



# Reflections on Character and Presence

## Two Elements Most Practitioners Never Examine

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*Most change practitioners understand that what they know and what they do are central to the value they create. Fewer have seriously examined the third element that separates most influential advisors from everyone else: who they are.*

*HITAs don't simply apply frameworks and methodologies. They bring themselves to the work in a way that is distinctive and potent. Their effectiveness flows from their Character and Presence, not just their competence. These intangible but profound qualities are what this paper is about. The full ATA paper, "Reflections on Character and Presence," explores how the deepest source of a HITA's influence isn't skill or methodology but who the practitioner actually is. Here are some highlights.*

### **Character and Presence: What They Are and Why They Matter**

Character is the aggregate of features securely planted in your personal landscape. It functions like a biological set point or baseline your unique operating system returns to regardless of what circumstances surround it. You can ignore it, embrace it, mask it, or resist it, but you can't escape it. Who you are at your core inevitably shows up.

Presence is the outward expression of that inward Character. It's the means by which who you are becomes evident to those around you. Think of it as an undercurrent that runs beneath your words and behaviors and is conveyed to others through your interaction. Presence isn't charisma or personality; it's the projection of *who you are*.

Think of it as a subliminal identity signature, an undercurrent that runs beneath your words and behaviors and is conveyed to others through your interaction. That holds only when your

presence conveys the truth of who you actually are, not a filtered version of it. Authentic presence isn't charisma or personality. It's the projection of your self-unmediated self.

This is where many well-intentioned practitioners lose their way. They recognize that Presence matters, so they refine their delivery, polish their communication, and enhance their interpersonal exchanges. These efforts aren't without value, but they fall short of where the greatest leverage lies.

Leaders feel the difference when a practitioner's Presence is rooted in Character—that quality of Presence builds the kind of trust that opens doors to HITA-level influence. But it can't be manufactured. Authentic Presence is a byproduct of Character. If you want a stronger Presence, stop adjusting the signal and start working on the source.

Working on the source isn't about adding something new or correcting what you think is missing. It's about surfacing and honoring what already exists. Character is uncovered, not concocted. That excavation, the slow and at times painful process of stripping away accumulated conditioning to find what's been buried beneath it, is less like learning and more like remembering. It begins with a willingness to look honestly at what the layers have buried, including the parts you'd rather not see.

The paper goes deeper into why this distinction matters and how practitioners can close the gap.

## The Sapling and the Trunk

One of the challenges to projecting authentic Presence is when Character becomes obscured. To understand how this happens, think about a tree trunk: inside every massive old-growth trunk is the young sapling it once was, still there, just buried beneath rings of accumulated growth. Character works the same way.

The metaphor maps directly onto the practitioner's experience. The sapling represents your core Character: the foundation of who you are, the keeper of your instincts and vitality. The trunk represents the defense structures you've built over time: the adaptations, facades, and conditioning you've accumulated to fit in, stay safe, and be accepted. The trunk is necessary. Without it, the sapling is exposed and vulnerable. But if the trunk grows too dense, it suffocates the very Character it was built to protect.

This is the paradox. Every time you smooth things over to sidestep tension with a leader, you add a layer. Every time you avoid your or the leader's discomfort by circumventing important issues, you add a layer. Every time you submit to pressure to cut corners in ways that put realization at risk, you add a layer. Over time, those layers become so routine that you lose contact with what's underneath. You can still deliver tactical value, but the depth required to serve as a strategic HITA asset gets buried beneath the same layers that were meant to protect it

What happens is, leaders end up interacting with your protective surface but not your essence, where the deepest value resides. They find themselves running into a facade of survival strategies that are blocking your courage, creativity, and conviction. And even when they can't name it, they know when they're not accessing your true Character.

The question isn't whether this happens. It happens to every HITA. The question is whether you notice it and what you do when you do.

## Waking Up

Falling asleep professionally means succumbing to the accumulated weight of accommodation so thoroughly that you no longer register when you're opting for safety over impact. The platitudes pile up. "That's just the way it is." "Leaders want to hear what they want to hear." And eventually, the mask becomes indistinguishable from the face.

HITAs respond differently. They recognize that no one stays fully alert all the time, but waking up as frequently as possible is an aspiration that is feasible. When they sense their capabilities are being misapplied or undervalued, they catch it and act. The issue isn't whether you fall asleep. It's how quickly you wake yourself up.

Waking up doesn't mean you'll never yield to political pressure again. It means that when you do temper your authenticity to preserve harmony, you do so with full awareness of the cost. That awareness is the HITA edge.

Cultivating character isn't about adding something new or correcting what you think is missing. It's about surfacing and honoring what already exists. Character is uncovered, not concocted. That excavation, the slow and at times painful process of stripping away accumulated conditioning to find what's been buried beneath it, is less like learning and more like remembering. And it begins with a willingness to look honestly at what the layers have buried, including the parts you'd rather not see.

But awareness alone isn't the destination. It's the entry point to something more demanding: deciding what you're going to do with what you now see.

## The Question You Can't Outsource

Waking up doesn't resolve anything on its own. It just returns you to the question that matters most: who you actually are and whether you're willing to bring that forward. The most compelling Presence you can offer is one that fully and unapologetically reflects who you actually are. Not who you wish you were. Not who the circumstances seem to require. Who you really are.

The operative question for every practitioner who has read this far is: Are you intentionally bringing your Character forward through the Presence you create and offering it as part of your value to the leaders you serve? Or are you asleep at the wheel, delivering competent work from behind a facade that has grown so familiar you've stopped noticing it's there?

Nobody can answer that for you. The excavation is yours to do. The "Reflections" paper closes with that question. What you do with it is the work.

***This paper is drawn from the Conner Academy Advisor Training Academy (ATA) curriculum. To explore the full program, visit [conneracademy.com](https://conneracademy.com).***