

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Be Impeccable with Your Word ▶ 03/19/09

### **Trust erodes by over-promising**

At the end of our second session, Sharon told me she'd have her assistant call me to schedule our next appointment. When I hadn't heard from anyone a week later, I called the assistant myself and we set up the next coaching session.

Personally, I experienced Sharon as a kind person who was eager to please others. But as her coach I was concerned that her desire to please had taken her into dangerous waters: she was eroding trust by agreeing to more than she could deliver.

Her feedback had reflected that. One person summed it up with two words and an exclamation point: "Stop over-promising!"

### **Trust erodes by changing the truth**

Another client, Dave, got feedback that also reflected erosion of trust but for a different reason. The issue snapped into focus for me the day I heard him on the phone with Janine, the division president in Atlanta. He'd apologized to me about having to take the call during our session. I told him it was no problem and asked if he wanted me to step outside. He said, "No. Actually, I wish you could be on the line so you can hear how irrational she can be." Dave and I had discussed his relationship with Janine at length.

I thought Dave did well on the call. I wrote down some questions I had about things I'd heard, but in general I thought he'd avoided his big pitfalls of over-explaining and sounding defensive.

When I asked Dave about one particular exchange, he replied by telling me what Janine had said and then quoted his own response. His response sounded excellent except for one thing: he hadn't said anything like that. I knew. I'd been listening.

In a flash I finally understood what people were griping about. He didn't report accurately. Consequently, people couldn't trust what he said.



I began to doubt things he'd told me about his interactions with Janine. And I wondered what he told his direct reports about senior staff meetings. Was he passing on information accurately? And what about when he reported up to Janine about his staffers? Was he representing their successes and obstacles accurately? I was concerned this could be a derailment issue for Dave.

### **Be accountable for what you say**

In 1997, Don Miguel Ruiz wrote a small book called *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*. It quickly became a bestseller and remains so more than a decade later. Ruiz's four agreements are ones you make with yourself. He believes if you can do these four things, you will live a powerful, authentic, balanced life.

The first of the four agreements? "Be Impeccable With Your Word."

He writes: "It is through your word that you manifest everything. Regardless of what language you speak, your intent manifests through the word . . . [Your word] is the power you have to express and communicate, to think, and thereby to create the events in your life."

Sometimes I catch myself wanting to inflate a story. I am tempted to say, "I sent her four emails but never heard back from her" when in truth, I only sent two.

Do I really think four emails will further my case more than the two I actually sent? If so, I should have sent four. Why, I ask myself, am I not willing to accept my own truth? Isn't it good enough? And, I wonder, if I'm willing to inflate the truth about something as small as that, where do I stop?

Being impeccable with your word can mean any number of things. In business, it can mean:

- ▶ Being on time to meetings you've agreed to attend;
- ▶ Replying to emails within the agreed-upon standards of the culture;
- ▶ Completing monthly administrative reports on time with no errors;
- ▶ Attaching the document you said you're attaching;
- ▶ Giving credit where credit is due;
- ▶ Giving honest feedback;
- ▶ Explaining "what happened" without assumptions, interpretations or inflations;
- ▶ Resisting gossip.



### **Be impeccable with your word even with yourself**

In *The Four Agreements*, Ruiz says it is not only what we say to others that makes us less than impeccable with our word, it is also what we say to ourselves and our use of [negative self-talk](#).

For example, when Dave and I discussed his tendency to report inaccurately, he was defensive at first but moved quickly to self-criticism. Similarly, when Sharon and I talked about her tendency to over-promise, she shared what sounded like a familiar litany of all the ways she disappointed herself and others. Their self-condemnations simply swung the pendulum to another point on the circle. They were being less than impeccable with their word by reacting emotionally and not assessing their actions realistically.

### **Four ways to be impeccable with your word**

I challenged both Dave and Sharon to begin to hold themselves accountable for the impeccability of their word. I gave them four simple guidelines:

- 1 Don't over promise.
- 2 Don't change the truth.
- 3 Do what you say you will do.
- 4 Speak about others as if they're in the room.

Ruiz says this agreement—be impeccable with your word—is the most important one you can make with yourself and is also the most difficult. I think it is behavior that is vital as you travel along the road to *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

[Learn The Four Agreements](#)

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