

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Speed of Thought ▶ 11/15/06

Brian called me early one morning as he drove to work. The day before, while he and I were working on a presentation for his company's investors, he'd come up with an analogy for the company that he thought was powerful. Incorporating it into the presentation would mean tweaking many slides but he was enthusiastic about it.

Now, on the phone, Brian was annoyed. James, his CEO, had seemed very cool about the new analogy. Brian quoted James as having said, "I guess we could say that." Exasperated, Brian said to me, "What the hell kind of reaction is that?"

"Brian," I said, "that reaction isn't about whether James thinks the analogy is good or bad. It's about the fact that the analogy is new. It's his reaction to change. He just doesn't have his hands around it yet."

Brian paused. Then he said, "Thanks." He paused again, then added, "I get it." Then he took in a breath and said, "Can I ask you about something completely different?" And he took off in a new direction.

Brian's "I get it" moment is why people talk about him as one of the brightest guys they know. His ability to quickly grasp a concept and move on displays fierce intelligence.

Contrast that with Anna, a marketing professional at a drug company. I've learned that about fifteen minutes before the end of a coaching session I need to let her know we're ending. It takes her about that much time to think out loud about what we've been talking about and to begin all her leave-taking behaviors. As I enter the elevator to descend to the lobby, she's still getting out her final ideas.

The difference between Brian and Anna is not IQ. Both are smart. The difference is what I call *Speed of Thought*. Its power is so profound that these days when people ask what one behavior I think is most important in conveying executive presence, I unfailingly respond, *Speed of Thought*. I've come to believe this one trait truly separates champions from mere mortals.



Let me be clear. *Speed of Thought* has absolutely nothing to do with “speed of speech.” It is not about talking fast. Nor is it about responding quickly when someone stops speaking. Nor is it about listening quickly and interjecting your ideas. None of those behaviors reflect *Speed of Thought*. They reflect impatience and a high orientation on one’s self. *Speed of Thought* is about alertness, attention and mental energy.

Larry’s a good example. I coached him over the phone for months before meeting him. Because his speed of thought was so high, he quickly became one of my most challenging, exciting and exhausting clients. He chewed through my material at an unprecedented rate. I worried that he’d leave me panting and depleted in his wake. Here’s how it went.

He’d get onto a topic and I’d listen. When I’d ask questions, he’d pop back crisp, concise answers giving me almost no time to form my next question. When I’d finally offer a coaching idea, he’d listen quietly. Then, just about the time most people begin to ask me questions, he’d say, “Okay. I got it.”

“Got it?” I’d think. “I’ve barely begun to *explain* it!” But after probing a little, I’d come to find out he really *had* gotten it. Not only had he understood the concept I’d explained, he’d already extrapolated how he could apply it and the benefits he’d reap and even the potential pitfalls. No wonder his boss had said to me in all seriousness that he fully expected to be reporting to him someday.

Developing *Speed of Thought* is like developing any other skill. First you have to choose it as a goal and get specific about what it will look like for you. Then you have to remember to put it in the front of your mind as many times a day as you can.

When striving to develop *Speed of Thought*, ask yourself the following questions before speaking:

“What does this information connect to?”

“What else do I need to know about this?”

“What do I already know about this?”

“Do I need to share what I know or can we move on?”

The irony about developing *Speed of Thought* is that in the beginning, focusing on it may actually slow you down. But keep your eyes on the prize. Building *Speed of Thought* is like going to the gym. At first it hurts and feels overwhelming. But with consistent application the improvement becomes quite pronounced.

Speed of Thought is a skill you want. It’s worth going to your mental gym every day for this.



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