



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

THE SOUND OF LEADERSHIP AND OF MANAGEMENT

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Last month's coaching conversation explored the differences between leadership and management, as well as a skill set they share. This month, Tom and Reiko question whether leadership actually sounds different from management. Spoiler alert: they do.

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Barking management

Reiko and I were exploring the differences between [leadership and management](#). During our conversation, she had wondered whether the two actually sound different.

I said to her, "You seem pretty comfortable in both camps, Reiko. Does your version of leadership sound different from your version of management?"

She gave a sad laugh. "Yeah! When I think about management, I think of barking. 'Do this!' 'Do that!' Bark. Bark. Bark."

"You're serious?" I asked.

"Dead serious! You remember we said management exists to address complexity? Well, all that complexity is hard for me. I get cranky doing that kind of work. Bark, bark, bark."

"What would you do differently?" I asked.



“Oh! Going to put it on me?” She stopped to think. I loved Reiko’s willingness to think without knowing where it would take her. “So we’re trying to manage complexity, right? Oh! Well, here’s one! I’d run my meetings differently.”

“Differently how?” I asked.

Stay on topic

“We get off topic. That’s horrible for managing complexity. You can’t get anything done.”

“When things drift off topic, how soon do you notice?” I asked.

She screwed up her face and shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t know. I notice when I notice.”

“I ask because I’ve actually been thinking about that question for years.”

“You have?” she laughed incredulously.

I laughed, too. “Yes, I have.”

I explained, “I have this idea about noticing when topics change. I imagine that every conversation, like yours and mine right now, and everyone else’s everywhere, are being transcribed. And that when things go off topic, later, we could order up a copy of the transcript. And we could see the actual instant someone popped out of the folder that we all had been in together and jumped us somewhere else.

“And the game I’ve been playing with myself over the years has been to see if I can spot the jump in real time. When it’s actually happening. So now, when I’m in a meeting like yours and it goes off topic, a lot of times I *can* see it as it’s happening. I don’t get dragged along with it.”

“And what do you do?” she asked.

“If it’s mine to facilitate, I usually let it go a little. And I calculate. Is the road we’re on now more valuable than the road we *were* on? If so, okay. I make the choice to change topics. Maybe I even point it out.”



“And what would *that* sound like?” she asked.

I modeled it. “Hey, I know we were just talking about that report, and we’ll get back to that. But this feels more important right now, so let’s really dive in.”

She raised her eyebrows. “That’s a good prompt. And it certainly wouldn’t be me barking.”

“Probably not,” I agreed.

“Boy, I’d really have to pay attention to catch those changes in topic. But you know something I have gotten good at noticing?”

Appreciation first

“What?” I asked.

“Good work. I have learned to put appreciation first. Oh, man, it’s taken me so long. But it’s made a huge difference for me.”

“Tell me about that,” I said.

“Well, you asked what my version of leadership sounds like? And for me leadership is getting people to care about their work, right? I began putting appreciation first.”

“Because you believed it would make people care?”

She nodded yes, looking for words. Then, breathing out, she said, “I review work all the time. In meetings. At peoples’ desks. At my conference table. I’m always reviewing work. And I used to approach reviewing as if I wasn’t doing my job unless I was the super detective finding all the flaws. So that’s how I looked at the work. Find the flaws! All this other stuff that’s *not* a flaw? All this good work? Why talk about *that*?”

“But I realized,” she continued, “that if I wanted people to care about their work, I’d better talk about all



the things that *weren't* wrong. And once I started looking, I didn't have to make stuff up. There was plenty of good work. I began talking about those things *first*. It's made a big difference."

"Were you right? Do people care more about their work now that you're putting appreciation first?"

"Maybe," she said. "There's something else I do to make them care about their work."

Laying out the map

"What's that?" I asked.

"I'm not sure what to call it. It's like laying out a map for people." She gestured, as if smoothing a sheet. Then she said, "I remember in one of my early jobs, I was doing okay. Or I thought I was. And my boss, who was about my age but had been there way longer, she sat me down one day and explained our work to me. She explained what the company really did. And what the different divisions did. And how our work fit into all that. She gave me the whole layout of what was going on around me. And it was like suddenly flying over a forest I'd been stuck in. It felt like everything changed for me after that. Like I was smarter."

"So what does that sound like now?" I asked.

"I try and do that for others. I try and layout the map. So I am very intentional about passing on information. My peers know a lot about what goes on over here. And I pass information up to Scott from my team's meetings," she said, referring to her boss "and I pass information from his meetings down to my folks."

"People don't always think of passing information laterally," I said, admiringly.

"Well, it's to my benefit if I can layout a map for my peers, too, right?"

I said, "That idea of passing information downward to your team? I often use the analogy that the leader is up in the crow's nest of a tall-masted ship. Being way up there, up above the deck, she can



see to a much farther horizon than anyone else. So her view is special. And I say, don't assume anyone else can see your horizon. You have to tell them what's out there or they won't know. And they want to know what's out there. They're better when they know what's out there."

"Right! But I'll go you one better," she said.

"Oh, good!"

"Telling them about the horizon is important, yes. But that only tells them where they are on the map. You have to tell them *why*, too. If you don't tell them why, the where doesn't become important enough for people to care about."

"Well said!"

"So what does your version of leadership sound like?" she asked.

Open-ended questions

I took a breath, deciding which skill to talk about first. "Well, if leadership is about change..."

"...which never ends..." she threw in.

"And if it's also about how people feel, here's an idea. This is something I'd like to hear from more leaders. Open-ended questions."

"Really? Why?"

"I use them a lot, Reiko. I see all the time how a conversation completely changes just by asking an open-ended question. People respond to them completely differently. Sometimes I wonder if it's in our wiring."

"Can you give me an example?" she asked.



“Sure! Easy! So I’m going to ask you two questions. And I don’t want you to answer either of them. I just want you to notice where your brain goes. OK?”

“OK!” She smiled, liking the game.

“Here’s question one. ‘Do you have any questions about what we’re talking about?’” I paused a second. “Question two. ‘What questions do you have about what we’re talking about?’”

“Ha! That second one is completely different!”

“Because?”

Close-ended questions

“Because I actually considered whether or not I had any questions!”

“And the first one?” I asked.

“Oh! No! I didn’t consider for one second whether I had any questions. The right answer was clearly, ‘No!’ Oh my gosh, that’s horrible!”

I laughed. “No babies with the bath water, please! Close-ended questions are not evil doers. They have their place.”

“Oh! They do! Do you know when I use them?” She shrugged as if the answer were obvious. “When I manage! ‘When. How many. Yes/no. Is it this. Is it that.’ I use those all the time.”

“What an interesting idea,” I said. “That close-ended questions might belong more to management and open-ended questions might belong more to leadership.”

Then she said, “Why are open-ended questions so hard?”



The open-ended hurdles

“Two reasons, I think. First, it’s hard to get comfortable framing questions that way. I don’t know if it’s the English language or our American culture, but putting a question into the construction of an open-ended question is hard work. I know for me it took a lot of work.”

“You’re saying it’s not just hard to speak them, it’s hard to *think* them in the first place.”

“That’s better than what I said, so I’ll agree.” I said.

“What’s the second thing that makes open-ended questions tough?”

I looked at her without speaking, then held the silence. Finally, I said, “That. Stillness. Comfort in silence. Waiting. Listening. Not talking. Not even in your head. Getting still. All that’s a bitch.”

“I’d have to go on a retreat to do all that!” Then, more seriously, “Why is silence part of asking an open-ended question?”

I took a breath. “Open-ended questions can sound like a threat. Suppose I ask, ‘What got you to that decision?’ It’s a good, legitimate open-ended question, right? ‘What got you to that decision?’”

“Sounds good,” she nodded.

“Would you also agree, that, possibly, that same question could sound like a challenge? ‘What got you to that decision?’”

She smiled. “Oh. Yes. I see.”

“Stillness helps take the challenge out of an open-ended question. Not a big dramatic pause. But a comfort. An interest. A willingness to listen. Ask the question and stop talking. If you asked me an open-ended question in that way, I might actually try and answer it.”

“And you might just care about your work,” she said, as if scoring a point. Then, using her fingers to count,



she said, “OK. I said put appreciation first. What else did we list as the sounds of leadership?”

“The map,” I said.

“Right. Layout the map,” she said. “Tell them *where* they are on the map. Then tell them *why* they’re there.”

Thinking we were done, I gave a clap. “That was good!”

“Wait! I want the management pieces, too. Stop barking. Slow down.”

“Stay on topic. Or at least notice when the topic changes.”

“Right,” she said. “And get conscious of close- and open-ended questions.”

Reiko and I agreed that all those behaviors, even the ones under the management banner, ultimately led to [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).

Core Concepts:

- Management exists to address complexity
- Sounds of Management:
 - Stay on topic
 - Listen for, and eliminate, barking
- Leadership exists to help people through change...which never ends
- Sounds of Leadership:
 - Appreciation first
 - Layout the map
 - Open-ended questions



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