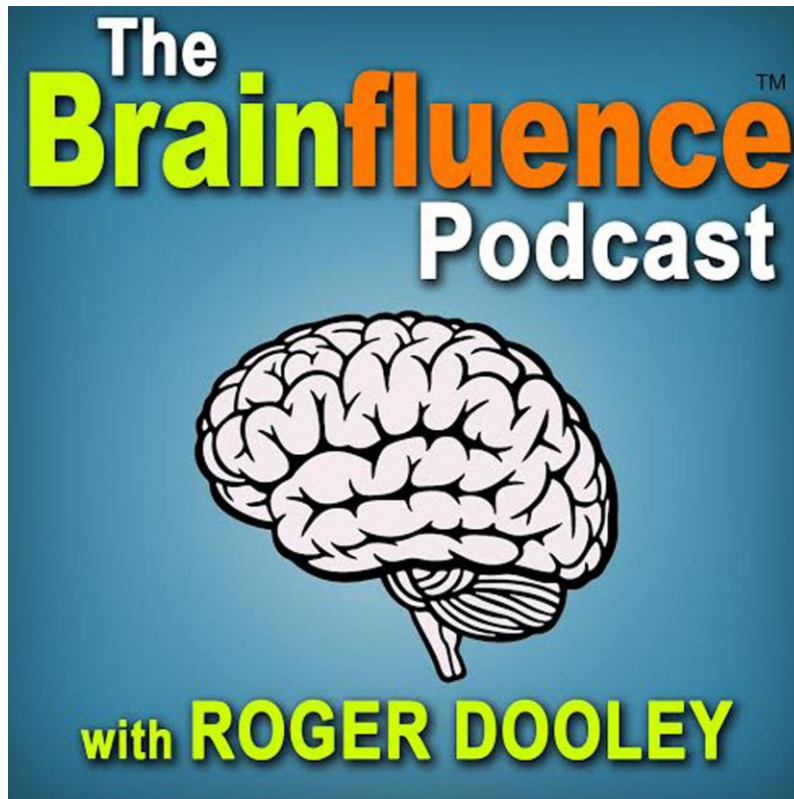


Ep #109: The Science of Extraordinary Executive Presence



**Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**



**Roger Dooley**

## Ep #109: The Science of Extraordinary Executive Presence

Welcome to *The Brainfluence Podcast* with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to *The Brainfluence Podcast*. I'm Roger Dooley. Let me start by posing a question. Wouldn't you like to be perceived as a true leader? Wouldn't you like to be able to get others to accept your ideas? If you're part of a large organization would you like to be viewed as capable of functioning at the next level? Even if you hold an executive title, you still need what my guest this week calls executive presence.

She's an expert in leadership and communication and is the author of multiple books including *Speak Like a CEO* and *Motivate Like a CEO*. Her newest book is *All the Leader You Can Be: The Science of Achieving Extraordinary Executive Presence*. Welcome to the show, Suzanne Bates.

Suzanne Bates: Roger, it's so great to be with you. Thanks so much.

Roger Dooley: Suzanne, I've got to start with a question. You were a TV news anchor and reporter for 20 years before you entered the field of leadership consulting and coaching. How did that experience help you develop your ability to help leaders communicate effectively?

Suzanne Bates: When I left television, it was pretty easy to open the door to the executive suite and offer leaders an

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opportunity to look at how they present and work with the media.

What was very interesting, Roger, was as I met some really great leaders, I got excited about great leadership. So I kind of became a student of it. My initial journey into leadership development was really in the space of communicative leadership, helping leaders communicate effectively with their important audiences.

As I went along, lots and lots of leaders and companies would ask us as our firm grew to work with leaders on executive presence. That was wonderful and we did the work but we always had to ask them, "What do you mean by that?" The answer we usually got was, "Well, I'm not sure but I know it when I see it."

If we pressed them they would say, "Yeah, well, you know, it's kind of presentation skills but it also maybe it's charisma or savvy or just commanding the room. Maybe it's professional image." Nobody really had a clear picture of what it was. So drawing upon, as you asked, in my experience in television and in media, I started to think about what are the qualities of executive presence that really matter to leaders in driving organizational performance?

Rather than relying entirely as I think a lot of the conversation has, rather than rely on kind of observation or anecdote or conjecture, what we decided to do was do a really deep dive into the empirical research, the studies, from a wide variety

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of areas from leadership and management to social action theory and communication and philosophy and ethics and psychology.

So while my instincts from television were to work with leaders on some of those qualities of presence you usually think about, what we were trying to get at in developing a model of executive presence were the range of qualities that really matter in engaging and aligning and inspiring people.

Roger Dooley: Suzanne, how much of presence comes with the position? How much is the person themselves, sort of their life experience and personality up to that point and how much can be learned?

Suzanne Bates: All of it can be learned because what we're measuring in the assessment are behaviors, observable behaviors. What we were trying to get at it was to help leaders understand what are the qualities of presence that engage, align, and inspire, move people to act. Then how do people look at certain behaviors and say, "this is a leader that I believe in" or "this is a leader I want to follow," or "this is a leader that I'd go above and beyond for."

So when you ask is it—I think what you're kind of getting at here is do you have it just because you're vice president or a senior vice president? No. On the other hand, a lot of people get promoted into higher levels of leadership because instinctively we see these qualities in the leader.

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What's important though is that almost all of us have strengths and gaps. So when we look now at the historical data that we've been gathering and assessing, hundreds and hundreds of leaders, is that everybody is different. Everybody has certain strengths. Everybody has gaps, areas that they can work on.

The good news is we can all develop in the gap areas so that we don't rely too much on just a few qualities of executive presence. That might not be enough to get us to the next level or to help us drive organization performance.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, Suzanne, I know you can't sum up a 275-page book in a few words, but what are some of those qualities of presence that you're talking about?

Suzanne Bates: It's fairly easy to sum them up because we created a model that has three dimensions. Think about somebody you know who's a pretty terrific leader. There's some qualities that you'd say, "Those are easy for me to get at. I understand what that is." Maybe it is that command the room kind of feeling or they show up in the room energized and ready for the game. Those are qualities of style.

What we mean by style are your way of doing things. The reason style is important is it's about execution. So in the style dimension, the first of the three dimensions of presence, are things like appearance, what I just talked about, being ready for the game.

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But they're also qualities like intentionality, the ability to get everybody focused on the right things. Inclusiveness, getting people around the table together and getting their opinions. Interactivity, kind of a less hierarchical, more conversation style of leadership. And assertiveness, which is getting the issues on the table. So that really sums up the style dimension.

There are two other dimensions. Substance, which are really the qualities that earn us credibility. And character, those are the qualities that are a little more fundamental to who we are but they're the qualities that make us trust a leader, believe in that leader, and when that leader maybe screws up a little bit, we give them the benefit of the doubt. It ranges from incredibility, things like authenticity which we talk a lot about in leadership, to integrity. The kinds of things you would think of as part of a leader's character. Humility is another one.

In substance, this is actually where we find some of the lower-rated qualities of leadership are qualities like vision and practical wisdom and confidence. Those are the qualities that are the driving qualities of leadership. What's really interesting, we worked with hundreds and hundreds of leaders using the assessment, which has been around now for about two or three years. What we see are some interesting patterns.

For example, it's not unusual to find a manager promoted to a more senior level. So they've been in leadership for a while but maybe not on a bigger

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stage. They're pretty good at connecting with their people, resonance, being attentive and attuned usually or they wouldn't have gotten promoted. But not so good at sharing and inspiring vision and connecting people with the mission and purpose. So even though every leader is different, we're starting to see there are a few patterns there of qualities that a lot of leaders need to develop.

Roger Dooley: How do you develop something like vision and being able to communicate vision?

Suzanne Bates: It does start with accurate assessment. When we provide people with a look, a snapshot, of how their peers and direct reports and managers see them, if you just look at that quality of vision, we measure it six different ways because all the qualities are pretty nuanced. What we might look at is, what are the specific one or two areas of vision that the leader needs to develop?

Let's just say that quality that we're looking at that was lower rated by others is painting a believable and inspiring picture of what could be. Well what we might do and what we now have is some great information, some great data that we need to zero in on this aspect of that leader's coaching right now. We have tools that we use to help leaders develop that quality.

For example, we have a tool called the "Big Idea" which helps them boil down an exciting visionary statement in 25 words or less, a proposal, outcome,

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and benefit that really connects to the audience's thoughts about mission and purpose.

So the point I think is that you can develop these qualities and that I wouldn't say it's always easy, right? Some of these things are hard to develop but the small changes we make when we zero in on one or two areas can make a tremendous difference in the influence and impact that we have on others.

Roger Dooley:

I find it really interesting, Suzanne, I think what you're saying is that in some cases, it is really content that is determining leadership presence or executive presence. In other words, it's not somebody looking in a mirror and trying to figure out how to be more charismatic but rather having the content that whether it's a big idea or something else that is not necessarily part of themselves but allows them to be seen as really understanding the situation and having a plan.

Suzanne Bates:

Yes. You know, that's one of the great misconceptions about executive presence is that it is fluff. That is not to say that those qualities of style don't matter. I mean, you've got to show up ready for the game, energetic, looking the part of a leader or executive to earn credibility with others. Otherwise, they just may not hear you.

But what we wanted to appreciate and were delighted to be able to affirm through our research is that qualities like vision and practical wisdom do really matter to a leader's presence and ability to influence. When I say practical wisdom, what I'm



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talking about there, that's another quality of substance, is the leader's ability to get to the heart of the matter.

You've probably known a number of really great leaders in your life who had an exceptional ability to ask the right questions. To ask the questions that get everybody focused on what the real issue is or to kind of cut through all the clutter and say, "Isn't this really what we're trying to figure out?" Or, "What's the question we're really asking here?"

When a leader is able to do that, what happens is it produces prudent judgments and decisions by the group. So we're not just talking about how we show up in the workplace. In executive presence, what we're talking about in especially these substance qualities is the impact it has on others around us. Our ability to get things done through others and drive outcomes.

Roger Dooley:

You mention multitasking in the book, Suzanne, I think all of us know that multitasking is usually not something that our brains are particularly good at but in developing leadership it seems like multitasking has some specific flaws, but why is multitasking bad for executive presence?

Suzanne Bates:

That's a great question, Roger, because a lot of the research and publishing around multitasking focuses on how it makes us less productive. That's all true. I'm certain of it because I've tried it myself. But when we look at executive presence and the impact that multitasking has on others, it's an even

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more compelling reason for us to think about how we want to connect in the moment and be fully present. Why is that?

I can tell you a specific example of a leader that we coached not too long ago. She had her phone on the table all the time. So even if she wasn't answering it and sometimes she was, even she wasn't answering it, it sent this blaringly loud signal to her team that they were not the most important thing in the moment. She got dinged really hard on that in the quality of resonance which is being able to not only connect with others but be attentive and attuned and responsive to their thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

It's true when you think about it. It's almost impossible to be fully attuned to what someone else is thinking and feeling if you have a distraction like that in front of you. So what it does is it gives leaders another compelling reason, a motivation if you will, to really think about not only how they come across but how they can be more effective. This is really about leadership effectiveness.

I'll tell you a quick, funny story from my television days. I remember and this would have been—email was a relatively new phenomenon when I was back in my TV days. I remember we would all gather around in the news director's office. It was kind of an awkward setting because there weren't even enough chairs for everybody. We were all crammed in there.

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The new director would sit behind his desk and he would answer email while we were having our meeting. I'm sure he thought he was being efficient but it was extremely frustrating. I think now back on how much he missed. Maybe it was taking us too long to discuss the issues, whatever it was, how the show went today or what we were planning today but we would then have to always catch him up again.

So that's an extreme example but I think we could all probably if we're honest look inward and say we create these kinds of distractions. It's really important to think about the impact that has on other people.

Roger Dooley:

Right. I'm sure we've all been in that kind of meeting and maybe even occasionally done that kind of thing ourselves if we thought the meeting was going slowly or if it was somehow irrelevant to my concern at that particular moment, that checking email is a more productive use of my time.

I think in that case where the person in charge, it's particularly bad because they could in fact redefine the meeting. If it's taking too long, if the stuff that's being discussed isn't relevant, then at least they have the power to say, "Okay, we're getting off track here" and bring that meeting to a swift and efficient close.

Suzanne Bates:

Yeah. Well you know, you're into neuroscience obviously. You understand the distraction part of it. I

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think another way to think about this is the other impacts that it has on our ability to influence.

Let me go over to another part of the model which is humility. Humility we define as an awareness of our strengths and weaknesses and also an openness and respect for other people's ideas. So you could be in a meeting and be distracted by something and look, it's so easy to let that happen because frankly as senior leaders or more experienced, more mature leaders, we've heard a lot of it before.

We may think we have the answers and maybe we do. But the problem is it's so demotivating for a team to think that you're not curious about their ideas and the fact is as we all know, you're very likely to miss out on some great ideas if you're not sending a signal loud and clear that you want to hear what other people think and that you respect their ideas.

What happens we found when we're working with leaders is this single behavior can not only affect how people see them as resonant but also whether they see them as humble leaders. That goes to whether we trust them. So you can see the cascading impact that a single behavior has on your ability to influence, your ability to engage, and align people.

It's not an understatement to say, and I've seen it happen again and again when we work with leaders that small changes in behavior can make an enormous impact on how others view them and

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whether they want to follow them and go above and beyond for them.

Roger Dooley:

The person that comes to mind when you talk about presence or charisma is Bill Clinton who is legendary in his ability to captivate a room. One of the things that people who have met him personally say is that when you're speaking with him, you have the impression that he is 100 percent focused on you and what you're saying.

He's not thinking about the other people in the room, the next person in line behind you, or what he's going to say to you in reply but he is listening intently to what you're saying. I'm sure there are many aspects to his personality that create this incredible magnetism but just that focus and that sort of absence of any apparent distraction is certainly one of his key attributes.

Suzanne Bates:

Well, he's legendary for that. Again, that goes to resonance in our model. What I think is so exciting to think about, Roger, for all of your listeners who are in leadership roles or maybe if they work with leaders is that people assume that Bill Clinton was born that way. Now, maybe he's a natural politician but he honed that quality just as he honed the ability to speak on a big stage.

If you remember his first speeches before the early Democratic conventions, they were awful. He went on and on and on. So these are honed qualities of mature leadership. It is possible for any of us to develop a level of resonance that makes us stand

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out and make an enormously powerful impact on other people.

It's really a matter of deciding what kind of leader you want to be. Which is exactly why I wrote *All the Leader You Can Be*. That's why I called it *All the Leader You Can Be: The Science of Achieving Extraordinary Executive Presence*. I believe and have seen that leaders can develop every single one of these 15 qualities.

When they do, they stand out on a bigger stage and they're better ready for the next assignment and others recognize that "it" factor, that mysterious "it" factor, whether or not they have the language to describe it. They see it, they feel it, they experience it, and they want to be around it.

Roger Dooley:

You just mentioned your book title and the word "science" which is one reason why I wanted to get you on the show, Suzanne. So many leadership books are based on one person's experience or some miscellaneous anecdotes which may or may not really translate into other situations.

I mean I could read about the leadership approach of Richard Branson for months and at the end of the day, I'm not Richard Branson and chances are whatever he's doing so very well isn't going to work for me exactly. What is some of the science that underpins the work in your book?

Suzanne Bates:

As I may have mentioned, we looked at empirical studies in English language from around the world.

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So our model is not culturally specific, it's a situational assessment which means it's that leader, we're measuring that leader at that time, in that organization, with that role, etc.

So what's the science behind it? We looked at leadership and management theory, psychology, we looked at communication theory. Social action theory, because leadership doesn't happen in a vacuum, it happens in the context of an organization. We looked at philosophy and ethics to build in the character.

Then what we did is we asked a panel of ten independent PhD leadership experts, experts in assessment, to help us develop and then cull down from a universe of questions that we could be asking about these 15 qualities, which ones would get to the heart of measuring the real things that matter.

Once we did that, we validated the assessment. We tested its reliability by piloting it in 20 companies with 100 leaders. We did all of that before we launched it because we wanted to be sure we were measuring the right things. That we had it right.

So what happened as a result was when we went back out and we started introducing it to global organizations and senior leaders and high-potential leader programs is they were all nodding their heads and saying, "Yes, this is what we've been trying to get at."

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What it's done is, you know it's a very intuitive model, you've heard me talk about authenticity or practical wisdom or confidence or humility or restraint. We wanted it to be easy to understand to have what's called face value for leaders. They had to look at it and say, "Yep. I get why that matters. I've seen it at work in my organization and I've seen it at work with great leaders."

So we wanted it to have face validity but it needed to have science behind it because the problem for leaders is for years they've gotten feedback, "You need to work on your executive presence." They'd turn around and they'd say, "Well that's fine but what does it mean? What am I supposed to do?"

So it's frustrating for leaders who are trying to move ahead in their careers. It's frustrating for CEOs and senior management who are trying to look down the organization and say, "Well who are my successors?" It's frustrating for the talent development folks because they can't figure out, "What am I supposed to do to help these leaders get that "it" factor?"

So it's been very exciting to see it being adopted in so many companies. It's now been deployed in 17 countries in a wide variety of industries. I think it really is as you suggest because finally people feel there's some science behind it.

Roger Dooley:

What about appearance, Suzanne? We want to think today that appearance isn't all that important and that it's really competence that counts but in



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fact since we're dealing with humans in organizations, appearance is still important. What are the different aspects of appearance and how does one control them?

Suzanne Bates:

We measure appearance in several ways because as I mentioned all of these qualities are nuanced. We wanted it to be a robust look at each of those qualities. So, yes, people are sometimes reluctant even to talk about appearance because they feel it seems shallow. Yet, secretly, we'll get the phone call, "Could you work with this leader on wardrobe?"

So, yes, wardrobe does matter but our ideas even of professional image and grooming have evolved certainly because the range is quite great now between business professional and business casual and even casual attire. In that aspect of appearance, it's about professional image. What we ask is, "Does the leader look and act the part of a senior executive?"

When we do our programs, we have an executive presence mastery program and we have leaders work on all aspects of presence. We bring in an image consultant to talk about things like cut, fabric, fit, quality, those kinds of things. We give them the roles of the road because when you walk in a room having the right attire, not only sends a signal to others that you're standing out by fitting in perfectly. But it also makes you feel confident. You know how you feel when you put on your best business attire, whatever that is, and walk into a room. You feel like you could change the world.

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So that's one aspect of presence but the other aspects of presence are equally important. Those are things like, as I mentioned, readiness for the game, showing up for the meeting totally prepared. Even if you're the senior leader, not just walking in and listening to what everybody has to say but you looked at the briefings. You've developed a point of view. You're ready to ask the right questions.

It's also the energy and vitality that you bring into the room because as we all know when we work with leaders who are engaged and focused and energetic, that has a contagion that is so powerful. It raises everybody's game.

Roger Dooley:

Yeah. How does our digital world change some of these factor? Today we aren't always meeting face to face or having face-to-face meetings. We may be communicating with tools like email or Slack or messaging apps and this sort of thing. Even meetings, many of the people may not be present in the room. They may be attending remotely. How does this change the world? Do you have different prescriptions for companies that very heavily digital in their communications?

Suzanne Bates:

Well there may be three things that I recommend people do in the digital age. One of them is a) think about what the best way is to communicate. We're sometimes over reliant as everyone knows on email and those kinds of forms of communication. It's so possible now to have face-to-face interactions without being in the room with somebody. There's so many ways to make that happen.

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In our organization, even though we're a boutique firm, we have a video conferencing system that communicates with any company anywhere in the world. You have to. So getting as close to face to face is the gold standard of communication.

If you can't be face to face, then you should at least, especially as a senior leader being looking at your calendar and saying, "When can I be face to face with this group of people or this team?" It does become challenging as you especially you get to an enterprise level or you work in a global company. But it's important to make sure that you are meeting people when you can.

Then the last recommendation that we make to the leaders is be sure that your written communication or your voice communication is aligned with your brand, is aligned with who you are. As a senior leader, if you need voice training, you should get it. If you need accent reduction, you should get it. If you need to learn to write well, you should get some help doing that because people are evaluating your presence in all those ways.

Roger Dooley: How does social media affect executive presence, if at all?

Suzanne Bates: I use social media a lot in my work because I'm an author and I speak and there's good reason for me to use social media. I don't find senior executives using it much or as much but there is a growing use of certain kinds.

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So for example, they're using internal video blogging more and more, senior executives are. Which is a good thing I think and a wonderful tool to use in again, trying to get face to face with people or even just blogging without the video is a great way to get in touch with people. Certainly, there are senior leaders and CEOs who are using social media especially if it's advantageous in their role. If they're in a marketing role for example, it's very important for them to know social media.

I know you know that world very very well, obviously communications and PR. But you know, public companies' senior executives are understandably a little bit reluctant to go all out on social media, most of them, unless they're celebrities like a Richard Branson because of the obvious risks involved.

Roger Dooley: To wrap up, Suzanne, is there one piece of advice that you'd offer our listeners who want to work on their executive presence?

Suzanne Bates: What I'd say is that the best leaders I've ever worked with are always working at becoming all the leader they can be. You know, I've done executive presence index or ExPI assessments on CEO succession candidates. They get pretty great scores but they're always looking to see what else they can do to become all they can be.

So what I would say to your listeners is that it's really up to you to decide what kind of leader you want to be. Maybe to look out and say, "Who do I really admire? Even though I'm pretty good, who do

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I admire out there and what might I learn from them?”

If your listeners are interested, we have a pre-assessment survey that's complimentary so you don't have to take the ExPI assessment but it might introduce you to the model. You'd be able to look at the 15 qualities. Maybe even ask yourself, what's important to me? You get a personalized report back. It's at [alltheleaderbook.com](http://alltheleaderbook.com).

So if you go to [alltheleaderbook.com](http://alltheleaderbook.com), click on pre-assessment survey. It takes about three minutes but it will send you back a personalized report. You'll get a look at the model.

Roger Dooley:

Great. Let me remind our listeners that we're speaking with Suzanne Bates, author of the new book *All the Leader You Can Be: The Science of Achieving Extraordinary Executive Presence*. Suzanne, you just gave that URL, is there any place else that our listeners should look for you online or your content?

Suzanne Bates:

Yes, if you're interested in the ExPI assessment, in coaching, or leadership development for you or for your team, our website is [Bates-Communications.com](http://Bates-Communications.com). You can also write to me at [info@bates-communications.com](mailto:info@bates-communications.com) if you're interested.

Of course, if you just want to check out the book, I'd recommend that you go to [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) or [Barnes & Noble](http://Barnes & Noble). It's called *All the Leader You Can Be*.

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Roger Dooley: Great. We'll have all those links on the show notes page at [RogerDooley.com/Podcast](http://RogerDooley.com/Podcast). We'll have a text version of our conversation there too as well. Suzanne, thanks so much for being on the show.

Suzanne Bates: Roger, it's a delight to be with you. Thank you for the great questions and for the great work you're doing.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of *The Brainfluence Podcast*. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at [RogerDooley.com](http://RogerDooley.com).