



The Look & Sound *of* Leadership™ SINCE 1990 *Executive Coaching Tips*

PERFORMING LIKE A TED TALKER

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AUGUST 2017

Delivering a top-notch presentation requires you to master your ideas. Of course! But even more, you need to master yourself. Your audience won't be able to lock onto you unless you are "in focus." This month's coaching conversation shows you how to get "in focus."

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Body Issues

Caroline, in London, wanted to know what to do with her body.

Caroline was one of eight division heads who would speak at the company's annual global management meeting. The CEO told them they each would talk for eighteen minutes – just like a TED Talk. And, she said, she wanted each talk to be as riveting as an actual TED Talk.

The division heads asked for help and got paired up with me. Eventually, I would work with them each individually, but this was our 90-minute group kick-off call.

We had discussed how to rehearse, how to build ideas while rehearsing, and whether or not to memorize. (You can read that conversation [here](#).) That was when Caroline, admittedly nervous about delivering any speech at all, asked how they could rehearse their bodies.

I asked what she meant.

"I just can't imagine walking onto that stage and looking out at all those people," she said. "I'm not



worried about what I'm going to say. I can figure that out. But actually being out there? That's a yawning black chasm to me."

Thinking I might have an idea to help, I asked, "Where is the meeting happening?"

"Vegas," said Marissa from Cupertino.

"Is it there every year? Do you know what it's going to look like?" I asked.

Adam in Phoenix said, "We had it there two years ago."

"It's massive, Tom," said Caroline. "The stage is enormous. Huge screens hanging behind you like a world summit."

"It *is* a world summit," said Cloé from Montreal.

"If you can picture all that, Caroline," I said, "then it doesn't have to be a black chasm. It doesn't have to be scary."

"Easy for you to say!" she said.

"We can work on this, just the two of us. I think visualizing the event will help you."

"Wouldn't it help us, too?" asked Kurt.

"Oh, of course," I said. "Do you all want the crash course on visualization?"

Crash course visualization

They were energetic with their yes.

I said, "The benefit of visualization is that you totally trick your brain. Here's why. When we're in a new situation, our brains have to process more information than in a familiar situation. Like when you drive somewhere for the first time. Doing new things takes up bandwidth in our brains. But after that first time, you need less bandwidth to do the same thing.



“Well, when you visualize an event before it happens,” I continued, “then, when it really *does* happen, you trick the brain into thinking it’s not the first time. You gain capacity. And you quiet the fear.”

I went on, asking, “Will you have a chance to rehearse in the real space?”

“We have in the past,” said Tracy from Hong Kong. “Not much time – maybe an hour for all of us – but we’ll get to see the space.” Tracy was the most experienced presenter of the group.

“If you can,” I said, “get the people there to make the space real for you. Ask them to turn on the real lights they’ll be using. The real sound. The real microphone. Get it as real as it can be. Ask for help even if the folks in the venue are grumpy. It’s their job. They’ll get over it. Besides, it’s your butts out there. Anything that will make things seem more familiar on the day increases your brain’s capacity.”

“And what do we use that capacity for?” asked Caroline.

“People, for one thing.” I said, “Can I do a quick visualization with you?”

They said sure.

Picture this

“OK,” I said. “Picture yourself at the rehearsal. It’s the day before the event. You’re standing on stage.”

“Oh, god,” groaned Caroline. The others laughed.

“All the lights are on,” I continued. “And they are *bright*. Blinding. Even when you squint, you can barely make out the carpet down there where the tables are going to be tomorrow.”

I spoke slowly, adding one element at a time. “Now, picture tables all set up all around the floor. Each one has a linen cloth over it. And there are chairs around every table. And in every chair is a person. For example, right down front, picture Deborah,” I said, naming their CEO.

“Now picture your boss in another chair. And your boss’s boss. Picture your peers – the ones you like and the ones you don’t. And over there are your direct reports.”



“Is any one else getting the willies?” whispered Caroline.

“Actually, I like it,” said Kurt quietly. “I don’t know why, but that calmed me down.”

Pre-program feelings

“That’s what visualization does,” I said.

Marissa said, “An old boss of mine taught me a visualization that I use all the time. It’s a little different because it’s about a feeling. What I picture is me, waking up in bed on the morning of the event – whatever the event is. And I picture my waking feeling as this happiness, this certainty, that today is going to be a fantastic day. Everything about the day is going to go well. I visualize that over and over, and then, on the day, that’s pretty much how I feel. I am so happy!”

“Sounds great,” said Adam.

“I wonder sometimes if I’m doing the opposite,” said Tracy.

“The opposite of what?” I asked.

“Opposite of visualizing,” she answered. “When I’ve got a big event, it’s like I’m blind to anything that isn’t about the presentation. I’m laser focused. Like if the assistants are losing their minds backstage? It’s got nothing to do with me. Even when something *does* have to with me, it can’t shake my focus. The only thing in my sights is that performance.”

I asked, “And that’s the opposite of visualization because . . . ?”

“Because it’s like I have these giant blinders on. I don’t see anything if I don’t want to see it.”

Adam laughed, “Actually, that’s like visualization on steroids!”

“It’s like game day,” said Kurt. “There are no distractions on game day.”

Marissa said, “Hey, guys, let’s hear from Tom.”



“No, this is great,” I said. “Clearly I’m not the only expert here.”

Silent until ‘in focus’

Cloé said, “If we’re talking about bodies, here’s what I’d like to know. When do I start talking? It’s a long walk to get out there and everyone can see you the whole time. Do I start talking while I’m walking?”

Marissa laughed, saying, “Has anyone noticed that everyone giving a TED Talk starts stock still, already in place? I always wonder what happened two minutes before. Was it a shit show?” The group laughed.

“What about us, Tom? Do we just walk out silently to some magic spot and start talking?” asked Kurt.

I said, “If the venue’s that big, somebody will have that figured out and will tell you what to do. But, no matter what they tell you to do, you’re going to follow the same rule you follow when you’re standing in front of a conference room.”

“And which rule is that?” asked Cloé.

“Until you’re in focus, don’t talk. Get in focus.”

“Ooh, I like the sound of that,” said Caroline. “What does it mean?”

“What does ‘in focus’ mean?” I said, “Well, focus starts with you, of course. To keep me listening to you, you need to be focused in your mind and focused in your body. They go together. So if you are up there and your body is swaying, or fidgeting, or doing a little box step, you do not appear focused. That makes it harder for me to stay tuned into you.”

“But it really can be distracting up there,” said Tracy.

It’s about the people

“As it can be in front of a board room,” I said. “It always comes down to the same thing. It has to be about the people. You have to look at them. You have to talk with them. You have to connect to them. That’s what gets you in focus.”



“But there are many more of them,” said Caroline, as if it just weren’t fair.

“True,” I said. “But that’s no reason not to talk to them. You know how to talk to people. So talk to the people in the room. Don’t create artificial behavior.”

There was silence. Then Marissa said, “That same boss who gave me the wake-up feeling? She did what you’re talking about, Tom. We had these enormous global meetings – and in those days, the technology was really primitive – but she always sounded just like herself. She sounded the same as every Monday in her staff meetings and like she sounded on the phone with her kids. She was amazingly natural in every setting.”

Caroline spoke. “So you’re saying I shouldn’t be thinking about my gestures? Which I was, everybody. I confess, I was.”

I laughed, saying, “Unless you’re an athlete or a dancer who is used to programming your body, no, I would not encourage you to isolate parts of your body or script out actions. ‘Oh, I want to gesture this way about that.’ ‘Oh, on this slide I’ll look over there.’ I think it’s better to trust your body to act naturally.”

“Well, I can act naturally and hyperventilate, Tom!” Caroline said to more laughs. She continued. “No, I’m serious. When you say natural behavior, that gives me a broad brush to paint with! How am I supposed to know what’s going to be the most effective?”

“How about if I share a secret with you?” I asked.

“Juicy, I hope!” quipped Kurt.

“Here’s how I get in focus,” I said. “When I’m speaking, I imagine that I have a delicious secret. What is it? It’s whatever I’m going to talk about. And I make sure I love my secret. It’s wondrous. And I can’t wait to share it with you, because you’re going to love it, too.”

“It’s like my imagining the ‘best day ever’,” said Marissa.

“Visualization!” said Adam.



“So I wanted to talk about how to rehearse my body, and you’re telling me it’s all in my head!” said Caroline.

I laughed but she was right: focus in your mind creates focus in your body. Visualization rockets you towards *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

Core Concepts:

■ **Rehearse in the space**

Take the space in. Make it as real as you can. Rehearse with every element: lights, sound, projection, clicker, microphone, etc.

■ **Visualize the space**

If you can’t get into the space, take time to picture the space in detail. Imagine as much as you can. Repeated attentive visualization has infinite payoff.

■ **Visualize the people**

Don’t scare yourself. Don’t picture unhappy people. Picture them curious.

■ **No distractions on game day**

It’s your ass out there. You’re responsible for your performance.

■ **Get focused**

Be still. Feet as far apart as your shoulders. Feel the floor beneath your feet. Then breathe. And look at them. And talk to them.

■ **Love your content**

What you have to tell them is delicious. Relish doling it out.



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