

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Your Workspace as a Calling Card ▶ 12/14/05

I was invited to wait for the CFO in her office. The goal of my coaching, according to the newly installed CEO, was to “warm her up.”

Just standing in her office, having not met her yet, I understood why she needed warming up. There wasn't one personal item in the entire office. Not a picture that wasn't from the corporate art bin, not a diploma, not even a book that wasn't a work binder. The room was telling me that the person who worked here was well-defended and unavailable.

The flip side of that story is the young manager at one of the studios (you'll guess which one) whom I'd been coaching for a while. The goal had been to polish him for a promotion. Our work had gone well, especially getting him to be taken more seriously by his peers. Then I visited his workspace.

It was overflowing with all things Taz—as in The Tasmanian Devil, one of Bugs Bunny's archenemies. There were Taz lunch boxes and action figures and animation cells and toys. And he wondered why he'd had trouble being taken seriously!

In theatre and film, set decoration is an art. Nothing gets placed on a set by accident. The grimy curtains in the dank New Orleans apartment of “A Streetcar Named Desire” tell us as much about Stanley and Stella as the thousand unopened crates at the end of “Citizen Kane” tell us about Kane.

As an actor on the corporate stage, you are your own set decorator. Like it or not, your workspace speaks volumes about you. When someone pokes their head in on their way to a meeting, the space you've created influences their impression of you. And after you've gone for the day, your space continues to tell your story. Is it telling the right one?

Step outside your workspace. Look back with a stranger's eyes, without attachment. What portrait is painted by what's there? If you were looking to hire someone, would you hire the person who created that space?

Once I was one of three coaches working with a particularly challenging executive. When we compared notes, we found we'd all noticed a small snapshot in an unassuming plastic frame off to



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one side of her office. The picture showed her on top of a formidable mountain. Clearly reaching this peak was a triumphant achievement.

Interestingly, we each had different opinions as to what the picture meant about her psychologically, but we all agreed that putting it there was an intentional—and mostly positive—action on her part: we'd all noticed it and were now talking about it.

Not everyone will interpret your setting exactly the way you intend, just as not everyone will interpret your *actions* exactly the way you intend. That shouldn't stop you from being intentional and choosing with care each item you make room for on your stage. And what you remove!

And the cold CFO? She told me plainly she wasn't interested in making any personal changes. Within a year she took an exit package. Was her austere office her undoing? Not by itself. But it certainly was a factor in how she was perceived. As your space is about you.

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