

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Elevator Speeches ▶ 01/22/09

Weston was disgusted with himself. “Man, did I miss a great opportunity,” he said in the first minutes of our coaching session. “I ran into Brad, the division president, on my way to the parking lot on Monday. For a change he actually had a minute to chat. So first we were talking about our weekends. But then he asked me about the Chandler project and I started babbling like a junior intern. I sure didn’t sound like the project lead! It was horrible.”

Weston knew he’d had an opportunity to give the president an “elevator speech” (a crisp executive summary that lasts no longer than an elevator ride) but because he was unprepared his comments were anything but crisp.

My friend and colleague, Lois Frankel, has a saying when she coaches people about creating strong networks. She says, “By the time you need a relationship, it’s too late to build one.” Here’s my variation on her saying: “By the time you need an elevator speech, it’s too late to make one up.”

A few minutes with a senior leader, as Weston had, is just one situation where an elevator speech will help you sound executive. At a social gathering, someone asks, “What do you do?” That’s an elevator speech opportunity. At an all-hands meeting, someone from another division asks about an inter-departmental initiative. That’s an elevator speech opportunity. On a conference call with team members, someone asks for an update on a customer. That’s an elevator speech opportunity.

In these days of lay-offs and reorganizations, elevator speeches become a critical communication skill. If you’re looking for work, networking is important, which means having succinct elevator speeches is *really* important! At a minimum, you should have an elevator speech ready for each of the following questions: “What would your ideal job look like?” “What should I tell people about you?” “When should I think of you?”

### **Great elevator speeches have three qualities**

When delivered well, elevator speeches give your listeners a valuable overview and put a framework around your topic. They also make you sound razor-sharp.



To be effective, imbue your elevator speech with three qualities:

- 1 Keep it short;
- 2 Make it memorable;
- 3 Tailor it to the listener.

Here's a little guidance about each of those qualities.

### 1 Keep it short

Most elevator speeches are triggered by an open-ended question. "How's that proposal coming?" "What happened in Atlanta?" "How's the selection for the new position going?"

It's hard to be concise when someone gives you an open invitation to talk. (See *Being Concise*.) It's especially hard if you haven't done any sorting of your thoughts before.

But that open-ended question from your listeners doesn't mean they want to know everything that's in your head. They're extending a small teacup for you to fill. Don't blast them with a fire hose. Details and nuances that fascinate you are invisible to them. Stay at a high level. Resist giving details, especially at the outset. That will help keep your elevator speech short.

### 2 Make it memorable

One simple way to make your elevator speech memorable is to use a number when you begin.

You're asked, "How's that proposal coming?"

Begin your reply, "We've had three meetings on it and they've have gone well."

You're asked, "What happened in Atlanta?"

Begin your reply, "There were four important things we found out about the client's needs."

You're asked, "How's the selection for the new position going?"

Begin your reply, "We're down to our final two candidates."

In each case, the number of items you mention will stick in your listener's mind. She might not remember the exact details of each item, but she'll know you said there were three meetings or four needs or two candidates. When you sort and simplify your data so it sticks in her mind, you become a valued player.



### 3 Tailor to your listener

We all listen to the world around us with filters that ask, “Why is this important to me? How does this fit into what I do?” This self-oriented listening is appropriate: it helps us sift the barrage of information that bombards us daily.

Adroit communicators understand these filters and lead with what’s important to their listeners. We each do this naturally in our day-to-day interactions. If you’re talking about a childhood illness, you naturally speak differently to a parent than if you’re talking to a pediatrician. But we often drop this automatic adjustment when we start talking about our work: we tend to talk through the filter of what is important to us, not what’s important to them.

Elevator speeches need to answer your listeners’ unspoken question, “Why should I listen to this?” This is especially true when you’re talking with executives.

#### The key take-away

Elevator speeches don’t happen without mental rehearsal. But the prep process needn’t be long. While cleaning up dinner, ask yourself, “What’s going on with me these days?” For every item you think of, identify the salient points. How many are there? Two? Three? Assign each point a little nametag so you can retrieve it later. That’s it! You just created the skeleton of your elevator speech.

#### An offer

Whether you’re looking for work or are in a position you’ve held for years, elevator speeches are critical to your success. If you’d like to polish an elevator speech, I’d like to help. I’ll give you 15 minutes on the phone for free. In exchange, I’ll ask whom you know who might benefit from our coaching or training or Executive Coaching Tips. But your ability to come up with a referral is not a prerequisite for making a phone appointment with me. If you’re interested, shoot me an email and together we’ll work to develop your *Look & Sound of Leadership*<sup>™</sup>.

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