

# EXECUTIVE PRESENCE AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: AN EMPIRICAL ANALOGY

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explored the relationship between executive presence and employee engagement. Data were retrieved from 74 managers in Port Harcourt city, Nigeria. The data set was further subjected to a reliability test via the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The study in utilizing the inferential statistic tools, conducted a Spearman correlation to ascertain the association between the constructs, and a linear regression analysis was also conducted to predict the relationship between the constructs under study. The results of the study indicated that there is a significant positive relationship between executive presence and employee engagement [ $p (.000) < 0.05$ ,  $r = 95.4$ ]. The significance of the research is that the result adds empirical credence to the topical discussion on executive presence and employee engagement, the study also postulated theoretical and practical implications of its finding.*

**Keywords:** Executive Presence, Employee Engagement, Transformational Leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

Extant literature has observed the essence of leadership in organizations Bulinska-Stangrecka (2018); Kozioł-Nadolna (2020) an often missing link in most of the observation is the executive presence (EP). EP is significant as both academia and industry have recognized its importance to the optimal success of any leader Hale (2018); Sanford & Janney (2019), it encompasses the intangible substance that dignifies and optimizes leadership in an organization, notwithstanding its covert status. The elucidation of EP has mostly been limited due to the paucity of empirical credence on the construct (Shirey, 2013), and the generalized notion of it being a new buzz word in the management circle; nonetheless, subjecting this construct to an empirical tool via this research will breach such gap.

EP generally connotes the ability of a leader to inspire, influence, align and engage organization members to effective actions via appearance, trust-worthiness, gravitas and communications (Hewlett et al., 2012; Beeson, 2012; Petor & Glatzhofer, 2018). Its relevance is increasingly becoming a competitive necessity and advantage in determining who advances into managerial positions (Shirey, 2013; Evan, 2019) as well as in the forecasting of the organization's sustainable posterity.

EP is the strategic niche required to effect needed change in an organization (Shirey, 2013), and propels stakeholders (i.e. employees) in achieving set goals. While EP is seen as a significant key in sustaining a leader's success (Shirey, 2013), with a ripple effect on every aspect of an organization's member (i.e. employee), there is a core paucity of empirical evidence to an investigation on its specific association with employee engagement (Dalavai, 2019).

Employee engagement (EE) is sporadically gaining a status of relevance and importance in the global business world, this is mainly due to empirical evidence to the fact that non-engaged employees results in lowering profitability and performance in organizations (Rich et al. 2010), while engaged employees have been validated to enhance productivity, optimize client service, decrease turnover in organizations, and increase profit (Masson et al., 2008; Wollard & Shuck, 2011). Hence, there is an increasing interest in examining variables whose interactions in the workplace may influence the engagement level of employees, and within the scope of this study, such variable is EP (Bass & Bass Bernard, 1985).

The accompanying sections of this study will cover the following main areas; literature review, methodology, results, and discussion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Executive Presence (EP)

EP in recent times is becoming a topical issue in both the industry and academia (Groysberg et al. 2011; Edmonson & Asturi, 2015; Dalavai, 2019), notwithstanding the diverse definition to its construct, a common theme revolving around the amalgamation of competence, integrity, ability to influence perception, intelligence, aura, gravitas, and ultimately a leader's physical, emotional, functional, and rational attributes strategically implored to optimally achieve an organization's goal (Crittenden, 2013; Long, 2011; Hewlett et al. 2012).

Dalavai (2019) in his study argue that diverse attributes of EP possess trainable (learned), non-trainable (inborn), and intangible features. Extant literature has revealed the trainable attributes of EP to include; effective communication, aura, appearance, substance and style, personal connection, relationship building, focused awareness, the seriousness of purpose, and status (Williamson, 2011; Hewlett et al., 2012; Dagley & Gaskin, 2014; Limardi et al., 2014; Bates & Weighart, 2015). Dalavai (2019) posits that the non-trainable features of EP denote attributes that cannot be acquired via training and development. Bass & Avolio(1996); DuBrin (2012); Green & Cooper (2012); Bates & Weighart (2015); Martínez & del-Bosque (2013); and Dagley & Gaskin (2014) posit the non-trainable features of EP to include; charisma, substance, character, evaluation-based attributes (i.e. expertise, intellect, values-in-action), integrity, authenticity, goodwill, humility, and credibility. The intangibles are more relevant to leaders than the non-trainable and trainable attributes (Dalavai, 2019). These intangible attributes of EP denote the “*wow factor*” or “*it*” (Harding et al. 2011; Hough, 2012; Crittenden, 2013), self-confidence/esteem Williamson (2011); Hough (2012); gravitas Hewlett et al. (2012), and aura (Williamson, 2011). Leaders who lack these attributes cannot effectively and optimally influence employees (Dalavai, 2019), nor exercise discretionary effort.

EP in organizations that understands its potentials and implications is explored as a professional brand that is cultured and deliberately developed (Monarth, 2010) some organisations view EP as an implied necessity for leaders and their advancement in the organization (Shirey, 2013), while others explicitly develop the EP attributes of their leaders through observation, training, and coaching (Williamson, 2011). Shirey (2013) further posits that an organizations inability to exploit the advantages in EP would result in the under-utilisation of their leadership potential, and devalue the credibility of their leadership structure; hence, the

optimization of EP exact necessary strategic influence for the sustainable posterity of an organization.

### **Employee Engagement (EE)**

The growing interest in EE is anchored on the discovery that it can mar or make the sustainable viability of an organization (Rich et al., 2010). Engaged employees are cognitively, physically, behaviorally, spiritually, and emotionally invested in their organization and execute their task with discretionary effort (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Cardon et al., 2009; Mendes & Stander, 2011; Dale, 2012; Chukwuma et al., 2019). Today's organizations are increasingly recognizing employees not just as an asset and a strategic competitive advantage, but a competitive necessity in the marketplace (Bailey et al., 2016). Contrastingly, employees' orientation with regards to their workplace is constantly evolving and presently transcending from just an economic role and transaction to a conscious heightened awareness of purpose and fulfillment in the work role. Hence, employee engagement in the workplace is deliberately aimed at executing roles that impact both the organizations and employees at a higher dimension (Marciano, 2010; Zeidan & Itani, 2020).

As executives of organizations continuously aim to increase performance, advance market share and leadership, enhance competitive edge, and ensure the viable sustainability of the organization and its posterity, the search for engaged employees have become a necessity. Employee engagement has been proven to have a positive association with performance, profit, customer satisfaction, decreases turnover, productivity, motivation and zeal for work (Harter et al., 2002; Richman, 2006; Rich et al. 2010; Christian et al. 2011; Wollard & Shuck, 2011; Shuck et al., 2011). When the workplace environment is conducive, employees optimise their level of engagement to go beyond the work contract agreement in good faith (Rana & Chopra, 2019). Hence, the increased focus of the executives and academia on the workplace variables (i.e. EP) that may influence the strength of EE.

### **Executive Presence (EP) and Employee Engagement (EE)**

To exploit the increasingly complex and rapidly evolving environment, executives need employees who commit their fullness (i.e. cognitive, behavioural, spiritual, emotional, and physical engagement) and goes beyond the job descriptions in achieving the set organizational goals; hence, leaders must comprehend the basic processes (i.e. EP) that inspire employees and enable them to optimally engage themselves in their role performance (Lai et al., 2020).

In today's business environment, where optimisation of engagement is sought, executive of organizations is prioritising employees' needs, and aiming to influence a positive engagement level (Bates & Weighart, 2015). Sometimes the desires of an employee and what organizations deliver are usually misaligned, but such can always be aligned when the difference is identified (Rana & Chopra, 2019). EP equips leaders with influence and strategic access to impress a heightened degree of self-confidence and esteem Long (2011); Bates & Weighart (2015), with a ripple effect on creating and sustaining a workplace environment where the employee is empowered and feel a sense of purpose in their role Vessey et al. (2014); which may impact an employee engagement level significantly (Avery et al., 2007).

Luthans & Peterson (2002) posit that the culturing of an environment that solidifies an employees' cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement is a prerogative of the executive. These engagement levels are also impacted by a stronger and healthier employee-executive relationship, which when done rightly increases the overall firm's performance (Luthans & Peterson, 2002). Also, when the executives communicate their expectation and provide the requisite guidance to the employee, the level of engagement may be influenced positively Zeidan & Itani (2020), as employees cognitive, physical, behavioural, spiritual, and emotional engagement are stimulated. Furthermore, Bhappu and Schultze observe that a workplace environment that exhibits camaraderie and social-bonding (i.e. attributes of EP) can help increase employee engagement. Optimising employee engagement from an employee perspective connotes giving employee autonomy, participation, and trust to execute his role effectively (Rana & Chopra, 2019), and those are the features of an effective EP. Bates & Weighart (2015) posit that enhancing employee engagement is akin to the capacity of leadership to motivate employees, connect them to a vision, simplify direction and direct purposeful role; hence employee believe such leaders, and the organization's mission, as well as engage their all.

*H<sub>1</sub>: Executive presence is positively related to employee engagement.*

### **Transformational Leadership Theory Perspective to Executive Presence and Employee Engagement**

Bass & Avolio (1996) articulate that transformational leadership incorporates the following elements. First, Idealized influence (attributed), or attributed charisma denote employee's attributions to the leader with regards to their perception of the leader's confidence, transcendent ideals, and power. Second, Idealized influence (behaviours), or behavioural charisma connotes a leader's behaviours that demonstrate sense of purpose and mission, beliefs and values, moral orientation and ethics. Third, inspirational motivation denotes leaders who motivate and inspire employees to achieve defined goals via strategic and effective communication. Fourth, intellectual stimulation require leaders to set new pace, prompt and encourage employees to "*think outside the box*" in solving and engaging task. Finally, individualized consideration denotes leaders who present bespoke socio-emotional support to employees, while developing (i.e. coaching) and empowering them. These elements are key attributes of EP, and through these elements of transformational leadership, leaders can reorient employees to the significance and meaningfulness of their tasks, and inspire employees towards higher engagement (Vila-Vázquez et al., 2018; Chua & Ayoko, 2021; Lai et al., 2020).

Transformational leaders inculcate collective and holistic goals with commitment and moral purpose (i.e. EP attributes) (House & Shamir, 1993; Shamir et al. 1993), and influence employees in pursuing significant collective goals against the individual goals (Lai et al., 2020). Transformational leaders foster the intrinsic value of goal accomplishment (via EP attributes) and advance employees' engagement (i.e. emotionally, physically, and cognitively) through a sense of meaningfulness to set objectives (House & Shamir, 1993; Lai et al., 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample and Procedure

Data were retrieved from managers of different organizations in the course of their career advancement certification programme in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. By streamlining this set of the respondent, and guaranteeing absolute confidentiality of their response, the researchers limited the potentials for a biased response (Spector, 2006) that may be triggered by interactions in their workplace environment. 74 questionnaire were administered using a convenient sampling technique, after which 74 (100% response rate) questionnaire were retrieved. After removing incomplete questionnaires, the useable questionnaires were 67.

### Measures

All measurement was scaled at a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Executive presence:** In this research, the respondents were instructed to choose the observed reality of “*executive presence*” in their organization on a 17-item executive presence scale adopted from the study of (Williamson, 2011; Bates & Weighart, 2015; Limardi et al., 2014).

**Employee engagement:** In this research, the respondents were instructed to choose their observed reality of “*employee engagement*” they engaged in their organization on a 15-item employee engagement scale adopted from the study of (Rich et al., 2010).

### Analysis

The questionnaire represented the sum facets of the constructs via the content validity by industrial experts. The data set was further subjugated to a reliability test via the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. The study in utilizing the inferential statistic tools, conducted a Spearman correlation to ascertain the association between the constructs, and a linear regression analysis was also conducted to predict the relationship between the constructs under study. The above was utilized because the data set met the assumption for their use. Tables were used to display the data analyses, and the decision rule was to reject the null hypothesis if the p-value is less than 0.05 (i.e.  $p < 0.05$ ); do not reject the null hypothesis if otherwise.

## RESULTS

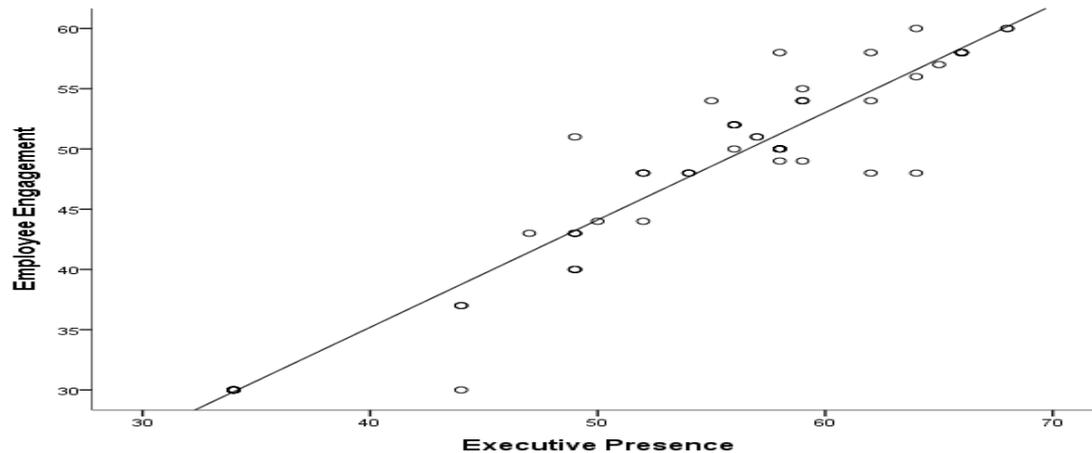
Table 1 demonstrates the Cronbach’s alpha of “*executive presence*”  $\alpha = 0.877$ , and that of “*employee engagement*”  $\alpha = 0.871$ , which reveals that the internal consistency of the scales was high, hence reliable in capturing the essence of the construct. The result of the Spearman correlation for executive presence and employee engagement is shown in Table 2. From the result in Table 2, it is empirically evident that executive presence and employee engagement possess a strong positive association ( $r = 0.892$ ), and we postulate that there is empirical credence of a significant positive association between executive presence and employee

engagement [ $p(0.000) < 0.05$ ]. To predict the relationship and degree of variance in employee engagement that may be explained by executive presence, the study conducted a simple linear regression analysis, as shown in Table 3, 91.1% of the variability in employee engagement can be explained by the actions of executive presence; this is also strengthened by the fact that since  $p(0.000) < 0.05$ ,  $r = 95.4$  there is a significant positive relationship between executive presence and employee engagement. This is clearly shown in Figure 1, which depicts a scatter plot graph with a fit line showing a strong positive relationship between executive presence and employee engagement.

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Executive Presence	0.877
Employee engagement	0.871

Construct	Category	Executive Presence	Employee Engagement
Executive Presence	Spearman's rho	1.000	0.892
	Sig. (2 tailed)	-	0.000
	<i>N</i>	67	67
Employee Engagement	Spearman's rho	0.892	1.000
	Sig. (2 tailed)	0.000	-
	<i>N</i>	67	67

Variable Executive Presence						
	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Employee Engagement	0.954	0.911	665.016	0.891	25.788	0.000



**FIGURE 1**  
**SCATTER PLOT GRAPH WITH A FIT LINE BASED ON THE RELATIONSHIP**  
**BETWEEN EXECUTIVE PRESENCE AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

## DISCUSSION

The study explored the effect of executive presence on employee engagement, specifically, we postulated that the attributes in executive presence can influence and positively relate to employee's engagement levels in an organization. Executives who are conscious of their non-explicit work roles in influencing employee's behaviour in the work environment possess a high probability of obtaining a significant employee engagement level with its ripple effects on the optimal performance and achievement of organizational goals. Hence, executive presence can strongly foster employee engagement level and enhance their social, behavioural, cognitive, physical, and spiritual engagement, because they involve employee's holistically and empower them to fully accomplish their expectations. Our finding supports these postulations and is aligned to earlier related research (Wang et al., 2011; Zhu et al. 2013; Dust et al. 2014; Bates & Weighart, 2015; Chun et al. 2016). That studied attributes of executive presence influence on employee engagement behaviours. Nonetheless, the unique feature of this study unlike other studies is its adaptation of a fortified research design to explore this constructs, its quantitative disposition to giving empirical proof to the relationship on the constructs, and its uniqueness in contributing to literature on the construct within the geographical scope (i.e. Nigeria) of the study.

## Theoretical Implications

The quest to explore executive presence and the significance of its implication on different facets of an organizations' life is becoming a topical issue. This study offers a series of significant theoretical contributions. First, the paucity of quantitative analysis on the relationship between executive presence and employee engagement has been reduced, as this study provides

empirical insight into the interplay of the activities of EP in EE levels in an organization; this insight is critical to policy strategy and the achievement of a viable going concern of the organization. Also, while other studies have studied EP as a sole construct or in relations to other organizational variables, this study provides a streamlined analysis of its activities as it directly influences employees in an organization, this perspective adds a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on this constructs. Finally, the study via the reviewed transformational leadership theory perspective to EP and EE offers a dynamic niche in understanding that the activities of EP are not solely limited to the inherent economic benefits to the organizations, but that through its process, employees are further equipped with requisite skills and competence to take over leadership and exhibit such EP attribute in creating a sustainably viable posterity for the organization.

### Practical Implications

For organization's management, the study findings offer two significant insight; first, the optimal role and responsibility of executives which transcends the conventional job description, and finally, the fact that this insight will greatly be a significant consideration in selecting executives as well as conducting executive training and development in organizations. First, most of the explicit description of the work role of an executive does not capture the essence of EP, this exclusion limits focus on the important attributes that executives should embody and limits the benefits inherent in exploring the full potentials in an executive, in addition to other factors that the job requires. This results in negative implication for the employee engagement (i.e. social, behavioural, cognitive, physical, and spiritual) level as well as reduces the optimal achievement of the organizational objectives. Finally, executive training and development are often neglected in organizations, and even some that conduct it, limits it to scopes that hardly have any alignment to the nature of EP. The attributes inherent in EP can be taught, learned, and developed via structured EP programmes, this will greatly advance the reputation of the executives, and grant them an earned legitimacy amongst employees, which invariably will enhance employee's engagement level and heighten the achievement of the organizational goals.

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