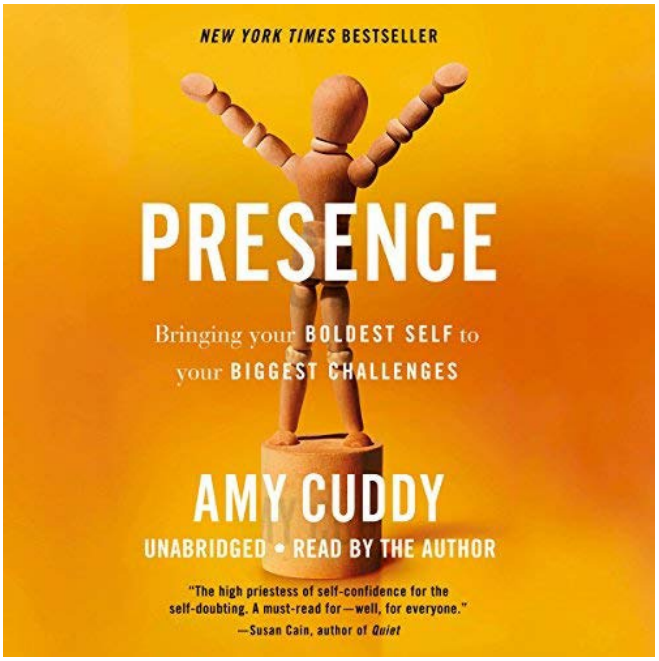
TEXAS WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

PRESENCE

Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges

A COMMON BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE



AMY CUDDY

Let's Read. Let's Grow. Let's Lead Together.

WELCOME TO THE TWHE COMMON BOOK EXPERIENCE!

Leadership doesn't always look the way we expect it to. Sometimes it looks like speaking up in a room where you aren't sure your voice will be welcomed. Sometimes it means standing behind a decision, advocating for someone else, or recognizing that you deserve to be at the table just as much as anyone else.

As women working in higher education, we know that our experiences shape how we lead, how we communicate, and how we see ourselves. We also know that confidence doesn't always come easily, even when we have the experience, education, and accomplishments to support it.

This year, TWHE invites you to join us in reading Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges by Amy Cuddy. Through this shared reading experience, we hope to create opportunities for meaningful conversations about confidence, authenticity, belonging, and leadership. More importantly, we hope to create space for women to learn from one another.

This guide is intended to help you think beyond the pages of the book and connect its ideas to your own experiences. There are no right or wrong answers. Some questions may bring up memories, others may challenge how you think about leadership, and some may simply give you a new perspective.

As we take part in this shared reading experience, we encourage you to capture photos, highlights, and meaningful moments along the way. We will also track participation and gather feedback to help document the impact of our Common Book initiative. These stories, photos, and data will allow us to celebrate our collective experience and share its impact during the conference.

Whether you are just beginning your career, finding your voice as an emerging leader, or have spent years in higher education leadership, there is something here for you.

Thanks,

The TWHE Board

Come as you are. Share what you are comfortable sharing. Be open to learning something new.

Your presence matters.

PART ONE | LET'S TALK ABOUT PRESENCE

Chapter 1: What Is Presence?

Presence is often something we recognize in other people before we recognize it in ourselves. Think about the people who make you feel confident, comfortable, inspired, or heard. What is it about them that makes an impression?

LET'S DISCUSS

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you have described presence? Has your definition changed?
2. Think about a leader or colleague whose presence you admire. What do they do that makes people take notice?
3. Have you ever felt like you had to perform a certain version of yourself to be taken seriously at work? What did that look like?
4. In what situations do you feel most like yourself professionally? What changes when you are in a setting where you feel less confident?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

What is one word you would use to describe the presence you want to bring into your workplace?

Chapter 2: Believing and Owning Your Story

We all have a story about how we got to where we are. Sometimes we celebrate that story. Other times, we minimize it, explain away our accomplishments, or attribute our success to being in the right place at the right time.

LET'S DISCUSS

5. Think about your professional journey. What experiences, decisions, or people helped shape the leader you are today?
6. Have you ever downplayed an accomplishment or felt uncomfortable accepting recognition? Why do you think that happens?
7. Do you give yourself the same credit for your accomplishments that you would give another woman in your position?
8. What part of your professional story are you most proud of but don't talk about enough?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

If you were introducing yourself and your professional journey without minimizing a single accomplishment, what would you say?

PART TWO | LET'S TALK ABOUT CONFIDENCE AND BELONGING

Chapter 4: I Don't Deserve to Be Here

Even accomplished women can question whether they belong. We may have the degrees, experience, and qualifications, yet still wonder if someone will eventually realize we aren't as capable as they think we are.

LET'S DISCUSS

9. Have you ever walked into a meeting, accepted a new position, or taken on an opportunity and questioned whether you really belonged there?
10. How do higher education's emphasis on credentials, titles, and professional status influence how we view our own qualifications?
11. Why do you think women sometimes find it difficult to own their expertise or accept that they are qualified for leadership opportunities?
12. Has another woman ever encouraged you or helped you recognize something in yourself that you couldn't see? What impact did that have?
13. How can we help other women recognize their value, particularly those who are still developing confidence?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

What would you tell the version of yourself who once questioned whether she belonged in the room?

Chapter 5: How Powerlessness Shackles the Self (and How Power Sets It Free)

Power in higher education can come from many places. Some people have authority because of their position or title. Others influence decisions through relationships, knowledge, credibility, or the trust they have built over time.

LET'S DISCUSS

14. When you think about power in higher education, what comes to mind? Is it always connected to a title or position?
15. Have you ever felt that you had the knowledge or expertise to contribute but didn't feel empowered to speak?
16. What are some ways women can build influence even when they don't hold formal leadership positions?
17. Have you witnessed someone gain a leadership title but struggle with the responsibility or influence that comes with it?
18. What does it look like when a leader uses their power to create opportunities for others rather than simply maintain their own position?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

Where do you already have influence that you may not be fully recognizing?

PART THREE | LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW WE SHOW UP

Chapter 6: Slouching, Steepling, and the Language of the Body

We communicate in ways that go beyond our words. Our posture, facial expressions, gestures, and body language can influence how we feel and how others experience us.

LET'S DISCUSS

19. Have you noticed your body language change when you feel nervous, intimidated, or uncomfortable in a professional setting?
20. How do you think body language influences the way others perceive confidence and authority?
21. Do women and men experience different expectations around how they should present themselves as leaders?
22. Can someone be both approachable and authoritative? What does that look like?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

What is one thing you notice about your own body language when you are in a challenging situation?

Chapter 7: Surfing, Smiling, and Singing Ourselves to Happiness

Sometimes the smallest things can change how we approach a difficult day or situation. A little preparation, a positive routine, or a moment to reset can make a difference in how we show up.

LET'S DISCUSS

23. Do you have a routine or ritual that helps you prepare for an important meeting, presentation, or difficult conversation?
24. What helps you reset when you are having a stressful day?
25. How do you balance showing up professionally with allowing yourself to have difficult days?
26. What small things help you reconnect with your confidence when you start to doubt yourself?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

Identify one small thing you can do before a challenging situation to help yourself feel more grounded and confident.

Chapter 8: The Body Shapes the Mind (So Starfish Up!)

The idea of taking up space can mean more than physical posture. It can also mean allowing yourself to contribute, share your ideas, accept recognition, and stop making yourself smaller to make others comfortable.

LET'S DISCUSS

27. Where in your professional life do you need to take up more space?
28. Have you ever held back an idea, avoided a leadership opportunity, or stayed quiet because you didn't want to appear too confident or outspoken?
29. Do women in higher education face different expectations when they demonstrate confidence or assertiveness?

30. Is there a difference between being confident and being perceived as intimidating? Who gets to decide?
31. How can women support one another in taking up space without feeling like they have to compete for it?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT
What is one opportunity where you need to stop making yourself smaller?

PART FOUR | PUTTING PRESENCE INTO PRACTICE

Chapter 9: How to Pose for Presence

Preparation can make a difference in how we approach important moments. Whether it is a presentation, an interview, a difficult conversation, or a major decision, how we prepare ourselves matters.

LET'S DISCUSS

32. Think about an upcoming professional situation that feels intimidating. What makes it challenging?
33. What strategies from this chapter could help you approach that situation differently?
34. How do you typically prepare for high-pressure situations?
35. What advice would you give another woman who is preparing for an important professional opportunity?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT
Identify one upcoming situation where you can intentionally put something from this chapter into practice.

Chapter 10: Self-Nudging: How Tiny Tweaks Lead to Big Changes

Sometimes meaningful change doesn't require a complete transformation. Small adjustments to our habits, routines, and thinking can help us build confidence over time.

LET'S DISCUSS

36. What is one small professional habit that has made a positive difference in your career?
37. Are there situations where you consistently hold yourself back? What small change might help?
38. How can we encourage ourselves to step outside our comfort zones without feeling like we have to change who we are?
39. What is one small adjustment you could make in your daily work life that would help you feel more confident or present?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT
What is one small change you are willing to commit to this month?

Chapter 11: Fake It Till You Become It

One of the most recognizable ideas associated with this book is “fake it till you become it.” There is something powerful about continuing to show up, even when we don't always feel confident. But there is also a difference between pretending to be someone you aren't and giving yourself the opportunity to grow into the person you want to become.

LET'S DISCUSS

40. What do you think Cuddy means by “fake it till you become it”? How is that different from simply pretending?
41. Can you think of a time when you stepped into an opportunity before you felt completely ready? What did you learn?
42. How has your definition of confidence changed throughout your career?
43. What would you say to a woman who is waiting until she feels completely ready before pursuing a leadership opportunity?
44. Looking back over the book, what idea challenged you the most? What idea resonated with you?

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT
What is one thing from this book that you want to carry into your next meeting, presentation, conversation, or leadership opportunity? Who will you share that commitment with?

Your Presence, Your Leadership

Reading a book is one thing. Taking something from it and applying it to our lives is where the real opportunity begins. Take a few minutes to think about what you learned and what you want to carry forward.

1. Something I learned about myself

What did this book help you recognize about your confidence, leadership, or professional identity?

_____

2. Something I want to change

Is there a habit, mindset, or behavior you want to work on?

_____

3. Something I want to embrace

What is one strength or accomplishment you want to stop minimizing?

_____

4. Someone I want to encourage

Who is a woman in your professional or personal life who could use a reminder that she belongs?

_____

5. My next step

What is one specific thing you will do differently in the next 30 days?

_____

A FINAL THOUGHT

We don't all lead the same way. We don't all have the same opportunities, experiences, titles, or paths. And we certainly don't have to show up as the same version of a leader.

But we can encourage one another to recognize our strengths, own our experiences, and walk into the rooms where our voices matter.

Sometimes the most important thing we can do is remind ourselves that we belong there.

LET'S READ. LET'S GROW. LET'S LEAD TOGETHER.

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