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Your palms are sweaty. You stumble over your words. You don't seem to be getting a clear message across. You look around the table — everyone is more senior than you — both in age and title. You wonder if you'll ever be taken seriously. Sound familiar? If so, you are among many who experience what we call the “grey hair complex.” The grey hair complex is a self-induced state of intimidation in the presence of more senior executives. It often begins with the false conviction that you would have more credibility if only you had the physical attributes that convey a higher level of seniority. To overcome these feelings of insecurity, you need to condition yourself in three areas: mental, technical, and physical. Here's how.

Mental conditioning. A key factor to conveying confidence is first believing that you belong. One of our clients, Jason, struggled with this when he was first promoted to senior manager. His new position required him to spend much more face time with senior executives and at times even the CEO. Often the youngest at the table, he acquiesced to the more senior executives in meetings, and hesitated to [challenge their point of view](#). While Jason wished for the day when the senior-level executives would see him as a peer, he refused to see himself as such. Because he did not believe that he had a place at the table, his impact was limited. Jason's first requirement was to replace this limiting belief with one that actually helped him. When we asked Jason, “What value do you bring to the table? What's your value proposition?” he had a hard time answering. But when we flipped the question and asked, “What would be lost if you were not at the table?” a light bulb went off and Jason was quick to list what differentiated him from the rest. His mindset shifted to what he had to offer rather than what he didn't.

Technical conditioning. Feeling intimidated by more senior individuals often leads to one of two outcomes: either you overcompensate by aggressively advocating your point of view and emphasizing your accomplishments or you undermine yourself by hesitating in your responses and

acquiescing to others. Needless to say, neither is an effective strategy. To overcome these blunders, you must technically prepare yourself by mastering basic communication techniques. Chief among these techniques is the ability to helicopter up and to speak from the executives' perspective, taking into account their issues, agenda, and upcoming decisions. Another is the ability to communicate value in terms of what you bring to the table and the results of your work (rather than the process). Jason often got mired in the details when communicating with higher level colleagues, and therefore missed opportunities to share his insights. To stop this from happening, he started to prepare two to three key messages before every meeting, and made sure to focus on how his group's analytical work drove value for the organization. In essence, Jason conditioned himself for the expected, leaving his "thinking on his feet" energy for those situations that were least predictable.

Physical conditioning. Which of your physical attributes negatively impacts your executive presence? The culprits are often dress, voice, and posture. On casual Fridays, Jason wore his version of casual — his favorite khakis with now-frayed cuffs and his scuffed up but comfortable loafers. Some said his attire made him more like a college intern than a high-potential individual. Jason reworked his Friday wardrobe to reflect a comfortable yet confident persona. After seeing himself on video, Jason also realized that his voice often betrayed him — the pace of his speech would quicken the more uncomfortable he was in a situation. With the help of breathing exercises, Jason learned how to be more deliberate with his points. He also learned to monitor his voice inflection to minimize "upspeak," which had made his statements sound more like questions than assertions. Lastly, Jason realized that his [posture](#) was also holding him back. Instead of taking his typical stance of casually slouching back in meetings, he began to lean forward with his hands on the table, making good use of his physical presence to express himself.

While you cannot control your audience, like Jason, there are many things within your control that you can use to enhance your impact. And not one of those things includes feigning to be older than what you really are.

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of [Paravis Partners](#), a premier executive coaching and leadership development firm. For the past two decades, she has coached CEOs, executives, and rising stars in organizations. She is the author of the HBR Press book [The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self—Every Day](#), and co-author of [Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence](#) with Muriel Maignan Wilkins.

Muriel Maignan Wilkins is a co-founder and managing partner of Paravis Partners, a boutique executive coaching and leadership development firm. She is co-author, with Amy Jen Su, of [Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence](#).
