastic watch. It gives out a message of poor judgement, poor quality and a sloppy approach to work. The subliminal message you want people to pick up from your appearance is 'here is someone who knows what they are doing, where they are going, with sound judgement and an eye for quality and detail'.

Whatever level they work at, an effective leader is a role model. They are setting the standards to all those below them on the career ladder – and should take that responsibility seriously. Giving clear messages to

your employees about how you expect them to dress at work will make them feel far more comfortable than a confusing 'anything goes' atmosphere. Make it clear to your staff or team just what you expect of them and avoid vague terms that can be misinterpreted. The current trend towards a 'modern professional' dress code, where an employee is expected to make judgements about the look required by each day's activities, is a good test of their business acumen. Judging when to opt for 'formal business', knowing when 'relaxed business' will do or when 'business casual' is the order of the day takes perception – and that's a valuable skill to have on your team.

You will want your staff and clients

to have absolute faith in you and your ability to make good decisions, and to earn their respect. Your clothes have a part to play here – always err on the side of formality or, if the culture in which you work demands a business casual approach, keep it smart and co-ordinated.

## CONSIDER THE CULTURE

Of course, your clothes need to match the culture and values of your organisation. For example, in a young, innovative company, you'll need to be more casual and keep a closer eye on fashion trends. Knowing how to wear colour will help you look more authoritative when you need to. This is especially true when selecting business casual items as they are often more colourful and require good co-ordination. There will also be occasions when you need to project more approachability and subtle changes in the way you wear colour can help achieve this.

Finally, you must be true to yourself and dress to reflect your personality. That way you will always look comfortable and confident in your clothes. Your demeanour should indicate to anyone that you're the boss and in control. If you don't feel right in what you're wearing, that will come across to others and your personal credibility will suffer. Don't let your clothes overpower you either

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“JOHN HARVEY-JONES HAD SHOWY SUITS, BRANSON HAD COSY JUMPERS – YOU NEED TO DEVELOP YOUR OWN DISTINCTIVE PERSONAL STYLE”

– make a statement but keep it understated. You should be the focus of attention, not your outfit.

Colours that aren't flattering, styles that don't suit or clothes that don't fit will all get you noticed for the wrong reasons, as will poor grooming and ill-judged make-up. Too much or too little are equally inappropriate. As a female leader, it's well worth learning how to use make-up effectively to achieve a polished, professional look. As a man, you need to adopt a grooming regime that includes regular maintenance of hair, nails, facial hair, clothes and accessories.

A combination of the above tactics will strengthen your ability to influence the way others perceive you. Remember, non-verbal signals are more powerful than words, so how you look and act reveals more about you than what you say. So, no matter what kind of leader you are, or aspire to be, it pays to understand your image. The stronger your personal presence and impact, the more you will be able to influence others in their thinking, actions and policies. Learn to manage your image effectively, and you'll find it a whole lot easier to manage – and lead – your staff. ■

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## PLAY THE GAME GET POINTS FOR IMPACT

Imagine that anyone you work with or meet starts with ten points. Take a closer look and see if you can spot something that diminishes their image, impact and credibility. If you can, deduct a point.

So someone who you initially thought looked smart and professional will lose points when you spot their unpolished shoes, chipped nail varnish and a bic biro in their top pocket! Their credibility goes down the more you notice – and their points score diminishes too.

Why not do this test on yourself every morning as you look in the mirror before you leave for work? It's a good way of checking that you score as highly as possible day in, day out. Consistency is what it's all about and impressive leaders rarely let their defences slip.

Aim to be a ten-point leader all day every day!



Don't accessorise your professional outfit with a cheap and chewed-up plastic pen