

# First impressions matter more than you think

By Sarah Berry



Qualifications count for nothing, if you don't have social skills to match

Forget your master's degree, your voluminous vocabulary or your brilliant beauty. Frankly, it often amounts to squat if your social skills aren't up to scratch.

Unfair as it might be, we make our first impression in a matter of moments and others aren't making those judgments based on our education or dazzling good looks.

In her new book, *Presence*, Harvard Business School psychologist Amy Cuddy, says people are assessing your warmth.

They tacitly ask themselves two questions when they meet you:

Can I trust this person?

Can I respect this person?

"From an evolutionary perspective," Cuddy says, "it is more crucial to our survival to know whether a person deserves our trust."

It also matters to prospective bosses more than your perceived competence, she says, adding that general warmth and the ability to ask for help are important.

"If someone you're trying to influence doesn't trust you, you're not going to get very far; in fact, you might even elicit suspicion, because you come across as manipulative," Cuddy says. "A warm, trustworthy person who is also strong elicits admiration, but only after you've established trust does your strength become a gift rather than a threat."

How do we project this? In high-pressure situations, many of us – in our hyper state of self-awareness of wanting to make a good impression – struggle to be authentic, force it, try to fake it, or just completely crumble, stumbling over our words and forgetting what we wanted to say.

It's mortifying, particularly when, as Cuddy acknowledges, "humans persistently make biased decisions based on minimal, misleading and misunderstood first impressions".

She says we can often pick up on cues that are off: when someone is trying too hard or doesn't seem true.

She suggests that precisely because genuine warmth, enthusiasm and confidence are very challenging to fake, they have such great appeal and weight. And make others more likely to feel we are trustworthy.

The research I've been doing for years now joins a large body of inquiry into a quality I call presence," says Cuddy, whose TED talk on body language has been viewed more than 30 million times.

"Presence stems from believing in and trusting yourself – your real, honest feelings, values and abilities. That's important, because if you don't trust yourself, how can others trust you?"

"We all face daunting moments that must be met with poise if we want to feel good about ourselves and make progress in our lives. Presence gives us the power to rise to these moments."

Ways to achieve presence

- Open, comfortable postures or "power stances" can help – draw your shoulders back so your chest is open, hands by your sides, on your hips or with fingers spread wide and fingertips together in front of the body. Arms crossed in front of your body, covering your mouth and hunching are all examples of "low power" poses.

- Pay attention to your body all the time, not just when you are in a situation where you need to feel powerful in yourself. For example, hunching over constantly to text is bad practice, according to Cuddy. Good, open posture reduces anxiety and increases performance, she says.

- Sleep positions can also affect how you feel in the morning. Sleeping in a relatively expansive way – with your arms spread out, rather than pinched under, or tightly curled up in fetal position – is associated with lower anxiety. You cannot necessarily change the way you sleep, though, so when you wake up, spread out before you get out of bed.

- Make eye contact, without staring.

- And, as Maya Angelou says: "Stand up straight and realise who you are, that you tower over your circumstances. You are a child of God. Stand up straight."

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