

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Driving Your Message Home ▶ 12/13/07

Roy, a director of quality at a major hospital, wanted some help with a difficult employee. For thirty minutes Roy told me about this fellow's explosive outbursts, his lack of punctuality at meetings, his failure to share information and a dozen other issues all of which were quite serious.

Finally I asked Roy, "If I went to this guy right now and asked him what your top three concerns are about his performance, what do you think he'd tell me?"

Roy thought, then shook his head and said he wasn't sure.

"OK, let me ask a different question," I said. "If he were going to get a better rating from you at next year's review, what three or four things would he have to change?"

He wearily shook his head, saying, "Golly, there are so *many* things!"

I told Roy I was concerned the employee was going to continue to fail because he, Roy, wasn't taking the time to make tough decisions about his own priorities. Since everything was equally important, there was no place to start and no way to measure success.

Think about your own pressures for a moment. Do you need to guide a project team? Improve your staff meetings? Direct a division toward next year's goals? Or, like Roy, do you need to develop an employee? No matter what your objectives are, if you want to hit your goal, people need to know clearly and consistently what's important to you.

In order to drive your messages home, do these four things:

- 1 Reduce your messages down to just a few core ideas
- 2 Wordsmith them until they're as catchy as can be
- 3 Say them over and over to people, the same way every time
- 4 Tell people why they're important

I experienced this in a wonderful way when I worked with a group of HR people who came from all over the country for a workshop. Although they rarely see each other, they responded like a



well-rehearsed chorus when I introduced this topic of repeated themes. Altogether they pointed to one man in the room and yelled, “John’s seven rules of compensation!” They laughingly acknowledged that John was a pain in the butt about his seven rules but they also acknowledged that over the years he had transformed their global organization by being single-minded in his focus on those seven things. What a win for that company. And for John!

Of course John didn’t create his clarity and conciseness overnight. Refinement requires reflection. In order to accomplish numbers 1 and 2 above, you’ll need to take some time and that’s a precious commodity these days. (Read more about taking time: [Accessing Your Best Thinking](#))

But even if you have taken the time to become clear and consistent, there are other obstacles that aren’t in your control. Here’s a simple example.

Recently I was presenting at an off-site event to a group of brilliant scientists. Their CEO had asked me to spend a day on the topic, “Creating Authentic Connections with People.” I opened the day stating the topic with those exact words. Throughout the day of exercises and discussions I reiterated those exact words four more times.

At the end of the day I asked them what the topic for the day had been. Twelve of these very smart men and women gave their answers and not one of them said the phrase, “Creating Authentic Connections with People.” Not one.

Why not? We’re talking about five little words here! What was in the way? Two things: first, their mental capacity and, second, how we listen to each other.

First, capacity. Their day had been full of experiential learning. Their capacity was pretty well used up learning about the topic. They had little capacity left to learn the *name* of the topic.

Second, how we listen. To be honest, I had not told them to listen for the phrase. I had repeated the phrase, yes, but I had not made it important to them; I had not drawn their attention to it. I had given them no *reason* to listen to it. So they’d listened to what *they* felt was important—which is how we all listen to the world around us. That’s why numbers 3 and 4 above are so critical.

Clark, on the other hand, is an example of an executive who addressed these issues very well.



The first time his secretary walked me to his office, I couldn't help but notice a large sheet of flip chart paper posted outside his door. Five bold bullet points were written on the chart. I stopped to read it before stepping into his office.

During our opening moments of chat, I asked him about that chart. "Those are the only things my people should be doing all year. If they're doing something else, they're doing the wrong thing. I want them to see it every time they walk by." I found out later he mentioned his five priorities at every staff meeting. Verbatim.

Wouldn't you like to think that if we polled his group they'd be able to quote those five bullet points accurately?

Do you want your messages to stick with people? Start by taking the time to figure out what's important and reduce your messages down to just a few core ideas. Then wordsmith them until they're as catchy as can be. Make slogans or memorable sayings. Then, say those phrases over and over, the same way every time. And be sure you talk about why they're important. Do those four things and you'll drive your messages home. That's *The Look & Sound of Leadership*TM in action!

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