

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Compelling Openings ▶ 08/09/05

A Director at a global software company got promoted to Senior Director. His group was expanding from six to 28 people.

The day before his kick-off meeting I asked, “What’s the first thing you’re going to say to your new team tomorrow?” In reply, he rambled a kindly but out-of-focus sentiment of welcome.

A huge missed opportunity.

For a moment, imagine you’re a participant at an event. What do you expect at the start? A generic welcome and all the usual “blah-blah-blah,” right? What you don’t expect is a message that leaps out and grabs you. When you’re the speaker, use your opening to capture hearts and minds.

Here are three different ways you can create gripping openings plus one critical technique you should never leave out.

1 Tell a story

The words “Let me tell you a story” never fail to stir people. Your story should either illustrate behaviors you want people to emulate or be an example of behaviors you want people to avoid. If you’ve got a story to tell, don’t spend time introducing it, just launch right in. (Specifics on crafting stories in [Story—The Ultimate Persuader](#).)

2 Express a hope or a vision

Without preamble, articulate a specific goal you want the group to achieve in the future. Even better, talk about the feeling you want them to evoke in others or to feel themselves. Don’t dive into the details of milestones or measurement yet. Think of this opening as setting direction. Stay at a high level and chart the course. (Specifics on staying at a high level in [Sounding Executive](#).)

3 Create a metaphor

What images come to your mind when you pause to reflect on the group or the event? (You do pause and think about the group or the event, don’t you?) Using metaphors is a documented behavior of charismatic leaders. Metaphors become the images people bring to mind when the going gets tough. (Specifics at [Speaking for Yourself](#).)



Any one of these three techniques will jump-start your opening. Don't try to use all three at once.

Caveat: people who have a high intuition quotient will find these three methods quite natural. If you're fact-driven, search out a colleague or companion to help you craft a memorable opening that's not so linear.

So what's the one critical technique you should never leave out?

Always answer your listeners' unspoken question, "Why should I listen to this?" No matter how you open, be sure to tell people why you're telling them whatever it is you're telling them. Don't assume your story or vision or metaphor is so obvious it needs no commentary. Put your stamp on your opening by telling them what YOU mean by it all. (Specifics at [Speaking for Yourself](#).)

Finally, don't save these skills for a kick-off meeting or a quarterly event. Try them at weekly staff meetings or even at the beginning of one-on-ones with your direct reports. There's an opening moment every time you talk with someone; give yours *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

Metaphor examples:

Each stage of this process is like a rung on a hand-made ladder: it might not be evenly spaced or perfectly square, but each one was crafted with extreme care and not one of them can be skipped without causing trouble later.

When the guy next to you accidentally punches a hole in the boat, it is absolutely unacceptable to stand up and point and say, "He did it!" We're all in this together. The only acceptable reaction is to get down, get wet, and start bailing while he gets busy plugging the hole.

The metaphor the Director used successfully with his new group was this:

"When I was a sophomore in high school our district built a new building. I remember our first day of classes in there. Everything was brand new, unmarked, full of potential. It was very exciting to be breaking new ground. But it was all a little sterile, too. It didn't feel lived in. No one knew the secrets of the place or how things really worked or even if we liked it or not. That's how I feel today. We're full of tons of potential AND we're really brand-spanking new. I want us to get 'lived in' really quickly. Here's how." And on he went.



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