

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Being Concise ▶ 04/24/08

Todd, Chief Information Officer at an international food distributor, had coaching goals that were absolutely clear. His boss, Richard, the CEO, said plainly, “Get him to talk shorter. He’s driving me nuts. If he can’t stop overtalking he’s going to have to find some place else to work!”

I knew Richard was exaggerating only a little. Being concise is a critically important skill—and extremely difficult to accomplish. As proof, I need only look at my clients’ coaching goals over the past fifteen years: the need to be more concise is one of the top five. And these aren’t the goals of budding young professionals; these are goals of extremely successful senior leaders in virtually every industry. They just can’t stop talking. What’s going on?

Todd’s situation is a perfect example to learn from.

When I asked him what he knew about this issue of “overtalking,” he said, “I really only do it when I feel strongly about something. Or when I want to make a point. Or when I feel like my expertise is being challenged. Or . . .”

I smiled and interrupted him. “You do it a lot.”

After a pause, he smiled, too, and said, “Yes, I guess I do.”

“What stops you from talking shorter?”

He thought about that, then said, “If I were to talk shorter I’d feel like I’m not giving the whole picture. It’s like I’m leaving out important information, like I’m not doing my job. If I don’t tell them everything I know I feel I’m withholding and . . .” He went on at length.

Todd’s feeling—that he just *had* to provide more information or he wouldn’t be doing his job—is common. It’s one of two reasons I hear from people when I ask why they don’t talk more succinctly. (I’ll get to the second reason in a minute.) But it’s faulty reasoning; it’s merely a way to justify less-than-executive performance. Here’s why.



Let's say you're making a recommendation that could have serious consequences for your division. It's completely natural, given the potential ramifications, that you'd want to explain all your thinking. But you're in your position because you've earned it. Since you're the expert we don't need to hear every data point and every alternative and every thought that occurred to you. In fact, providing *unrequested* explanations makes you sound defensive. That's why I often use the adage: "Short sounds confident." It does. I urge you: stop talking sooner and see if people *want* your explanations.

In response to Todd's feeling that he had to contribute or he wouldn't be doing his job, I asked, "But Richard is clear that he doesn't *want* your information. Why are you giving him data he doesn't want?" He didn't have a good answer.

Don't be like Todd. Stop talking sooner. *You* may feel incomplete and uncomfortable but most likely your listeners will be more than satisfied.

Here's an experiment you can try. Adopt the belief that you probably overtalk. (Most of us do.) Then, the next time you're explaining something and have even the faintest inkling you might be overtalking, simply stop speaking. See what happens. If people lean in and ask, "What were you saying?" then you had them hooked; finish your thought and *then* stop talking. But I'll wager that by the time you can stop speaking your listeners have begun to tune out. When you stop talking, the conversation will simply move on naturally. No one will feel the bumpy cut-off—except you.

So what's the second reason people give for overtalking? They're thinking out loud about something for the first time.

This is tough. If the topic is something you really haven't discussed before, it's almost impossible to be concise the first time through. In those situations, tell your listeners what you're about to do. Preface your remarks with phrases like, "Let me think out loud for a minute." Or, "I haven't formulated my thoughts about this yet but what comes to mind is . . .". Phrases like that help people know what to expect so you won't lose credibility when you ramble through your thoughts. But even in those cases I encourage you to stop talking sooner. Your listeners will be satisfied long before you feel you've explored all the corners of your thinking.

Short does sound confident. Rambling sounds subordinate. Expend the energy it takes to stop talking sooner. You won't achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™ until you can.



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