

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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**Act with Intention ▶ 02/21/08**

Stan didn't intend to be intimidating. But I didn't know that when I received a call from his secretary asking me for an hour-long meeting. As the senior sales executive for a worldwide technology firm he led an organization of several hundred people. I'd coached a score of his senior staffers and all but one talked about him as unapproachable and intimidating.

Walking into his office the morning of the meeting, I felt myself strapping on my heaviest mental armor. Stan greeted me not warmly but with the strained cordiality of the severely introverted. As we talked, my impression of him transformed from The-Great-and-Powerful-Stan to a rather awkward middle-aged guy whom my parents might have called a nebbish.

That morning, Stan talked to me about his legacy: he knew people found him intimidating and that was painful to him. It wasn't his intention to be that sort of leader; he wanted to be a nice guy. Would I help him, he asked, because he'd be retiring in three years and he wanted to change his reputation before leaving the company.

Contrast Stan with Larry Webb. Larry is the CEO of John Laing Homes, headquartered in Newport Beach, California.

I've coached people at Laing from division presidents to executive assistants. Everyone there talks about Larry with surprising intimacy and affection, easily identifying his gifts and also his areas of development. They see him as smart, tough and fair and, across the board, they love working for him.

Larry works hard to cultivate this devotion. For example, he embraces the exposure his role affords him and does endless public speaking. "No matter what topic I'm talking about to a group," he says, "what I'm really trying to convey is that Laing is a fabulous place to work and that they should want to be part of the company." This strategy has succeeded. Prized professionals are wooed to Laing and always end up saying it's the best place they've ever worked.

What Larry has tapped into is the magic of intention. Actors know the power of intention. On the surface, a scene may be about a woman demonstrating an espresso machine's features to a gentle-



man but we can tell her real intention is to interest him in features of her own. Or a young man may appear to be flirting with an older woman but we can see his real intention is to slip her credit card out of her purse. What drives people's behaviors—and what we feel most powerfully—is not what people say or do but what they intend.

I often use an intention exercise with clients when they need to project more confidence. I'll ask them, "If you were at your very best, what words would you like people to use to describe you?" They'll say words like "presidential" or "expert." Then I'll get them to pound those words in their head like a drumbeat while they're rehearsing a short presentation. Suddenly, their intention to be presidential or expert gets tapped like a gusher and their confidence becomes tangible. Intention is transformational.

For most of us, intention is unconscious. We're not really sure *what* our intention is. And so people don't experience us as a force; they experience us in soft focus. That's one reason Larry Webb is so powerful: his intention to make John Laing Homes a fabulous place to work blazes out of him. And it's made Laing an award-winning homebuilder.

What do you want people to say about you? Select three or four words that will personify you in the workplace, then think of them as often as you can—while you're on the phone, listening at a meeting, chatting in the hallway, presenting weekly updates. Consciously keep those words front and center in your mind for a month or more and it will change you. And don't be surprised if, after another month, you begin to hear people use those words to describe you. I've seen it happen.

By the way, Stan did turn his reputation around. First, we explored how he came to be seen as intimidating. We discovered that, in compensating for overwhelming shyness, he'd developed behaviors that appeared harsh: he spoke no more than he had to; he came and went without engaging people; he hid in his office with the door closed. Those behaviors, born from his vulnerabilities, had an impact that was not at all what he'd intended.

To create his new impression we developed this strategy: twice a week his assistant scheduled a short informational meeting for him at the farthest edges of the campus. The rule was that he had to stay away from his office for at least an hour and, as he made his way back, he had to talk to as many people as possible. While he chatted—which was painful for Stan—he had to keep his intention ("I'm a nice guy") foremost in his mind.

By the time Stan retired, people were hugging him and telling him, sincerely, that they would miss him. Intention allowed him to create the legacy he wanted. It can for you, too.



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