

Presence can be a gift

Impressing others is all down to how you carry yourself, writes **Ann-Maree Moodie**.

At the recent APEC meeting, Prime Minister Julia Gillard was photographed chatting with US President Barack Obama and Alan Garcia, the president of Peru. Obama and Garcia were looking at each other eye-to-eye but Gillard, being a good deal shorter, was forced to look up to both men.

Stature is important in leadership because height conveys the perception that the person is more intelligent and capable. "The bigger you are and the more impressive you look physically, the more people listen and the better you can sell yourself," former body builder, actor and now outgoing Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, once told *Fortune* magazine.

This isn't to say short people, (defined as less than about 164 centimetres), don't have authority or can't be successful leaders. The battle is about perception and while height can't be changed, the way a person looks and speaks can make their height – whether tall or short – irrelevant.

"Extremes of height can be a challenge for both sexes," says Emma McDermott of Sydney-based My Personal Stylist, a personal-image branding consultancy.

"Too tall and you risk appearing awkward and slightly comical; too short and you may be perceived as immature or child-like or not

'strong enough' to do the job," she says. "[The latter is] particularly [so] in workplaces where physical labour is required.

"However, perception is reality and attitude can go a long way to compensating for non-standard body shapes whether short, tall, large or slight.

"Confidence and calm are your allies. When you are seen to be in control of the situation without resorting to raising your voice unnecessarily or being overly confrontational, then you will always have the upper hand."

Confidence and authenticity are the best paths to gaining attention. "Taller people, by the very nature of their physicality, may appear to command respect and authority, they also tend to have a deeper voice and firmer handshake, all of which send non-verbal cues as to perceived competence," McDermott says.

"However, the key for shorter people is to be assertive without being aggressive and to command respect via gracious and consistent behaviour. While you can use clothing and accessories to appear more commanding, it is your attitude and behaviour that will always have the last word."

Clothes maketh the man, as the saying goes, and for shorter people, careful wardrobe choices are critical to making your height irrelevant. "Adopt a streamlined



Commanding types ... Julia Gillard chats with Barack Obama. Photo: AFP

approach to your outfit," says Helen Robinett of Melbourne-based Image Quest. "Use colour blocking and let it all flow. Avoid clutter through use of belts, necklaces and dangly earrings – if there's not much room on the body there's not that much room to hang anything!" While women "have more areas to get it wrong" when selecting their outfits, Robinett says, others say that short women have a dress advantage over short men.

"Women have more wardrobe 'tricks' available to them," McDermott says. "It can also be more challenging for a short man to live up to the alpha-male stereotype and be perceived as a strong and confident leader with presence, without being seen as a bully or having a Napoleon complex."

Another way to achieve the illusion of height is through your voice. But avoid increasing your

pitch, especially if you are a woman, because this will make you sound shrill or girly. Instead, learn to develop a resonance that is conveyed through a combination of energy and confidence.

"Presence isn't necessarily to do with height – it's more to do with energy that you have," says Lucy Cornell of Sydney-based Voice Coach. "Look at short actors, for example, like Cate Blanchett. She is a tiny woman but she has a huge energy and presence about her. She lights up a room; she turns heads when she walks in."

Cornell defines "energy" as being "the ability to have your inner-strength experienced". This energy can be experienced through sound, being your voice; it can also come from physical energy such as gesture. Your energy is also akin to your "aura", meaning the sense that someone creates when they walk

CONFIDENT TO STAND TALL

If you are of a shorter-than-average height then there isn't a lot you can do to change it. However, the way you dress, stand and project a presence can overcome the idea that you're pint-sized and somehow therefore pea-brained.

DO

■ Beware the "Napoleon complex" and using exaggerated gestures to make up for your height as the risk of over-compensating will make you look silly.

■ Stand tall, walk tall and adopt an air of confidence.

■ Manage your personal space by stepping back from the taller person in order to reduce the arc of the line of sight.

This also means that the taller person can't "look down" at the shorter person, which is a classic power play.

DON'T

■ Over-exaggerate your voice as a means of appearing taller. Being too loud or adopting a grating pitch will not assert presence; it will annoy people and you may appear embarrassed about your height.

■ It is best not to clutter your outfits with unnecessary accessories such as belts, scarves and long dangly earrings (women) or wear brightly patterned shirts teamed with noisy ties (men).

into a room, a kind of innate essence that projects outwards.

"It's about standing in your strength," she says.

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