

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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Casual comments create chaos

Once again, executives were complaining about Sarah's group.

A new line of products had been submitted to Sarah's development group and the only thing that had come back was chaos.

During our conversation about coaching Sarah, her boss said, "I need her to get her group under control."

When I asked him to tell me a little about her management style, he said, "Sarah's a creative type. That's why she's so great at her job. And we love her. But creative types don't always make the best managers, do they?"

Asked to elaborate he said, "Her brain has a million ideas shooting off all the time. And that's great for brainstorming, but that's what happens when she talks, too. She says all sorts of things that just aren't appropriate."

He told me how, during a meeting with her peers, the poor performance of one employee was mentioned. Sarah said the company "should just fire his sorry ass." That had riled enough people that HR had come to talk with her.

Another time she'd shared confidential information about the probable elimination of a project that her team was involved in. Many hours of many meetings over many days were spent controlling the damage from that comment.

Yet another time, in a public hallway, she'd told a colleague that, on an upcoming international trip, she was going to take her team to a particular karaoke bar "and get 'em so wasted we'll all probably miss our flight home." That comment ripped through the division so fast that the legal department issued a memo about appropriate behavior during travel.



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Tentatively I said, "It sounds like Sarah's group creates a lot of chaos because *Sarah* creates a lot of chaos."

Her boss sighed wearily, "That's pretty accurate."

Stubbornly self-sufficient

Sarah's loose-cannon comments were quite different from the aggressively self-sufficient behavior of Howard, the CFO at a construction engineering firm.

His boss, the President and CEO, had several goals for Howard's coaching. One was to finally address the complaints from other departments that the entire accounting function, world-wide, was non-responsive.

Talking about Howard, his boss said, "Howard gets more done than almost anyone I know. He takes a ton off my plate without my ever asking. I'm grateful for that. But he has to address these complaints about his groups."

When I asked the CEO to tell me about Howard's management style, he told me two stories.

The first was this: Although it was mandated that every employee give yearly performance reviews, Howard hadn't reviewed any of his direct reports since assuming his position eight years earlier. And the CEO had repeatedly pushed Howard on this topic with no effect.

The second incident had become lore about Howard. I ended up hearing this story not only from the CEO, but from a half dozen other people, too.

Years earlier, Howard's team planned a three-day global summit. Accounting heads from around the world would travel to a resort for workshops and breakout sessions. Howard threw his weight behind the summit, sending emails stating that attendance was not optional; if invited, you were expected to attend. And it wasn't enough to just show up: you were expected to participate through the final sessions on Friday afternoon.

When the summit coordinator asked Howard if he wanted to make some closing remarks at the end of the day on Friday, Howard had answered, "No, I'm leaving that morning. My family is planning a get together that weekend and I don't want to miss it."



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Creating culture is inevitable

On the face of it, Sarah's uncensored comments appear to have little in common with Howard's stubborn self-sufficiency. But I had the same concern about both situations: in each case, one of the leaders' strengths was having a negative impact on their group's culture.

When I suggested this to Howard, he disagreed.

"Look," he said, "my people know I'll give 'em any resources they need to do their job. And then I expect 'em to do it. So if they have to be more responsive, I'll tell 'em to be more responsive! And they will be!"

I wasn't sure. I suspected that the people around Howard had adopted his belief that rules only applied to others.

I said I'd like to change the subject and tell him about a family I knew. Hesitantly, he said to go ahead.

I told him that friends of mine, a divorced couple, were having trouble with their teenage daughter. The girl had gotten expelled from two private schools because of flagrantly disrespectful behavior. The mom, a high-powered entertainment lawyer, was outraged at her daughter's behavior. The mom complained long and loud to anyone who would listen that she, the mom, had always preached respect. She couldn't understand why her daughter hadn't gotten the message.

The girl's dad, on the other hand, quietly admitted that he wasn't all that surprised about the situation. Speaking of his daughter he said, "Since she was a baby, she's been hearing her mom on the phone screaming at people and using dreadful language. Heck, her mom talks that way to me! And to the kids, too. So I'm not surprised she's doing what her mom *does*, not what her mom *says*."

At the end of the story, Howard protested. "But I'm not screaming at my people. It's not the same thing at all!"

"But, Howard, you're like the parent. And they're all your kids. You say everyone has to stay till Friday night, but you leave early. Or your boss tells you over and over to do performance reviews and what do you do? Nothing. They see that you don't follow the rules, so they think they don't have to, either.



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“You can tell your people you want them to be responsive, but they see that you aren’t. Frankly, I don’t think they’ll be responsive until they see you setting an example and playing by the same rules.”

Executive = celebrity

When I talked with Sarah about her impact on her team, I used a different story.

I told her about the night three friends and I went to a little sushi bar. We’d been there about a half an hour when four other people walked in—one of whom was George Clooney.

In an instant, the energy in the tiny restaurant completely changed. I was aware that we all became slightly self-conscious; we were in the presence of someone special.

It so happened that one of my friends knew one of George Clooney’s friends. There was table-hopping and laughter and loud calling out.

Later, when the four of us were alone, we replayed the night in a way that we probably wouldn’t have had George Clooney not been there.

I told Sarah, “Nothing profound got said in the restaurant that night, believe me! But what got said had been said by George Clooney. Or to George Clooney. Or in George Clooney’s hearing. His presence made everything seem more important than it really was. And we all have been around Hollywood for decades!

“When you talk, Sarah, it’s the same thing. Your words carry weight like a celebrity’s. You breathe different air from your direct reports and their direct reports. When you talk, you’re their George Clooney.”

Sarah laughed at the comparison.

“Do you know something I noticed about George Clooney?” I asked her. “He seemed to know how much power he had and he used it gently. That’s not true of every celebrity. Or every executive!”

People want to please celebrities and corporate executives, I said. Consequently, they have the power to send people off on wild goose chases with the smallest comments. A division president once told me how his over-stuffed schedule caused him to regularly arrive late at other people’s meetings. One day, he idly remarked how uncomfortable and intrusive his late arrivals felt.



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The unintended consequence of that remark was that people waited to begin their meetings until he got there—which had a significant negative impact on productivity. And, as is often the case with celebrities and executives, it was a long time before anyone told him what was happening.

Corporate executives—like celebrities—often get shielded from unpleasant information. They can exist in a blissful bubble of unrealistically positive feedback. This cushioned existence can blind them to the fact that even their strengths can negatively impact their group.

As a leader, you cast a long shadow. Many people seek your approval and good opinion, so your behavior carries weight far beyond what you may intend. Carrying this burden with humility and respect is essential if you are to achieve *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!

Tom Henschel



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