

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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The High-Maintenance Executive ▶ 07/11/13

“High maintenance? Not me!”

Melissa got stuff done. No one disputed that. She had risen through the ranks by shouldering enormous amounts of work without complaint. Now, a vice-president for many years, she seemed to have stalled.

“I know they’re happy with my work,” she told me when we discussed her goals for the coaching. “They keep giving me bigger and bigger projects. I’ve been doing the work of a senior vice-president for a while now, but I can’t seem to get the title.”

I set about collecting feedback for Melissa and heard almost immediately that people experienced her as high maintenance.

Thinking about my limited time with Melissa, at first no alarm bells went off around the words “high maintenance.” Then I remembered my initial visit to her office.

I’d placed myself in front of a chair that seemed positioned for visitors. Very politely and with genuine warmth, Melissa asked if I minded if *she* take that chair. I’d said sure and hadn’t thought about it for another second—until right then.

Had that been a high maintenance moment? It didn’t really feel like it. But I wondered if this was the tip of an iceberg.

You don’t get to decide

Needless to say, “high maintenance” figured prominently in Melissa’s feedback report.

“Wait a second, Tom,” she said when she read the feedback. “I know executives who are high maintenance. And I am not one of them.”

“I’m afraid it’s been decided that you are,” I said.

With grudging acceptance she said, “Then help me understand it. Can you give me an example?”



I told her I had heard many examples. For example, I had heard she had strong preferences about how meetings she attended were run. And that she had strong preferences about how she wanted to be summoned out of a meeting. And about the template she wanted everyone to use when they presented information to her.

She laughed. "I really pissed people off with that template thing, didn't I? But it's been a huge help for us all. I don't get why that's high maintenance."

And so Melissa and I began a long conversation over months about the behaviors that get people labeled "high maintenance." Here are four.

1 Ignore feedback

One day, I told her about Leticia.

Leticia believed that every time she asked a question, scrutinized a plan or re-examined a decision that had been made, she was adding value. Leticia didn't mind being called "the resident skeptic."

When people told her she was like an interrogator on steroids, her comeback was, "I'm just trying to make the work better."

"Uh-oh," said Melissa. "That sounds familiar. I know I've said that. But being a skeptic doesn't make her high maintenance, does it?" she said.

"No, it doesn't," I agreed. "What made her high maintenance was that she justified her behavior and ignored the feedback."

Melissa considered this, then said, "I've been giving one of my direct reports the same feedback for two years. She keeps arguing and telling me why the feedback is wrong. I think of her as high maintenance 'cause I keep pounding harder and harder and it still doesn't make any difference."

We had identified one way executives—or any employee!—can be perceived as high maintenance: ignore feedback.

2 Make people suffer

I turned the conversation back to Leticia.



I told Melissa, “There was another behavior besides ignoring feedback that made Leticia even more high maintenance. When she didn’t get her way, she made people pay.”

“Pay how?”

“She threw tantrums. But that’s only one way to make people pay. There are lots!”

“Don’t I know it!” Melissa said.

We brainstormed a quick list of some ways high maintenance people can make others pay when they don’t get their way: give people the cold shoulder; withhold good projects or promotions; speak badly about people when they’re not present; call people names; be upset with an outcome and blame your upset on others’ performance.

We had identified a second way executives—or any employee!—can be perceived as high maintenance: make people around you pay an emotional price for not giving you what you want. That is high maintenance.

3 Lack of gratitude

I wondered if—and how—Melissa made people pay when she didn’t get her way or people didn’t perform up to her standards.

So I asked, “When you don’t get called out of a meeting the way you want, or the template doesn’t get used, what do you do?”

“I let people know when they’ve missed the target,” she said a little defensively. “But I think it’s my *job* to let people know where the target is and whether they’ve hit it or not. Look, Tom, I know working for me can be tough so I say thank you all the time.”

That was true. She did. Melissa was not ungrateful.

I told her she’d just identified a third way executives—or any employee!—can be perceived as high maintenance: be ungrateful.



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If you have a position with power, some people will feel the need to please you. Don't be ungrateful. And don't imagine that it's their job to keep you happy. It's not. It's *your* job to keep you happy. So thank them for their efforts.

You're the boss. Be grateful.

4 Require more "touches" than needed

Another day, I told her about Dustin.

Dustin's need to be inclusive was out of balance. His meetings were bloated with more attendees than were really needed. His emails went to more people than were really needed. There were more meetings, more discussions, more everything than was needed to get the work done.

Dustin's personal need for inclusion required everyone to "touch" the work more often than was needed to get the work done.

"Oh my gosh!" Melissa exclaimed. "Sounds like one of my first assistants. She had to touch everything about twenty times before she could just get something done. She was in my office all the time, checking to be sure things were right. I was always having to hold her hand."

We had identified a fourth way executives—or any employee!—can be perceived as high maintenance: require an abnormally high number of "touches" before completing tasks. That is high maintenance.

In this age of do-more-with-less and round-the-clock demands, slowing down the work because of your personal need for reassurance or perfection is often the fastest path to being seen as high maintenance.

The final factor

One day Melissa asked, "I understand the four factors that make someone high maintenance, but I don't think I see myself in them. So why am I considered high maintenance?"

"Are you aware," I asked tentatively, "of all your 'preferences?' You have preferences about everything from where you sit, to how you want data presented, to how your tea gets made."

"Oh, come on, Tom, as hard as I work, I think I'm allowed some preferences."



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When I didn't answer, she looked a little doubtful and asked, "Aren't I?"

"The problem, Melissa, is that, to everyone else, your preferences feel like a complex web of rules they have to follow. And it's hard to figure them all out. So you've gotten labeled as high maintenance."

"That hardly seems fair," she said. Then she stopped and said, "But perception is reality, right?"

"Yep," I said nodding. "What may be perfectly fine at one company, or with another boss or another team, may be high maintenance someplace else."

That is the fifth way executives—or any employee!—can be perceived as high maintenance: public opinion. If people say you're high maintenance, you are.

"Then maybe," she said slowly, "this is really a variation of ignoring the feedback. I've known people think I'm high maintenance, but I've dismissed it and given myself permission to keep acting the way I always have."

She was right. She had *heard* the feedback but hadn't committed to *acting* on the feedback.

Four actions to avoid the "high maintenance" label

So Melissa and I designed actions she could take to erase the label of "high maintenance." We came up with four. Rather than the four behaviors above that are ways people can *become* high maintenance, the following four actions are ways to *stop* from being high maintenance.

ACTION 1 Gather good feedback

First and foremost, you need to know if you're considered high maintenance. And you'll only find out if you get good feedback. More about this next month!

ACTION 2 Be grateful

Recognize that, as an executive, people naturally want to please you. They work hard to learn your ways and give you what you want. They are doing their best. No one is trying to annoy you. Say thank you. A lot!



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ACTION 3 Listen to public opinion

You don't get to decide if you're high maintenance. If people think you are, you are. Don't dismiss the feedback. Don't excuse your behavior because you're so important or you work so hard. Accept people's complaints as reality.

ACTION 4 Assess your impact on people

No matter what your style, it has consequences. Guaranteed. Do you expect others to make you happy? Do your emotions cause fear? Do your needs slow down the work? Are your standards realistic? Assess your impact. Figure out if you're making people miserable.

Those four actions will help ensure you don't get perceived as being high maintenance. And, of course, being perceived in the workplace the way you want to be perceived is the very essence of *The Look & Sound of Leadership™*.

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