

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Leadership & Self-Deception ▶ 12/03/09

### Hiding in plain sight

"This isn't rocket science!" is not a phrase you can use around Yolanda. The holder of two masters degrees and a PhD, she is a rocket scientist. Her upbringing in Puerto Rico was, she says, "old-fashioned." She learned to respect her elders and to be humble about her accomplishments. Those values were great preparation for her years in the Air Force; the hierarchy and structure suited her well.

In the private sector she didn't feel nearly as well matched. When she saw people develop friendly relationships with senior leaders, she labeled it inappropriate fraternizing. When people who did not deliver the best results received promotions, she labeled them ass kissers. To avoid that label herself, she put her nose to the grindstone, cranked out tons of top-notch work and remained distant from the executive offices.

One day, waiting at a gate at the airport, she saw the executive vice-president in charge of the division she'd joined a month earlier. She'd met him once right after she'd come on board. Standing there, it never crossed her mind that she could approach him and say hello. Rather, she kept her eye on him and, when they made eye contact, nodded to him respectfully. He nodded back.

### Putting herself in the box

I asked why she hadn't approached him. She said she was sure he had to be tired of people talking to him all the time, that he would know she was only "smooching up to him" and that she'd rather be known for her good work rather than for being a manipulator.

When I asked why talking with Ed at the airport would brand her a manipulator, she looked at me rather defiantly and said, "You think I should've gone over and said hello to him, don't you?"

"I don't think you should do anything, Yolanda. But it concerns me that you don't seem able to even consider it as a choice. That feels very limiting."

"I don't think it's limiting to be respectful to my superiors," she said. "I think it would limit me if I weren't!"



### **Defining the box**

Can you hear how Yolanda has put herself in a box? To her the box is invisible: she believes keeping her distance from Ed is respectful and humble—the values she learned in her family. But her self-limiting beliefs have her boxed in and she can't see her box any more than a fish can see the water it swims in.

Avery can't see his box either. Raised in an immigrant family, he learned that if he didn't stand up and fight for himself, he'd get disrespected and passed over. So his aggressive, defensive behavior in meetings feels completely justified to him. Rather than be a doormat!

Like Yolanda and Avery, Roberta is in a box, too. Brought up in a home with addiction and chaos, she strives for harmony at all costs. Conflict of any kind can make her physically ill. When people complain that she's indirect and slow to address issues, she says she "doesn't want to upset the apple cart." In her mind, her delays are actually serving people by calming the waters. She's in a box and can't see it.

It's our nature as human beings to live out the lessons we learned in our families and to justify the behaviors that evolve from those lessons. In many parts of our lives those lessons and behaviors serve us well. Inevitably, though, at some point, those same behaviors become self-limiting. This is not bad or shameful; it is simply part of our nature as humans.

### **Illuminating and revealing the box**

Are we condemned, then, to live inside self-limiting boxes that we're unable to see? No, we're not fish incapable of knowing we live in water. On the contrary, we hold the potential to become aware of the boxes that limit us. Engaging in any process of self-growth and development can begin to raise your awareness of your own box.

Here are three questions to help you do that.

#### **1 "How did I contribute?"**

At the end of a big success, we naturally congratulate ourselves and acknowledge what we did well. Sometimes we even celebrate our win. But when we fail, most of us focus on how other people got in our way and cut us off from our goal. Or we punish ourselves so harshly there's no possibility to learn. Asking, "How did I contribute to this outcome?" is a question that does not come automatically to most people. Learning to ask this question can begin to illuminate the walls of your box.



## 2 “Am I getting what I really want?”

Often we live our lives in a way that focuses our attention on this task or that event. It is rare that we have time to reflect on the patterns in our lives. Asking, “Am I getting what I really want?” helps you reflect on your sense of being, rather than your sense of doing. If you find you’re not getting what you think you want, ask yourself question number one: “How did I contribute to this outcome?” After all, it’s your life.

## 3 “What do I get out of this behavior?”

One school of psychology says we create systems that fulfill our concepts of ourselves. These are not always positive—or conscious. What does Yolanda get out of her self-limiting beliefs? She gets to be the good, obedient girl who honors her parents’ lessons of respect and humility. Avery, the combative son of immigrants, gets to “stand up for himself.” Roberta gets to avoid the pain of chaos.

Would Yolanda and Avery and Roberta immediately know the answer to the question, “What do I get out of my repeated behavior?” No, they wouldn’t. But if they asked themselves that question repeatedly over time, they might become aware of their patterns, and that could lead them to make different choices that would get them different results.

*Leadership and Self-Deception*, by The Arbinger Institute, is the best book I know on this topic. It is surprisingly friendly and inspiring with tools that are easy to grasp.

As leaders, we can’t help but bring our boxes with us into the workplace. And, like it or not, they are manifestly apparent to the people around us, as any good feedback report will reveal. Gaining awareness of your box diminishes its power over you and helps bring you within reach of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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