

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Listen Without an Agenda ▶ 02/15/06

At 31, with her MBA under her belt, Patricia was doing well. In the male-dominated world of warehouse management, she was a team leader doing systems installations.

She also had some challenges. She was barely 5'4" and looked like a high school cheerleader. "People always call me 'perky' and I hate it," she said. "That's why I went from Patty to Patricia but I still get treated like a little girl."

Patricia had worked hard to be taken seriously. She'd learned to be the sharpest knife in the drawer, the fastest person with an answer, the smartest mind in the room. All this compensating had made Patricia a dynamic expert but she'd also developed some behaviors that were pissing people off, which is why I was working with her.

When Patricia spoke, she was usually crisp and concise and stayed on track. Her problem wasn't when she was speaking; it was when she wasn't. Here's an example.

I had just begun to tell her I'd like to work with her on a behavior I call *Listen Without Agenda* when she jumped in and said she knew she was a bad listener, that it had always been tough for her, that it had gotten worse in grad school, and, besides she wasn't really sure it was possible for anyone to truly listen without an agenda. If I'd needed proof that she had trouble listening, that was it!

We all have trouble listening. We finish people's sentences. We talk when others are still talking. Or we're silent but aren't really listening: we're formulating our next thought, waiting for any little gap so we can jump in.

Listen Without Agenda requires three mental adjustments. First, you have to believe that when it's your turn to speak, your ideas will be available to you. Young practitioners struggle with this because they're not sure they'll deliver the goods when their turn comes. Watch and you'll see them urgently trying to listen while mentally constructing answers at the same time. This doesn't work. As a leader, you need to relax. You know your stuff. You can listen without an agenda.



The second adjustment is a willingness to go last instead of automatically going first. Here's a way to think of this. In the movie, "Shrek," we laugh at Donkey because he's so blatantly desperate to be liked. At one point, he repeatedly leaps into the air like a four-legged NBA prospect begging, "Pick me! Pick me! Pick me!" Poor Donkey.

The need to consistently contribute first has that same desperate feeling to it. In reality, the wisest person in the room can wait patiently for his or her turn. And while others speak, that person listens and gets wiser. Or asks questions and get wiser. When you're willing to go last, you shift from needing to make your mark first to wanting to make your mark endure. Go last. And listen while you wait.

The third adjustment you need in order to achieve *Listen Without Agenda* is to allow people to speak their own thoughts in their own way. This requires that you accept, deep in your gut, that people are different than you. You can't control that. Don't try. Allow people to express themselves without jumping in to correct them or split a hair or debate them. Let them speak their ideas in their own way: it doesn't lessen your ideas at all.

Here's the recap—

To *Listen Without Agenda*, requires three mental adjustments:

- 1 Feel confident in your own expertise. When it's your turn, you will do fine.
- 2 Go last. Listening to others can only make you smarter.
- 3 Allow people to speak their thoughts in their own way. This doesn't diminish your contributions at all.

Think this is easy? Here's a small exercise. See if you can listen all the way to the end of other people's ideas without being distracted by your own ideas. It's harder than you think! Good luck!

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