

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Creating New Behaviors ▶ 05/02/13

### Creating the wrong impression

Andy was abrupt and people didn't like it. Feedback about him included things like, "Talking to Andy is like shaking hands with a machine gun." And, "I always brace myself before I call him. He sounds angry from 'Hello!'"

An executive producer of movies, Andy always had at least one phone glued to his ear as he talked at people around the world. His projects were at varying stages of urgency, but none was *without* urgency. Urgency was a way of life with Andy. And all that urgency made him sound abrupt.

I could attest. Because his phoning never really stopped, I had innumerable opportunities to observe him while he was on the phone. It was true: he sounded angry from the instant he barked "Hello!"

Andy knew the feedback. He'd heard it before. He admitted that, yes, he did live with a sense of urgency. It was with him even when he slept. And he liked it. He didn't want to live without his urgency. But he didn't like sounding abrupt or angry. He wanted to change the behaviors that created that impression.

"So where do we start?" he asked—with urgency, of course.

"Well, let's start with this question, Andy: do you know when you're being abrupt?"

He became thoughtful, really considering the question. "Not usually. Sometimes I can see it after it's happened. I can see it in people's faces sometimes. And some people will call me on it. Sometimes. But, no," he said, "I don't think I know when I'm doing it."

"Then that's where we'll start." I asked, "Can I draw something for you?"

I leaned forward and drew a big empty square on my notepad. Then I drew a line through the middle each way. Now there were four empty squares.



“The goal for our coaching, Andy, is to create new behaviors—behaviors that won’t feel abrupt to others. Right?” He agreed.

### **How behaviors change**

I went on. “Regardless of what behavior you want to change—whether it’s eliminating ‘ums’ or fixing your golf swing or how you say ‘hello’—it always happens pretty much the same way. It’s a four-stage process. Ready?”

He was intrigued. “Go ahead,” he said.

“Can you remember when you were learning to drive? I mean, can you picture yourself sitting in the driver’s seat for the very first time? And how hard it was to get your hands and your feet to do all those different things at the same time? Can you remember that?”

“Yeah,” he said with a big smile. “I loved learning to drive.”

“Me, too!” I said. “I remember sitting in the driver’s seat the first time. Everything looked so different. It was a whole new perspective.”

“I know what you mean,” he said, laughing at his own memory.



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### **You don't know what you don't know**

I tapped the lower left-hand box of the drawing on my pad. "Until I sat in that left-hand seat for the first time, I didn't know what I didn't know." I tapped the box again. "I was unconsciously incompetent. That's the name of this first box: 'Unconscious Incompetence.'"



"From what you tell me, Andy, this box is where you are right now when it comes to being abrupt. Most of the time, you don't know when you aren't doing it and when you are."

"All right. So how do I get out of the beginner's box?" he asked.

"Practice. Just like with driving. I used to ask my mom if she needed anything at the store all the time."

He laughed. "Me, too. I drove every chance I could. And I still sucked!"

### **Now you know what you don't know**

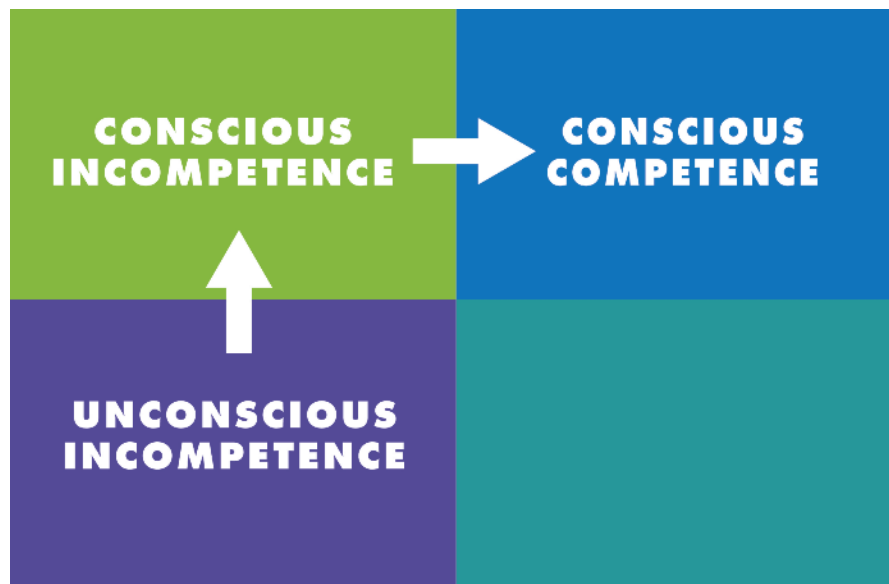
"Right!" I said enthusiastically. "That's how you know you're in the second box." I pointed to the box above the first one. "This is *Conscious Incompetence*," I said.

"That's what I said. I still sucked!"



I laughed and agreed. “Right! When you’re in this stage, you’re able to recognize the old behavior—like being abrupt—but you won’t be able to replace it with new behaviors yet.”

“Something to look forward to,” he deadpanned. He looked at the squares on the piece of paper and said, “I bet I know what box three is called. Conscious competence.”



“Right. Conscious competence is when you can begin to replace old behaviors with new ones—as long as you’re paying attention. When I was learning to drive, this was when I began to add some new skills. Now I could drive and also listen and talk. Or drive and also turn on the radio.”



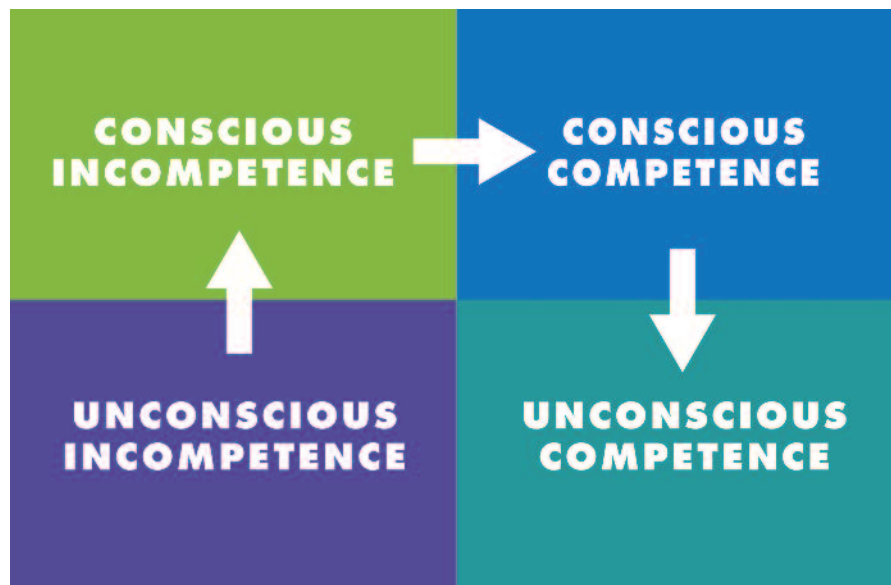
He laughed and said, "One day, driving with my dad, he asked me about school. I said maybe two sentences, then lost track of what I was saying. It cracked him up that I couldn't drive and talk at the same time."

"Yep! That's conscious competence," I said, laughing. "You've created new behaviors but you really have to think about them. If you're not paying attention, you'll go back to the old way of doing things."

He said, "I have some department heads like that. As long as you don't distract 'em, they can get the job done—and they're *good*, believe me! But they're not quite good enough to do two big projects at once."

### **New behaviors become habits**

"Because they're not quite *here*," I said, pointing now at the final, lower right-hand box. "Unconscious competence."



I went on, "Unconscious competence is when the new behaviors have become completely integrated and you don't need to think about them anymore."

"You're talking about habits," he said.



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“Yes, habits,” I agreed. “You’re going to become less abrupt by creating new habits. And the only way to create new habits is by moving through these four stages. There’s no other way. So don’t be impatient with the process. It takes time.”

He laughed and said, “You’re saying I shouldn’t be urgent about this, huh? OK. What’s first?”

I asked if he could identify one specific behavior that might be typical of him being abrupt. He mentioned the way he answered the phone.

“Great,” I said. “Your homework is going to be to focus on that one small behavior. Don’t try to stop being abrupt. That’s too big a concept. Just see what you can find out about how you say hello. Start in that first box.”

### **Different client, different challenge**

Erin was a young manager who also needed to create new behaviors. But, unlike Andy who was ready to jump in, she was completely overwhelmed by the change her boss was asking her to make.

“It feels like he wants me to get a personality transplant,” she told me.

Her boss wanted her to have a bigger role in the department—and she *wanted* the bigger role—but he wouldn’t give it to her until she proved she was up to it. He wanted her to take the lead in meetings and be an equal player with everyone in the room.

But Erin was thoughtful and cautious in a department of people who were fast-paced and outgoing. She was not at all sure she could create the new behaviors her boss wanted.

I asked her to stop worrying about the challenge in front of her and instead to tell me one small, specific behavior that might look like what her boss was asking for.

“I don’t know,” she said. Then, “Well, he wants me to speak up more often in meetings.”

“And what do you know about yourself and speaking up in meetings?” I asked.

She knew quite a lot. She knew when she did it, when she didn’t, and when she thought about doing it but chose to remain silent.



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“Perfect,” I said. And I showed her the four boxes. “When it comes to speaking up in meetings, you’re already in box two,” I told her, pointing to the upper left-hand box, Conscious Incompetence.

### **Focus small to create big change**

“Erin,” I said, “I don’t think it’s helpful to think that you need a personality transplant. Instead, just focus on that one behavior for now—speaking up in meetings.”

Erin decided she’d begin to count how often she actually spoke up in meetings, and, whatever that number was, she would try to double it in one month.

To which I said, admiringly, “Wow! Great homework!”

Andy had focused on how he answered the phone as a way to change the impression that he was abrupt. Erin focused on speaking up in meetings in order to create the impression she was ready for a more senior role. Both of them addressed their larger issues by focusing intensely on one specific behavior. As they gained mastery over that one behavior, they became conscious of other, related behaviors and those began to change, too.

Was either of them able to move all their new behaviors into box number four—Unconscious Competence—during our coaching? No. It takes longer than a coaching engagement to create new, deep-seated habits. But they both moved themselves firmly into that third box—Conscious Competence. And people were noticing the difference.

Moving specific behaviors through the four stages can help you project *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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