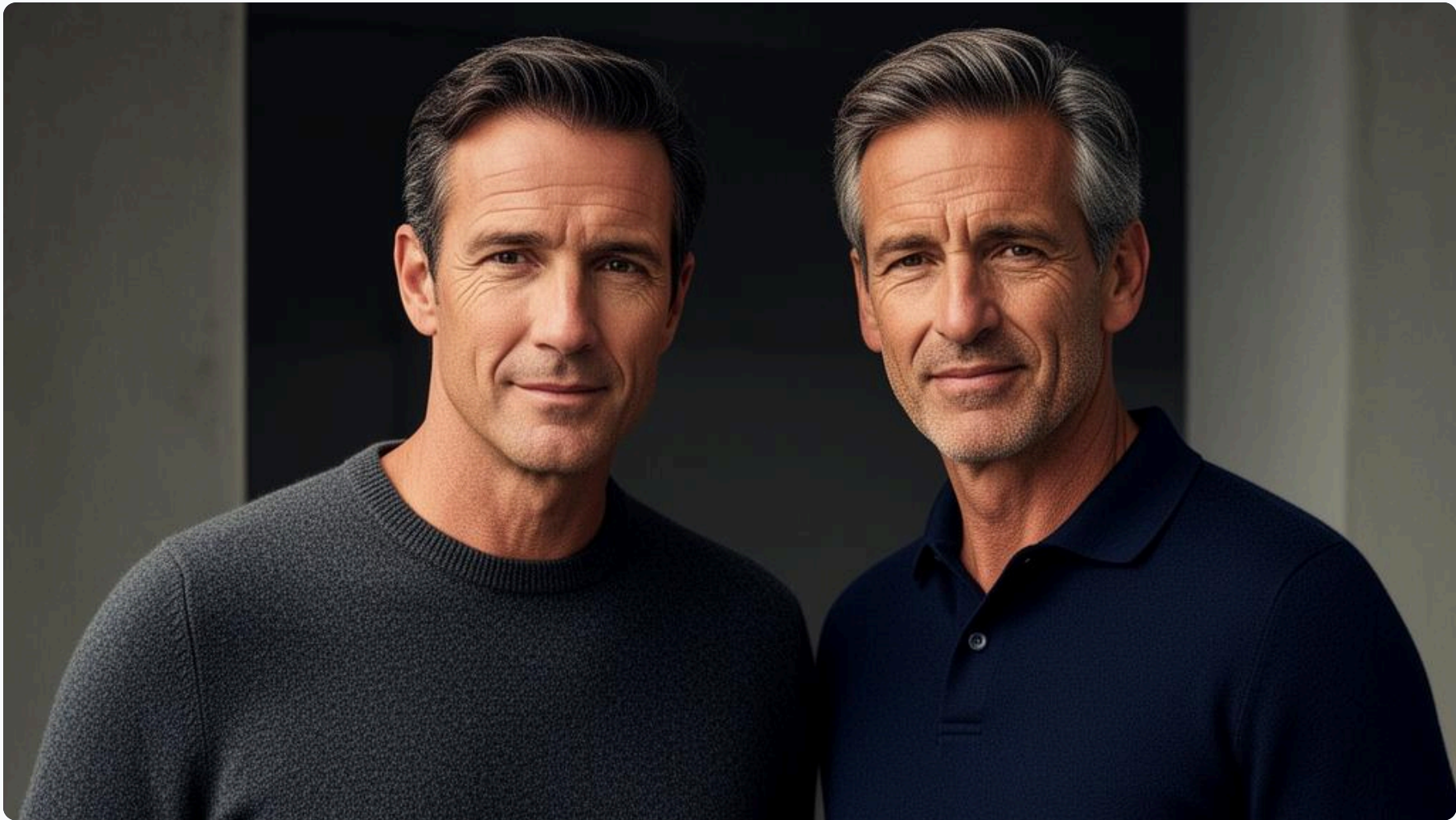


How to Dress Well Without a Suit

An Executive Style Guide for Men

By Phill Tarling — London Menswear Stylist and Image Coach for CEOs



What to Wear Without a Suit: A Smart Casual Guide for Executives

A relaxed dress code is not a relaxed standard. The boardroom may have softened, but the judgement has not. Founders, C-suite leaders and HNIs are read in seconds, and what you wear without the armour of a suit determines whether you walk in with presence or apologise for being there.

This is the executive style guide image consultants use with senior leadership teams who want to dress with intention, signal credibility, and command authority — even when the jacket stays on the hanger. Every principle here is built for men in business who need to look the part in the meeting, on stage and at the dinner that follows.

WRITTEN FOR Executives · Founders · C-Suite · HNIs

OUTCOME More Presence · Credibility · Authority

METHOD Image Coach Framework · Executive Style

FORMAT The Definitive Guide

How to Dress Casual and Still Look Like a Leader

Most men feel safer in a suit. The dress code is clear, the structure does the work, and nobody questions whether you belong in the room. Step into a smart casual or business setting and the rules disappear. That is where confidence drops, social anxiety builds, and wardrobe fatigue takes hold. Random combinations, badly fitting separates and an instinct to dress for comfort over the room — this is where most executives come unstuck.

This guide closes that gap. As an image consultant and image coach for CEOs, founders and senior leadership teams, I help men dress with authority in any professional setting where a suit is no longer the answer. There is a science to my advice, drawn from over thirty years of experience, research and expertise working with HNIs and C-suite clients. The ROI my clients see goes beyond confidence. It is perceived competence, credibility and the kind of executive presence that opens rooms before you speak.

Three pillars hold this framework together: Cut, Cloth and Colour.



01

Cut — How Clothes Should Fit Without a Suit

Fit is the single biggest difference between looking wealthy and looking ordinary. Without a suit's structure doing the work, every seam, shoulder point, and hem break matters more.

[READ LESS](#) ^

A suit forgives a multitude of sins — the jacket hides the waist, the shoulder padding creates shape, the trousers fall in a predictable line. Remove it, and you're exposed. The crew neck that sits two inches too wide at the shoulder makes you look borrowed. Chinos that pool at the ankle say 'I grabbed the first pair.' Here's the rule: knitwear should follow the shoulder line exactly — not a centimetre beyond the bone. Trousers need a clean break at the shoe, or a slight crop showing ankle. T-shirts should skim the bicep without cutting circulation. Get a tailor. Seriously. A £15



02

Cloth — Why Fabric Quality Matters More Than Brand

Wealthy men don't wear logos — they wear texture. Why a £300 merino polo says more than a £3,000 logo jacket, and how to read quality at a glance.

[READ LESS](#) ^

Here's what separates the well-dressed from the expensively-dressed: fabric knowledge. Run your hand across a quality cashmere knit and you'll feel the difference immediately — it's dense, has weight, and bounces back. Cheap cashmere pills after two wears. Merino wool has a natural sheen that polyester can only dream of imitating. Suede adds visual warmth without shouting. Selvedge denim develops a patina that tells a story. The point isn't to spend more — it's to spend on the right things. A man in a £200 merino zip-neck looks wealthier than a man in a £2,000 branded hoodie. Every single time.

CASHMERE

MERINO



03

Colour — What Colours Go Together for Men

Beyond charcoal and cream — dark forest green, midnight navy, and deep slate blue anchor your wardrobe with weight. These darker tones balance the neutrals and signal intention.

[READ LESS](#) ^

Most men default to black and grey because it's safe. But 'safe' isn't the same as 'good.' The real authority palette centres on rich, saturated darks: midnight navy, deep forest green, slate blue, espresso brown. These colours carry weight without the severity of black. Pair them using simple colour theory — tonal combinations (different shades of navy), complementary pairings (forest green with warm cream), or analogous blends (tobacco, camel, and dark slate). The colour section below breaks this down properly, but the principle is simple: dress in tones, not individual colours.

DEEP NAVY

alteration on a £60 jumper will outperform a £400 jumper that doesn't fit.

- SHOULDER LINE
- TROUSER BREAK
- TAILORING

- SUEDE
- SELVEDGE

- FOREST GREEN
- SLATE BLUE
- DARK NEUTRALS

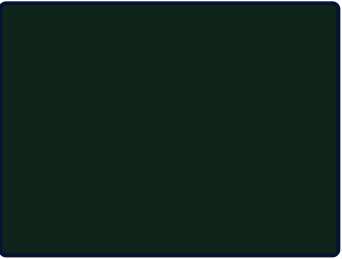
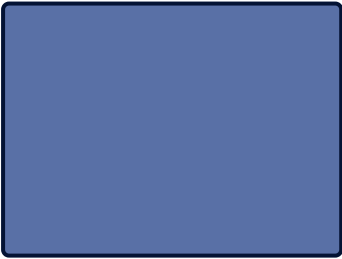
COLOUR COORDINATION FOR EXECUTIVES

What Colours Go Together for Men? The Executive Authority Palette

Most men lack confidence with colour and combining.

Choosing a darker business palette might seem safe, but the research is clear. Lighter, brighter colours suggest fun and energy, which works in some settings but rarely in the boardroom. In the corporate world, effortless colour coordination stimulates other people's brain activity to trust your expertise. This is the Halo Effect at work — visual harmony reads as competence, credibility and authority before a single word is spoken.

Men who dress well use colour to look polished and intentional without drawing unnecessary attention. The right tones create authority. The wrong combinations create noise. Each column below runs dark to light. Pair across columns at the same depth for effortless coordination.

NAVY	FOREST	SLATE	EARTH	NEUTRAL
				
MIDNIGHT NAVY	BLACK FOREST	CHARCOAL	ESPRESSO	NEAR BLACK
				
DEEP NAVY	DEEP FOREST	DARK SLATE	DARK CHOCOLATE	GRAPHITE
				
OFFICER NAVY	HUNTER GREEN	MEDIUM SLATE	TOBACCO	STONE
				
SLATE NAVY	OLIVE DRAB	COOL GREY	CAMEL	GREIGE
				



WASHED NAVY



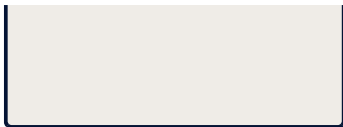
SAGE



LIGHT SLATE



SAND



CREAM

EXECUTIVE COLOUR PAIRINGS

Colour Combinations That Signal Wealth, Authority and Old Money

Some colour pairings are read instantly as polished, old money or quietly powerful. Others read as sporty, casual or unconsidered. Combinations work for a reason – and most of the time it comes down to what they stimulate the brain to think. This is the science of styling.

Below are four colour pairings that work for men in executive and corporate settings. Tonal and monochrome create a slimming, elongating effect and signal restraint. Complementary and analogous add depth, warmth and the kind of cultivated taste associated with old school style.



TONAL



MIDNIGHT NAVY



CHARCOAL



STONE

Tonal Dressing: The Boardroom Casual

Midnight navy and charcoal sit close on the colour wheel but create quiet depth. This is the power move when you want to command a room without a suit.

WEAR IT: Navy cashmere crew neck, charcoal tailored trousers, stone suede loafers

READ LESS ^

Tonal dressing uses colours that share the same undertone but differ in lightness. The eye reads the outfit as one cohesive block, which is exactly what a suit does. You are replicating that visual authority with separates. The key is keeping the temperature consistent: cool tones with cool tones, warm with warm. The slight variation in shade prevents it from looking like a uniform while maintaining that single block silhouette that reads as powerful.



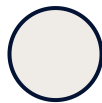
COMPLEMENTARY



DEEP FOREST



CHOCOLATE



CREAM

Complementary Colours: The Weekend Authority

Deep forest green against warm cream creates natural contrast that reads as intentional. These sit opposite on the wheel. The tension is what makes it work.

WEAR IT: *Forest green merino polo, cream cotton chinos, dark chocolate suede loafers*

[READ LESS](#) ^

Complementary colours sit directly opposite each other on the colour wheel: green and red brown, blue and orange, violet and yellow. When you pair them at the right saturation (muted, not bright), they create visual impact without looking costumey. The forest green against cream works because both colours are dialled down from their purest forms. This is the difference between looking like you understand colour theory and looking like a paint chart.



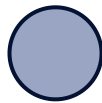
MONOCHROME



DEEP NAVY



OFFICER NAVY



WASHED
NAVY

Monochrome Dressing: How to Look Taller and Slimmer

Three shades of the same colour family, running dark to light. This is the easiest way to look put together without thinking too hard. Monochrome creates an unbroken vertical line that makes men appear taller and leaner.

WEAR IT: *Deep navy wool overshirt, officer navy merino crew, washed navy chinos*

[READ LESS](#) ^

Monochrome is the purest form of tonal dressing: one colour family, multiple depths. It works because the human eye naturally creates a gradient, lending the outfit a sense of deliberate design. The unbroken colour column elongates the body, which is why monochrome makes men look taller and slimmer. There is no horizontal colour break to cut the silhouette in half. The trick is ensuring enough contrast between the shades. A navy jacket over a navy tee with navy trousers needs at least two shades of separation between each piece. Too close and it looks like a failed match. Too far apart and the monochrome illusion breaks. Three distinct depths is the sweet spot.



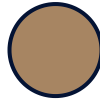
ANALOGOUS



DARK SLATE



TOBACCO



CAMEL

Analogous Colours: The Continental Look

Warm earth tones grounded by cool slate. Colours that sit next to each other on the wheel. This palette says you have spent time in Italy without trying too hard.

WEAR IT: *Dark slate cotton overshirt, tobacco merino knit, camel tailored chinos*

[READ LESS](#) ^

Analogous colours are neighbours on the colour wheel. They share an underlying hue, which is why they look natural together. Earth tones (tobacco, camel, sand) are all warm undertone neighbours. Adding a cool slate or navy element creates grounding, an anchor that stops the warm palette from drifting into safari costume territory. This is how Italian men dress instinctively: warm colours, cool structure, everything in harmony.

The Only Rule You Need

Pick any two columns. Choose shades at the **same row depth** for tonal harmony, or go **two rows apart** for intentional contrast. Never pair the lightest shade of one family with the darkest of another. That is a uniform, not an outfit.

PROPORTION GUIDE

How to Look Good Without a Jacket — The Rule of Thirds

A suit does the proportional work for you. Without one, you need to engineer these three zones deliberately. Get this right and you'll never look underdressed.

NECKLINE

WAIST

The Neckline Zone

There are several collar styles to choose from and more on that in another blog. Choose carefully. If you have a rounder face, an open neckline is more flattering. A clean crew neck in fine gauge knit or an open spread collar polo creates the same visual frame as a shirt and tie. Dressing with authority starts here.

The Tuck Point

Choosing the right belt is crucial if you want to look taller and narrower. If you are unsure, always match your belt to the colour of your trousers. A half tuck or clean waistline with a quality belt creates structure. This single detail separates 'I chose this' from 'I threw this on.'

The Foundation

Many men do not understand the difference between a good break and a bad break. Small changes make a big difference. Tailored chinos with a clean break, minimal trainers or suede loafers. The hem to shoe relationship determines whether you read as considered or accidental. More on this coming soon.

Smart Casual Outfit Formulas for Men: Three Executive Looks

Three smart casual outfits built on the same proportional rules. Each one nails the neckline, the tuck point and the foundation, using the fabrics that signal authority. Use these as templates for the boardroom-adjacent meeting, the off-site, or the dinner where the suit stays at home.



Tonal Navy

Cashmere crew, tailored trousers, suede loafers. Monochrome depth.



Continental Summer

Merino polo, olive chinos, suede tassel loafers. Complementary warmth.



Modern Executive

Suede shirt jacket, navy crew neck, tailored trousers. Structured contrast.

MEN'S STYLE ARCHETYPES

Smart Casual Style Guide for Men: Four Archetypes

Every well dressed man who has moved beyond the suit falls into one of these frameworks. Identify yours, then refine it. There is no wrong answer, only clarity.

Want the full breakdown? Read my comprehensive [Smart Casual Dress Code Guide for Men](#) on the main site.

THE FULL SERIES — PARTS 1 TO 6

[Part 1 — Cut: The Foundations of Personal Style for Executives](#)

[Part 2 — Cloth: How to Dress Well Without a Suit \(this guide\)](#)

[Part 3 – Colour: Texture, Materials and the Authority Palette](#)

Part 4 – Coming soon

Part 5 – Coming soon

Part 6 – Coming soon

All six parts will be linked here once published.

DOWNLOAD THIS GUIDE AS A PDF

The Quiet Mogul

BRUNELLO CUCINELLI
CLIENT

- Monochrome tonal layering
- Zero visible branding
- Cashmere on cashmere

SIGNATURE FORMULA

Grey crew neck + grey flannel trouser + suede penny loafer

The Tech Titan

SILICON VALLEY POWER
CASUAL

- Merino performance knits
- Engineered simplicity
- One signature item repeated

SIGNATURE FORMULA

Navy zip mock + slim chino + clean minimal trainer

The Continental

EUROPEAN LEISURE
CLASS

- Linen and cotton blends
- Earth tone palette mastery
- Effortless layering

SIGNATURE FORMULA

Cream knit polo + olive trouser + suede tassel loafer

The New Establishment

POST SUIT
EXECUTIVE

- Dark denim as trouser replacement
- Structured outerwear over knitwear
- Quality watch as only jewellery

SIGNATURE FORMULA

Charcoal suede shacket + navy tee + selvedge denim

EXECUTIVE STYLE FAQs

Smart Casual for Executives: Questions Answered

The questions C-suite leaders, founders and HNIs ask most often when they want more presence, credibility and authority without a suit.

What should a CEO wear without a suit?



A CEO without a suit should default to fine gauge knitwear in dark, saturated tones — a navy cashmere crew or merino zip-neck — paired with tailored wool trousers or dark indigo denim and a leather or suede loafer. The objective is to replicate the visual authority a suit provides through fit, fabric and tonal coordination. Avoid logos, slogans and high contrast. Quiet, considered and tonal reads as senior every time.

Is smart casual harder than wearing a suit?

Yes. A suit removes most of the decisions for you. Smart casual asks you to engineer the same authority from separates, which is why so many founders, executives and HNIs come unstuck. The framework — Cut, Cloth and Colour — exists to remove that guesswork. Once you understand the principles, smart casual becomes the most powerful dress code an executive can master.

What colours signal authority in business?

Midnight navy, charcoal, deep forest green, espresso brown and slate. These dark, saturated tones carry weight without the severity of black and read as competent, credible and considered. Lighter, brighter colours signal energy and informality, which rarely serves you in the boardroom. Pair tonally for quiet authority or use complementary depth for cultivated, old money confidence.

What does an image consultant actually do for executives?

An image consultant for executives audits your existing wardrobe, identifies what is working against your professional brand, and builds a capsule wardrobe of pieces that communicate the presence, credibility and authority you want to project. For senior leaders the ROI is measurable: stronger first impressions, faster trust, more boardroom presence and the freedom to stop thinking about clothes.

Why do men in leadership default to wearing black?

Black feels safe. It hides effort, reads as formal and requires no colour confidence. The problem is that black flattens features, ages the wearer and signals a lack of intention. Senior leaders who want more presence should swap black for charcoal, midnight navy or espresso. Those tones photograph better, layer more elegantly and signal taste rather than retreat.

How do I look more polished without trying too hard?

Three things. Get every piece tailored so it follows the line of your body. Invest in fabric — cashmere, merino, suede, selvedge denim — and let the texture do the talking. Stay tonal: pick two colour families and pair them at similar depth. Effortless polish is engineered, not accidental. Once these three habits are in place, you will look intentional in anything you put on.

Build the Presence, Credibility and Authority of a C-Suite Leader

A practical starting point for men who want clarity without committing to a full wardrobe overhaul.

This session identifies what is working, what is not, and what needs to change.

You will leave with clear direction on how to improve your image immediately.

Work with me one to one as your image consultant and executive style coach. I will audit your wardrobe, define your authority palette, and build a capsule that gives you more presence in the boardroom, on stage and off-duty.

BOOK YOUR CONSULTATION

[Book a 30 minute free consultation to see how I can strengthen your personal image.](#)