

Most of us have, at some point, experienced the challenge of not being able to express ourselves effectively. That heart-sinking moment of knowing that we didn't quite do ourselves justice in a meeting or presentation. Or that annoying feeling when the point we've just made is brushed aside, only to be fervently agreed with when made by someone else.

In an increasingly informal age, where social media, text-speak and one-line emails have become the norm, it is ironic that 'gravitas', a quality traditionally associated with formality, is becoming increasingly important. In the rush of corporate life, more and more employees are expected to display it earlier and earlier in their careers. Yet despite being an important skill, it is often misunderstood, which can be a challenge for talented treasurers who want to get to the very top of their organisation.

Gravitas is often perceived as an inherent trait, normally associated with silver-haired, older men. This assumption can act as an invisible barrier to talented employees who have the potential to reach the boardroom, but don't fit this 'type'. If we are really to tackle the lack of diversity at senior levels, it is critical that we address the 'gravitas myth'.

### Why is gravitas important?

Gravitas is a vital quality that talented employees need to have if they want to move up the career ladder and maintain their position at the top. People with gravitas lead better, present better, communicate better and network better. In a competitive environment, leaders who have gravitas



# GET SERIOUS

GRAVITAS IS AN IMPORTANT SKILL THAT CAN ENABLE YOU TO COMMAND RESPECT AND GET PROMOTED. ANTOINETTE DALE HENDERSON EXPLAINS HOW TO ACQUIRE IT

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build stronger relationships, win more business, get promoted more quickly and get better results.

The term comes up frequently during appraisals, delivered as a throwaway line to an aspiring leader, who is told they 'must develop gravitas in order to advance' without any practical advice on how to develop it. The reality is that few people are born with

gravitas. It is also true that everyone has the potential to develop it, with the right support and guidance.

### Defining gravitas

The word 'gravitas' has its roots in ancient Rome and was one of the virtues that Romans were expected to possess to fulfil their role in society, along with *pietas*, *dignitas* and *virtus*. *Gravitas* is translated as weight,

seriousness, solemnity, dignity and importance. It denotes a certain substance or depth of personality that elicits a feeling of respect and trust in others. The word is also linked to 'gravity', a centrifugal force that keeps you grounded, and 'gravitate', an energy that attracts people to you.

As part of my research into leadership and gravitas, I interviewed and modelled

a range of business and political leaders, with the aim of turning this intangible quality into a skill that can not only be learnt, but accelerated in today's emerging leaders. While it is clear that there are as many interpretations of gravitas as there are successful leaders, what I did find is that people with gravitas share a number of *internal* qualities that reflect their beliefs, values and personal identity, and *external* qualities that determine how they present themselves to the outside world and are experienced by others.

This enabled me to develop the Gravitas Wheel<sup>®</sup>, a six-point model to enable individuals to explore their personal strengths and which areas, if further developed, would enhance their leadership style and enable them to communicate with greater gravitas.

The internal qualities of gravitas include:

- **Self-awareness:** an acknowledgment of your values, beliefs, identity and purpose; recognition of your strengths and limitations; and an ongoing drive for self-development.
- **Expertise:** an appreciation of, and belief in, your unique

### Boardroom facts

- Less than 25% of board members of FTSE 100 companies are women<sup>1</sup>
- More than half of FTSE 100 companies have no non-white board members<sup>2</sup>
- New businesses have 8.37% female directors on average<sup>3</sup>

## DEVELOPING GRAVITAS

Here are six tips for developing your own style of gravitas:

1. **Become self-aware** – understand your unique strengths and areas of development. Ask people for feedback on when you have demonstrated gravitas and learn how to replicate that in more challenging situations.
2. **Hone your expertise** – become an expert in your area of work. Find a 'niche' that's uniquely 'yours' and create opportunities to demonstrate it as part of your role.
3. **Convey authenticity** – be true to yourself and reveal more of your 'best self' at work, rather than trying too hard or emulating someone else.
4. **Cultivate presence** – practise the skill of 'being present', focusing your mind on the people around you, rather than getting distracted. Develop an open and energised posture that emanates ease and 'lights up' the room.
5. **Forge connections** – broaden and deepen your professional network, seek out mutually beneficial opportunities with your contacts and develop the skill of rapport.
6. **Build projection** – learn how to 'switch on' and amplify your message by using your mindset, voice and body language so that even the largest audience gives you its undivided attention.

knowledge, experience and capabilities; a desire to become an expert in a chosen field; and an ability to share your expertise eloquently.

- **Authenticity:** an ability to remain true to your values and beliefs irrespective of external factors; and a commitment to acting consistently and characteristically in all situations.

The external qualities of gravitas include:

- **Presence:** an energy that emanates from a person; and the ability to attract attention and make an impact through physical appearance, body language and voice.
- **Connection:** an affinity with people; and the art of building networks and relationships, creating rapport and communicating eloquently with a broad range of audiences.
- **Projection:** an ability to 'switch on' your

best self, expressing yourself confidently to the largest audiences.

### The importance of gravitas in a global environment

Knowing how to develop and portray yourself with gravitas is particularly important in a global environment, where individuals are required to make an impact, communicate effectively and influence decision-making across different languages, countries and cultures.

An example of the challenges associated with operating effectively in a multicultural environment is the array of idioms used to describe different skills. For example, someone failing to get to the point in the Norwegian and Czech languages would be described as 'walking around hot porridge', whereas in German they would be 'speaking around hot mush'. Non-verbal communication can also be a minefield, with direct eye contact demonstrating

openness and sincerity in most Western countries, while conveying lack of respect across most of Asia.

Presenting yourself with gravitas in a global environment requires an appreciation of international business etiquette, combined with an ability to develop rapport with people from diverse backgrounds. As Stephen R Covey said in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, one of the key steps to success is to "seek first to understand, then to be understood".

For organisations looking to build gravitas in their people, the Gravitas Wheel<sup>®</sup> provides a consistent framework to define, assess and monitor the development of its constituent parts, while taking into consideration cultural variations. In defining gravitas, it is critical that an organisation sets out a supporting framework, which takes note of cultural differences, while providing a common objective of what having gravitas in that organisation means from a leadership perspective. ♡

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- 1 Cranfield's *Female FTSE Board Report 2014* ([www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/ftse](http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/ftse))
- 2 A study of the top 10,000 executives published in 2014 – co-authored by Trevor Phillips and Professor Richard Webber, of King's College London ([www.green-park.co.uk/press-release-britains-competitiveness-risk-deep-diversity-deficit-says-new-study](http://www.green-park.co.uk/press-release-britains-competitiveness-risk-deep-diversity-deficit-says-new-study))
- 3 Research from [www.approvedindex.com](http://www.approvedindex.com), with more detail at [www.treasurers.org/start-ups-exclude-women-their-boards](http://www.treasurers.org/start-ups-exclude-women-their-boards)