

Achieving & the **LOOK** **SOUND** of **LEADERSHIP**

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Gravitas ▶ 09/05/13

Get coached or get out

Shelley had no choice about being coached. Her boss made it clear she was getting a coach and the coach was going to be me. Often that dynamic makes for a difficult beginning, but Shelley was eager; she knew she'd dug herself into a hole and was hoping I'd help her climb out.

At our first meeting, she told me the same story I'd already heard from other sources. It went like this:

As VP of North American services, Shelley led a large team. She was fiercely loyal to them—some said overly loyal. So she was devastated when, six months earlier, Alan, one of her direct reports, went to HR and complained about her.

To make matters worse, Joyce, Shelley's HR person, delivered the bad news with all the finesse of a wrecking ball: Joyce was emotional and used the language of blame and shame. Not surprisingly, Shelley reacted with emotion of her own. Shouting and tears ensued.

During the following months, Shelley was wildly off balance. Some days she called meetings with her team to probe for feedback. Other days, she'd corner colleagues in the cafeteria and emotionally recount how she'd been victimized. Her team and peers began to avoid her. Not surprisingly, her performance, which had been stellar, declined.

Consciously, she knew she had to get back to her old self, but her wounds were so raw she couldn't. When she heard she was getting a coach, she was relieved.

"But it is personal!"

At our first meeting, it took Shelley over an hour to recount the whole story to me, blow by painful blow. When she was finally done, she looked at me and asked, "So what do you think?"

"I'm sorry that happened to you, Shelley. It sounds lousy."

"It was!" she agreed fervently. "But what about my part of it?"



I said, quite neutrally, "It sounds like you took it all very personally."

"Well, yeah! It was personal. Alan complained about *me*. It doesn't get more personal than that! And Joyce attacked *me*. She wouldn't have treated other VPs like that. That was completely personal."

"Hold on, Shelley," I said. "Can I make this about chess?"

"Chess? I don't play chess!"

"I don't either!" I answered. "But I want to give you an image. Can I?"

"OK," she said with some suspicion.

"Every day that you come to work, you're standing on an enormous chessboard. You're just one piece on the board. Other people are on the board, too. Alan is on the board. So are your other direct reports. And your boss. And Joyce. And her boss. And the senior execs. With me so far?"

"Yeah," she said. I could tell she was beginning to see the picture I was painting.

"So one day, Alan goes to HR to complain about you. That's not about you! It's just his move on the chessboard. That's the best he can play the game." I paused. "Your move. How do you want to play the game?"

She was silent. I continued.

"Another day, Joyce comes in and hammers you. That's *her* move on the chessboard. That's the best she can play the game. Oh, well. Your move. How do you want to play the game?"

She smiled the tiniest bit, then said, "I've been running around the board knocking over a lot of pieces, haven't I?"

"So I hear," I said, smiling back. "But you didn't always."

"No, I didn't. All those attacks really shook my confidence."



"And then, because you were knocking over all those pieces, your reputation took a hit."

"That's what *really* upsets me," she said. "How do I get *that* back?"

Two components of gravitas

I told her that reputation and confidence are two components of a larger leadership attribute: gravitas. And that gravitas is a component of an even larger leadership attribute: executive presence.

I told her I'd like to help her regain her confidence and her reputation by focusing on her gravitas.

She was willing and asked, "Can you define gravitas?"

"To me," I said, "gravitas is credibility that goes beyond titles. You have gravitas when you project confidence and authority."

I asked her to begin observing people through the lens of gravitas. Who had it? Who didn't? And why? After a month, she said people displayed gravitas when they were thoughtful and emotionally stable.

I told her those weren't the only behaviors that display gravitas, but they were great ones for her to focus on.

As she continued to focus on gravitas, *she* began to be more thoughtful and emotionally stable.

Gravitas endangered

When our coaching ended, Shelley's confidence had been restored and her reputation mostly repaired. Three months later, she was promoted from the head of North American services to the head of global services. What had been a big job became enormous.

I didn't hear from Shelley again for almost year. But when I did, I could hear all the old emotion in her voice. Over the phone, she told me that just the day before, her boss informed her that three of her 27 countries were now going to report to him.

"This makes no sense, Tom," she said furiously. "It's gonna screw up all the work I've done to standardize the services and streamline the procedures. This is going to be a train wreck!"



I agreed that her boss's action seemed bizarre.

"So what have you done?" I asked.

"Nothing. I called you hoping you'd talk me off the ledge."

"No flaming emails?"

"No," she said, calming down.

"No storming down to his office?"

"Hey, Tom, come on! It's just chess!"

I laughed out loud when I heard that and shouted "Bravo!" I congratulated her for not falling back into old patterns.

During the next months, Shelley was—to all outward appearances—unruffled, thoughtful and strategic. For nine months, she "played chess" and got her organization back to some semblance of order. Through it all, she never lost her gravitas.

Lousy things happen to us all in the workplace. And because we put so much of ourselves into our work, it's understandable that those lousy things often feel very personal. But of course, they're not. They're "just chess."

When lousy things happen to you, how do you want to play the game? With confidence? I hope so. Are you able to maintain your reputation? I hope so.

If this idea of gravitas interests you, I want to tell you about a white paper called "Executive Presence," published in 2012 by Sylvia Ann Hewitt and her team at The Center for Talent Innovation. Their research found that executive presence is made up of three attributes. In ascending order of importance they are: appearance, communication and, most importantly, gravitas.

In the paper, they identify six attributes that make up gravitas. Two are confidence and reputation.



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You can purchase the entire 100-page study for \$20 [here](#).

Gravitas, as I've depicted it here, relates directly to a popular Executive Coaching Tip from June, 2010, called, "[Don't Take It Personally](#)." Why? Because the instant you take someone else's move on the chess board personally, you've most likely lost your gravitas. And you must have gravitas if you're going to achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

Read related Tips:

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