

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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The Flexible Leader ▶ 02/07/13

Tale of Two Employees

Martha, a director at an entertainment company, was struggling to manage two of her direct reports. "I'm not sure why, Tom, but I'm not succeeding with either of them."

First she told me about Don, a smart young fellow who'd started 18 months earlier.

Martha said Don consistently made errors when creating the reports that were his primary responsibility. "These aren't little errors, Tom. He gets a major piece of data wrong at the start, then spends hours building on that flawed data. He should be able to catch that stuff by now."

Then she told me about Lorena.

Lorena was such a super performer, she'd almost become her own department. She had an enormous amount of responsibility and she executed flawlessly. Hers was not an issue of performance; hers was an issue of attitude.

Lorena was openly contemptuous of Martha. During their weekly one-on-one meetings, Lorena sat tight-lipped, hardly talking, as if she could barely stand being in the same room with Martha. In team meetings, whenever Lorena answered a question from Martha, she would look at someone else while responding. Martha was concerned that if she didn't manage Lorena's insubordination, it could infect the whole team.

Assessing her own style

After hearing about Don and Lorena, I asked Martha to tell me how she was managing each of them.

"I do what I can, Tom, but I'm spread thin. I've told each of them my concerns, but beyond that, I manage them the way I manage everyone. I try to be available. I have weekly one-on-one meetings with them both—although Lorena usually cancels hers and I'm getting a little tired of that."



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"My one-on-one time with Don isn't productive at all," she continued. "He needs so much help, we spend all our time going over his work at a microscopic level. It's really frustrating. He should be doing better."

I summarized, "So your goal for Don might be to improve his performance. Your goal for Lorena might be to improve her self-management. And you think you're managing them both pretty much the same way. Did I get all that right?"

She said I did.

So I asked whether Lorena's self-management goal seemed similar to Don's performance goal. She said no, they felt quite different.

I agreed, then asked, "If their goals aren't related, is it important that you manage them the same way?"

"It is to me," she said. "I've been managing a long time and it usually works. But not with these two!"

When she invited my suggestions, I asked if I could completely change the subject and tell her about two coaching clients of mine. Unlike her direct reports who had goals that were miles apart, these two clients had goals that were actually fairly similar.

Too rough and too tumble

First I told her about my client named George.

George was head of North American sales for an oil and gas company. His boss, the division president, described George by saying, "In a rough-and-tumble business, George is way too rough and way too tumble. But I've talked with him about the coaching and he's ready to go."

When I spoke with George, he was gung-ho about the coaching. He encouraged me to contact his guys in the field and the execs in the corporate office to get feedback about him. I did and found many of them extremely cautious when they talked about George. It seemed that retribution and bullying were often-used weapons in George's management arsenal.

The first time he and I met for coaching, I brought him his feedback report. People had acknowledged his skills and experience, but they were also direct about how intimidating he could be. It was clear: people wanted him to change.



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After he read the report, George debated the feedback and denied the accusations—not only that first day, but over the course of many sessions.

Sharp-elbowed superstar

Then I told her about my client named Suzanne.

Suzanne was 34 when our coaching began and was already running two business units. No small feat in a worldwide financial institution where her peers were all older—and male. She was clearly a high performer.

In her feedback, people praised her brilliance and cheered her meteoric rise. But they were not shy about saying she was uncollaborative, territorial and defensive. Her report had two phrases that were repeated, word for word, more than once: “She doesn’t play nice in the sandbox” and “She has sharp elbows.” It was clear: people wanted her to change.

I brought Suzanne her feedback report at our first session. She read it slowly, then asked if she could read it again. I said of course. She went to her desk, retrieved a red pen, and spent the next ten minutes completely focused on the report. When she was done, she closed it with finality, looked at me, and said with quiet determination, “OK. What do I have to do?”

All the same?

At the end of those two stories, Martha raised her eyebrows. “Wow, they’re really different! I thought you said they were the same.”

“Their goals are the same, don’t you think? They both have to play nicer in the sandbox.”

“OK, the goals might be the same” she conceded, “but the *people* sure are different!”

“I couldn’t agree more. But, hey, since their goals were so closely related, I coached them pretty much the same.”

“No way!” she said aghast. Then she laughed. “You did not!”

I laughed, too. “No, I certainly did not. If I had, I wouldn’t have succeeded with either of them. But why is that any more outrageous than you managing Don and Lorena the same way and thinking you’ll succeed with either of *them*?”



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That led us into a conversation about flexing your style as a manager.

Situational Leadership

I asked her if she knew a management theory called [Situational Leadership](#). First promoted by Ken Blanchard, Situational Leadership proposes that every leader be able to display four distinct behavioral styles of management. The styles range from a very engaged, hands-on management style, to a hands-off, delegating style.

The style a manager uses is not determined by his/her preference. Rather, the style is determined by *the needs of the person they are managing*. People at different stages of their development need different styles of management.

That sounds like common sense, doesn't it? But many leaders really only have one style of managing and they stick to it. Although Martha wasn't rigid, she really only had one style as a manager. And she was proud of it!

We began to talk about how she might manage Don and Lorena differently, aligning her style to their needs.

Martha wondered out loud if Lorena might not need one-on-one meetings every week. Maybe once a month.

I agreed. Why not give her lots of leeway if she was already executing flawlessly?

Then she said, "I think Don needs more training and clearer ways to measure his work." She thought, then said, "I can't train him myself, but I can make it happen."

Management becomes strategic

Over the next months, Martha began to change her management style with both Don and Lorena. One day she told me, "Thinking about which style I'm going to use with each of my direct reports—everyone, not just Don and Lorena—isn't actually thinking about me at all. I'm really focusing on them and what they need. It makes me manage from a much higher level. It feels more strategic. I like it."

As Martha changed, three interesting things happened.

First, Lorena began to thaw. The looser rein felt like increased trust to her, so she thawed. A little.

Second, when Martha provided Don with the support he needed, he settled down and began to improve. Their one-on-one time became much more valuable.

Third, she had extra time to do other things—a benefit she cherished.

Martha had to be diligent, though. It was not yet second nature for her to consciously choose her style of management with each person. But, when she did, she found herself amazingly close to *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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I've been invited to deliver a TEDx Talk in April. I've been asked to speak about feedback.

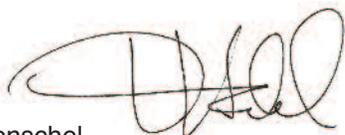
To open the talk, I'd like to use information gathered from you, the subscribers of the Executive Coaching Tips.

Would you fill in the blank—or complete the sentence—that begins: "Feedback is..."

Whatever leaps to your mind is what would be most helpful.

Please email your reply [here](#). And please identify yourself with a first name and a city and country.

Thanks so much for your participation and help!



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