

CHARISMATIC
PRESENCE

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“There are just a ton of things I love about this book. It’s more than the five easy-to-understand principles Eleni Kelakos shares, the stories she tells, or the examples she offers. It’s the TONE. Reading it makes you feel like you’re sitting on the back porch, shoes off, adult beverage in hand (!) and a really good, really smart friend is sharing her secrets. Get a copy for yourself and a couple more for your pals. You will be so glad. They will, too.”

—**Lou Heckler**, Hall of Fame speaker and speaker coach

“A captivating blend of rich prose and expert storytelling, this book offers invaluable insights about the power of presence and becoming a more powerful, confident communicator in any setting.”

—**Laura Denton**, Director of Faculty Development,
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“This book represents years of study and presentation prowess. By applying Eleni Kelakos’ Five Principles, you can transform your audience from passive listeners into engaged, enthusiastic fans—captivated, inspired, and drawn to your Charismatic Presence.”

—**Naomi Rhode**, CSP, CPAE, Speaker Hall of Fame,
Past President National Speakers Association,
Past President Global Speakers Federation

CHARISMATIC PRESENCE

5 Principles For
Magnetic Presentations

ELENI KELAKOS, CSP



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CHARISMATIC PRESENCE

5 Principles For Magnetic Presentations

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ISBN 13: 978-1-966168-21-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025908984

Designed by Melissa Farr, Back Porch Creative, LLC

INDIE BOOKS INTERNATIONAL®, INC.

2511 WOODLANDS WAY

OCEANSIDE, CA 92054

www.indiebooksintl.com

*To my coaching clients
who have stood, trembling but determined,
in the murky middle of discomfort
in the name of learning and growth.
Keep on using your words to change your world!*

*And to my brother, George Michael Kelakos,
the Boy Who Ate The World, and the poster child
for Charismatic Presence.*



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Part I The Stakes Are High	1
Chapter 1 Why Charismatic Presence And Presentation Skills Matter	3
Chapter 2 Oh! Say Can You See What An Actor Can Teach You About Presence And Presentation Skills	15
Part II The Charismatic Presence Process	23
Chapter 3 Presence Principle One: Know Thyself	25
Chapter 4 Presence Principle Two: Be Thyself	39
Chapter 5 Presence Principle Three: Prepare Thyself	55
Chapter 6 Presence Principle Four: Commit Thyself	73
Chapter 7 Presence Principle Five: Turn Thyself On	89
Part III After You Have Upped Your Game	101
Chapter 8 Moving Toward Mastery: Ten Ways To Sustain Presence And Presentation Excellence	103
Chapter 9 Three Presentation Patterns To Build Your Talks	109
Chapter 10 Into The Future	125
Appendix	137
A Essential Eleni-isms	139
B Example Of A Speaking Vision Statement	143
C Acknowledgments	147
D About The Author	151
E Works Referenced And Notes	153



Preface

I was eleven years old when I was first rewarded with a round of applause meant only for me. I had just finished singing the song *Froggie Went A-Courtin'* all by myself, in a pool of light on a big, wooden outdoor stage in the talent show at summer camp. The audience of parents and campers sitting in lawn chairs on the grass had surprised me by singing along to the chorus and clapping in time to the music. They surprised me again by clapping and hooting wildly.

It was delicious. Heady. Addictive. I loved it and wanted more. And so began my lifelong love of performing.

I was such a natural-born diva, so effortlessly present and comfortable on stage, that I was thrown for a complete loop the first time I got smacked with performance anxiety. It happened in the ninth grade when I was cast as the scheming Queen Aggravain in a production of *Once Upon A Mattress* at the Walworth Barbour American International School in Israel. We had rehearsed for weeks, and I had my lines down cold. At least, I thought I did—until the curtain rose on opening night, and I beheld the whispering, expectant audience.

I remember the butterflies colliding in my stomach, my heart beating so fast I thought it was going to sprout legs and run away from me. Most of all, I remember the complete and utter surprise—not to mention panic—I felt when I couldn't remember my very first line for the life of me. My face hot under the wash of the stage lights, I leaned over to the fellow thespian playing my king and hissed, "What's my line?" Fortunately, my scene partner knew it and whispered it to me. I smiled and spoke the line without missing a beat. The rest of the show went like gangbusters, my lines flowing with ease and confidence. Still, I have never forgotten those moments of uncertainty and vulnerability when, caught like the proverbial deer in the headlights, I was unable to recall lines I thought I could utter in my sleep.

Fortunately, this tender, icky moment didn't scare me off my destined path as a professional actor, singer-songwriter, speaker, and trainer. For many decades now, I've acted, sung, or spoken on countless stages (and screens) both large and small and engaged with audiences as large as thirty-four thousand (Shea Stadium, for a Mets game) and as small as two (the bartender and one drunk patron at a tiny folk club). Through it all, I have learned that performance anxiety can be managed, presentation skills can be improved, and the inherent charisma we all possess can be fanned to a greater, more compelling flame. The countless business professionals I've coached and trained for over two decades have learned this, too, going on to share their messages with greater confidence and impact.

Since I think there's nothing more important than sharing your unique wisdom, ideas, and perspectives with the people who need to hear them, I'm delighted you had the urge to buy this book. You'll be glad you did, as will the members of your audience, who need to hear exactly what you have to say.

Eleni Kelakos

September 2024

PART I

The Stakes Are High





Why Charismatic Presence And Presentation Skills Matter

*Presence [is] . . . the real core component of charisma,
the foundation upon which all else is built.*

OLIVIA FOX CABANE, *THE CHARISMA MYTH*¹

You were born with a powerful, magnetic presence. A presence that’s yours to expand and share without a whole lot of muss or fuss. A Charismatic Presence that may very well be different from what you think “presence” and “charisma” looks or feels like.

Don’t believe that? I sure didn’t. Until the night and the moment when I saw and realized those mind-blowing notions for myself.

It happened in 1988 at a dress rehearsal of an exciting new musical created and performed by a talented cast at the prestigious Humana Festival at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. Slouched in a seat in the darkened theater, I was doing something I often did as a young actor: observing—and learning from—other professional actors as they made their magic on the stage.

The cast was large, and the opening musical number was big and bombastic. Actors in colorful costumes danced and sang their hearts out on the brightly lit stage. As they swirled and twirled and sang and whirled, I found my eyes drifting to a small staircase at the very back of the stage. On the stairs sat a little girl, an actor of about eight years old, thoroughly and silently absorbed in reading a large book. I watched her slowly turn page after page of her book, seemingly oblivious to anything going on around her. She wasn't trying to "act." She wasn't trying to make us watch her or like her. She wasn't trying to impress us. She wasn't "trying" at all. She was simply being herself, fully present in the moment, and utterly engaged with her task. And as a result, I couldn't take my eyes off her.

I thought about that little girl long after I left the theater that evening. Because without even trying, she had radiated "it"—that intangible magnetism we call *charisma*.

That little actor had charisma, in the extreme, which both confused and intrigued me. Because, up until that moment, I had equated charisma with a sort of pumped-up, larger-than-life magnetism, and not the compelling, quiet ease and authenticity displayed by an eight-year-old neophyte actor who had been simply reading to herself in public.

What I realized that night was that you can't have charisma without being genuinely present. Thus began my lifelong commitment to learn, embody, and teach the principles that allow for a maximized Charismatic Presence.

So, What Is Charisma And Charismatic Presence? And Who's Got It?

Many people believe, as I once did, that charisma is only embodied and expressed by larger-than-life, super-confident extroverts in a larger-than-life, super-confident manner. They believe that only a chosen few—their verbally dexterous business partner, their charming Aunt Charlotte, their favorite screen idols (Idris Alba! Meryl Streep!)—are blessed with an innate

confidence and charisma that lights up a room or stage. They believe that charisma is something you are gifted with, a special intrinsic talent like the ability to sing on pitch or calculate numbers in your head. Most of all, they believe that charisma is something that other people possess and that *you either have charisma or you don't*.

To which I say, *yes and no*. Let me explain.

The *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* defines charisma as “a special magnetic charm or appeal.”² It’s derived from the Greek *charestai* (“to favor”), which in turn comes from the noun *charis*, meaning “grace,” which, among other things, is defined as a virtue or state of sanctification coming from God. So, I suppose you could argue that some rarified people are “graced” or “gifted” with charisma.

That said, and with all due respect to *Merriam-Webster*, I happen to believe that the essence—the glowing ember—of charisma is in all of us, a part of us from the get-go. We all have what I call Charismatic Presence. If you have ever been transfixed by the sight of a baby simply lying in his crib blowing spit bubbles or a fuzzy kitten happily cleaning herself in a sunbeam, you know what I’m talking about. Little babies, whether they have two legs or four, are utterly magnetic. And just like that little girl on the stage at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, they’re not *trying* to be magnetic. They’re simply being who they are, fully, in the moment at hand. They’re radiating their magnetic, unbridled *life force*—or, as the Greeks say it, their *dynamis* (dynamic or powerful) *zois* (life). (Full disclosure: I’m of Greek background, and, as my Dad used to say, “all the good words come from the Greek”).

Taking that a step further, I would define Charismatic Presence as *your dynamic life force fully activated in the present moment*. It’s the kind of all-senses-go, ease, aliveness, and authenticity that makes people want to look at you, listen to you, and trust you. Even if all you’re doing is quietly reading a book on a crowded stage.

Your Charismatic Presence is like the pilot light on a gas stove, always in the “on” position. It can smolder at a low glow, or burst into a mesmerizing, warming flame, depending on your willingness to feed it and tend it. The brighter the flame of your Charismatic Presence, the greater your ability to affect and influence your audience of one or many.

The expression of Charismatic Presence is as varied, nuanced, and unique as there are people on this planet. Put another way, your Charismatic Presence is imbued with the flavor and feel of your unique personality. Its rich warmth is what allows you to connect to audiences large and small, build the relationships that build your business, and effectively lead your teams to success. If you want to be a masterful public speaker, cultivating a maximized Charismatic Presence that is consistent under pressure and scrutiny is downright essential. And the responsibility for feeding, tending, and boosting the flame of your Charismatic Presence is yours alone.

You Can Boost Your Charismatic Presence

Charismatic Presence is something the clients I coach and train long to have (not realizing they have it already). What they want—to be fully themselves when others are watching them; to give a public presentation without being broadsided by nerves; to confidently own the stage, boardroom, or meeting while moving others into feeling and action—seems, to them, to be utterly, depressingly, out of reach.

But I know it isn't.

As a New York and Hollywood actor and singer-songwriter who learned how to be more consistently and charismatically present in spotlight moments, and a presentation skills expert who works with executives who want to connect more effectively with an audience and have more impact and influence, here's what I know: You don't need to somehow cultivate “magical” qualities outside yourself like charm, star power, pizzazz, or allure to be a powerful public speaker. You need to allow yourself to get out of

your way so you can reconnect with and uncover your naturally magnetic Charismatic Presence.

I know that with the right tools and methodologies, you can overcome the factors that dampen Charismatic Presence—such as worrying too much about making a mistake or what your audience is thinking or being overwhelmed by performance anxiety. And I know inherent Charismatic Presence can be maximized, just as I know that ho-hum speakers can become good speakers and good speakers can become great speakers—if they choose to and if they get the guidance they need.

I'm in full agreement with author Olivia Fox Cabane, who writes in her book, *The Charisma Myth*, that “Charisma is not magic; it's learned behaviors.” Presence “. . . turns out to be the real core component of charisma, the foundation upon which all else is built.”³

In a sense, it's all about learning (or relearning) how to be Present with a capital *P* and daring to be fully who you are when others are watching—especially in a high-stress, high-stakes public-speaking spotlight moment.

Like Peas And Carrots, Charisma And Public Speaking Go Together

In my mind (and work), Charismatic Presence and public speaking prowess go hand in hand. When I'm coaching a client on the latter, I'm typically working with them on the former. Each informs the other.

For those in leadership positions, being able to “own the room”—meaning allowing one's Charismatic Presence to fill the space and touch hearts and souls—is essential if they want to be of real influence. So is being able to communicate, pitch, and present clearly, cogently, and persuasively to an audience of one or many. As I like to say, “Great leaders are great speakers. And great speakers are great leaders.”

Presentation skills matter. In fact, billionaire Warren Buffett, arguably one of our time's most influential thought leaders and business executives,

has often been quoted as saying that public speaking abilities are the single most important business skills you can have. And this is from a man who initially dropped out of a Dale Carnegie public speaking class because he was, ironically, afraid he'd be asked to get up and speak. Buffett eventually sucked it up and went back to class. He considers the diploma he received when he graduated from that Dale Carnegie course, which he proudly displays in his office, one of his most important achievements. That's why, when he was delivering an address to a graduating class at Columbia Business School, he said, ". . . you can improve your value by fifty percent just by learning communication skills—public speaking."⁴

Buffett understood the importance of being able to share an idea in a way that moves people into feeling and action. To do that, not only do you need to have a good grasp of the nuts and bolts of public speaking, but you've got to be able to maximize your Charismatic Presence in spotlight moments that can feel downright scary.

Nothing dials down your Charismatic Presence more than the *F* word.

No, not that *F* word.

I'm talking about *fear*.

Fear: The Real F Word

"I want you to give a presentation."

How do you feel when you read those words?

Do they make you beam with joy and quiver with anticipation? If so, you're one of the lucky 10 percent of people polled who leap at the chance to speak in public.⁵ I call you the "Yay-ers."

Do the words make you sphincter up, cringe, and want to run like hell for the hills? Then you're one of the 10 percent of the population for

whom public speaking is a dreaded, hateful task that is best avoided at all costs. I call you the “Nay-ers.”

Does the statement make you shrug and say “whatever”? Then you’re part of the remaining 80 percent of the population that hovers, uncertain, in the murky middle between love and hate of public speaking. I call you “Ehh-ers.” When Ehh-ers give a presentation, they do it grudgingly. They do it because they’ve got to. They do it because if they don’t, they’ll lose their job, their standing, the sale, their self-respect. They do it because, as stressful as the experience might be, they know it will eventually be over, and they will have, somehow, survived. Furthermore, when Ehh-ers give a public presentation, it often lacks consistency, confidence, color, and clarity, reflecting both their underlying anxiety and their “I-can-take-it-or-leave-it” level of commitment.

For the Ehh-ers (and the small number of Nay-ers who get roped into speaking in public despite their efforts to avoid it) fear plays a major factor in their attitude and experience: fear of looking bad, saying the wrong thing, forgetting their words; fear of flushing, trembling, or sweating publicly; fear of being laughed at, dismissed, and not good enough. And because of those fears, they shut down, shut up, and hide, defaulting to a vanilla version of who they really are. As a result, the world loses out on the gifts, the wisdom, the insights, and the expertise that they alone can provide.

When we’re little babies, or in the early years of our existence, like that girl on the stage at the Actor’s Theatre of Louisville, we haven’t yet been battered into submission by a plethora of “no” and “don’t be you” served up to us by the greater world. However, once we step into the greater world and start to care (often too much) about what other people think of us, or being perfect at all costs, or impressing (or disappointing) others, we capitulate to fear and risk, becoming self-conscious and self-limiting. We pull back and play small, diminishing the Charismatic Presence that is our birthright. This is why every time I’m in a restaurant and witness a

parent tell their exuberant, loudly chatting child, “Shh. Honey. Use your indoor voice,” I think, “And so it begins.”

When it comes down to it, fear can keep your Charismatic Presence burning too low to make the kind of difference that turns heads, moves hearts, and cements deals.

That’s what fear can do.

I know all about this kind of fear because I had to learn to overcome it myself as a young actor to manage auditions, interviews, and performances. The tools I learned under the tutelage of master-level acting teachers in New York City are the very same tools I’ve been sharing with my clients since I hung up my shingle as a presence and presentation coach and trainer oh lo these many years. Day in and day out, I happily help fretting Nay-ers, Ehh-ers (and Yay-ers, too) overcome their performance anxiety; organize, practice, and deliver effective presentations; and maximize their Charismatic Presence. Because I know, and they know, that—whether it’s presenting a quarterly report at a board meeting, delivering a keynote at a major conference, or toasting a family member on their wedding day—opportunities and obligations to speak in public are a fact of life, and a given in the business world. And if they don’t come through to the best of their abilities in critical spotlight moments, their work, career, and reputation can suffer.

Sky-High Stakes

When it comes to expressing why they need to learn to speak to groups with less fear, more confidence, and greater Charismatic Presence, my clients—CEOs, middle managers, financial services experts, IT professionals, engineers, salespeople, and business owners—are dead clear about what’s at stake:

“If I don’t learn to manage my fear of public speaking, I’ll never sell my services.”

“If I can’t convey my big idea fearlessly and effectively, it won’t get funded.”

“If I keep avoiding giving presentations, I’m never going to get promoted.”

“If I can’t inspire my team to embrace my vision, we’re going to keep underperforming and losing money.”

The fact is, the inability to speak effectively in public can cost you customers, keep you from motivating your team, and damage your career prospects.

And yet, even in the face of these facts, people still find ways to back out of critical public speaking engagements (hello again, Nay-ers). In an article he wrote for *Forbes*, Carmine Gallo pointed to the findings of a survey that underscored the remarkable measures people will take to avoid giving presentations. Apparently, 20 percent of respondents would do practically anything to avoid giving a presentation, including pretending to be sick.⁶

I’ve seen my share of presentation avoidance with many of my own clients. Over the years, I’ve coached smart, accomplished business professionals who admitted they changed their majors in college because they were terrified of having to take a required public speaking course. I’ve worked with people who lied about being sick or having been in a car accident rather than get up and give a business presentation. I’ve coached people who have admitted to turning down promotions or threatening to quit their jobs to avoid giving public presentations. And I’ve worked with numerous executives who have regularly (and sheepishly) handed off public speaking opportunities to other colleagues, even though they knew their unwillingness to take the stage hurt their career or reputation.

Ironically, the more you let the fear of public speaking stop you from speaking in public, the less confident you feel about public speaking, and the less you want to speak in public. The less you speak in public, the less confident you feel about speaking in public, and the more your Charismatic Presence takes a hit. It's a vicious circle.

That said, you don't have to let fear of public speaking or feelings of inadequacy or discomfort around your public speaking abilities stop you. If you choose, you can learn to overcome performance anxiety and improve your ability to create and deliver a solid and persuasive presentation.

As with any other skill set—like tennis, cooking, or driving—better public speaking skills and the confidence (and Charismatic Presence) that goes with them can be acquired with time and practice.

The Rich Rewards Of Presentation Skills Mastery

What do you stand to gain by putting in the kind of time, effort, and focus that moves you from fear to fearlessness and from “ehh” to “yay” as a presenter? Well, to borrow a line from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnet 43*, “. . . let me count the ways.”⁷

For one thing, your confidence will take a great leap forward. And the more confident you feel, the more presence you exude, and the more attractive and magnetic you become.

Another result of improving your presentation skills is a better ability to lead a team. This means more productivity and a better bottom line.

Then, there's the ability to attract more business and customers. I have said time and again that there's no better way to attract customers than to give a public presentation that not only teaches them something of value but helps them feel what it might be like to work with you. I have built my business through these kinds of “showcases” and encourage my clients to do the same.

And let's not discount a huge advantage to acquiring better presentation skills: increasing the perception of you as a thought leader and expanding your visibility and reach.

Improving your presentation skills will also help you stand out above the majority of employees (or prospective employees) whose soft skills are sadly lacking. In fact, according to an article in *Education Week* by Catherine Gewertz, survey data reveals that the one soft skill employers struggle to find in new hires and want more than anything (even before critical thinking, working with teams, and writing well) is good speaking skills. Intangible “soft” skills, like presentation skills, can have a great deal of impact on your ability to get a job, motivate a team to complete a project, and persuade an investor to fling money at your big idea.⁸

As author and member of the National Speakers Association CPAE Speaker Hall of Fame Mark Le Blanc, CSP, likes to say, “Intangibles drive the tangibles.”

Perhaps the biggest argument in favor of gaining presentation skills mastery is being able to say “yes” to speaking at the pivotal personal-but-public occasions that life serves up—like giving the eulogy at your dad's funeral, delivering the best man's speech at your buddy's wedding reception, or saying a few gracious words of thanks for a well-deserved award at a business event. These are moments of grace you might miss (and later regret) if you choose to turn them down due to fear or discomfort at the thought of standing in the spotlight and speaking to a group.

Now Is The Time

The fact that you bought this book and are reading it right now tells me that the time is right for you to do what it takes to maximize your Charismatic Presence and your presentation skills. The sooner you plunge in and do the work, the sooner you'll find relief from the fear or lack of confidence

that plagues you—and the sooner you can make a greater difference at work and in the world.

Whether you want to be able to deliver your company’s quarterly numbers report with more punch and personality, or give a guest sermon at your local church, what you have to say matters. And if you’re willing to go the distance with me through the chapters of this book and embrace the five presence principles, you’ll shift your attitude about public speaking, maximize your Charismatic Presence, and shine on the speaking platform.