

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Leadership Behaviors in Meetings ▶ 05/23/07

Terri's feedback from her peers and superiors was consistent: people wanted a stronger presence from her. They all knew how smart she was, and they knew she was ethical and hardworking. But the feedback's message was clear: to be seen as a leader, she was going to have to develop a bigger presence.

Although not yet forty, Terri had an old school belief: if I keep my head down and my nose to the grindstone, people will notice and reward my efforts. She was not happy when I told her that that belief system got debunked back when my dad was still driving Ramblers.

Terri attended lots and lots of meetings. It was her biggest opportunity to create a new impression. When I asked about her behavior in meetings she rather defensively asserted that when she had something to say she said it, but that she wasn't a grandstanding blowhard like some people she knew.

"And when you speak up, are your ideas given weight and consideration? Do you feel you get heard?" I asked.

This fired her up. "Not always. A lot of times I'll suggest something and ten minutes later some one else will say the exact same thing and everyone will act like it's the first time it's been said. That makes me so mad!"

"And what do you say when that happens?"

"Well, what *can* I say? I just let it go. But it really burns me up."

We had a lot of work to do. Over the next several months, Terri and I focused on nine distinct behaviors she needed to display during meetings. They are:

Treat meetings like a contact sport

Meetings take energy. If you go into a meeting to listen and take notes, you're not really "in the game;" you're on the sidelines. Be a player. Gather your energy and project an aura of alert involvement.



Speak up early

Unless someone is making a formal presentation, get your voice heard during the first ten percent of the meeting. If it's a one-hour meeting, that means you need to speak up in the first *six minutes!* Show up ready to talk.

Speak up often

Imagine there's a court reporter in the corner taking down everyone's words. A transcript will be handed out at the end of the meeting. Unless there's a formal presentation being made, your name and the words you spoke should appear at least once *on every page*. You don't need to make a speech, but you can't just nod your head either. "Me, too." "Great idea." "What would that look like?" "I heard the same thing." Phrases like those get you on the record. They count. Say them.

Arms on the table

Pull your chair up to the table, push your pad towards the center, lean forward and get your forearms on the table. People should see you're energized and involved. Leaning back in your chair with your hands behind your head makes you look like you're waiting for the waitress to bring your Mai Tai. You're at the meeting to work. Look like it.

Interrupt when necessary

Terri often couldn't get a turn to speak. Here are three tricks to get your turn:

- 1 Lift your hand off the table, palm outward like a traffic cop. Keep it there until you have the floor. You're not raising your hand like in school but you are indicating you have something to say.
- 2 If the person speaking is not the meeting leader, make eye contact with the leader. Non-verbally tell her or him that you're next.
- 3 Vocalize. Short words thrown in between someone else's sentences are good indicators that you have something to say. You're not interrupting; you're indicating readiness.

Keep the ball if you want it

If you're talking, you can keep your turn, even when pausing, by saying things like, "Let me think out loud about that for a second." Often a slow "um" lets people know you're not done.

Take credit for ideas that are yours

If someone repeats your idea as if it is his or her own, respond. Say something like, "I really like the way you restated my idea, Ted." Or, "That's not exactly what I had in mind when I first stated that



idea, Ted. What I was thinking was..." Don't let people co-opt your ideas. That is not *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

Direct your eye contact

Get your eyes off your notes. Look at people when you talk. Your eye contact can be strategic. Should your comments be directed to the meeting leader only? To the person most likely to disagree with you? To an ally? To the group in general? Who will you choose to influence?

Make sure your face can be seen—especially your eyes

Terri had beautiful hair which she often wore down. When she leaned on the table, her hair hung forward. People sitting to her side could only see the tip of her nose. This is not good. If you have long hair, manage it so everyone can see your face, especially your eyes, even from the side.

Terri is not naturally gregarious. She really is more comfortable letting her work speak for her. While these behaviors created some initial discomfort for her, she stuck with them. Before too long, they became more familiar and more effective. And people began to get what they'd asked for—a bigger presence and more leadership from her. You can do it, too.

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