

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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**Creating Devoted Followers ▶ 02/06/14**

### **Frustrated mutterings**

Claire sensed her team wasn't firing on all cylinders. Individually they were strong—she only hired the highest of high performers—but somehow they weren't pulling together the way she wanted them to.

With a small snort she said, "For as much as I'm paying them, you'd think they'd be able to do this team thing a little better!"

The feedback I gathered about her was middling. People weren't inflamed and angry with her. But they weren't ignited and inspired by her either. Like her team, the feedback was just okay, certainly not great.

During our early sessions, I noticed Claire had what appeared to be an unconscious repeated behavior: in the midst of talking about something, she'd mutter disapprovingly to herself about other people. She'd say words like, "You'd think he'd know better." Or, "They didn't have to do that." Or, "What does she expect from me?" While these asides were quick and quiet, they were perfectly audible. And they always seemed to disparage others.

### **Tiny poison**

One day, as we discussed a new direction for the coaching, she muttered, "I thought I'd be farther by now."

When we finished what we were discussing, I asked, "How are you feeling about your progress in the coaching, Claire?"

"Fine!" she said, sounding surprised I'd asked. "Why?"

"Well, a minute ago you said you thought you'd be farther along by now."

Quickly, as if she'd spoken these words before, she said, "If that's what I said, I am so sorry. That's not how I feel. Really. It's not. I am so grateful for the coaching." Then she stopped and cocked her head.



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“Did you hear what I just said? That apology? I hear myself apologizing for things I’ve said all the time. I really hate it.”

Discussing it, Claire recognized a pattern: when she apologized for something she’d said, it was likely she’d done one of her mutterings not long before. She saw how her tiny habit of muttering was most likely having a negative impact on people.

Trying to make sense of her habit, she wondered, “Do those little comments poison everything else I say?”

“Poison? No,” I said. “But color? Yes, I think so. I think we’re all sensitive to the subtle messages we send each other—especially when there’s any sense of disapproval. It doesn’t create devoted followers.”

### **Leaking our thoughts**

I asked if she’d heard of microexpressions. In his study of microexpressions, Dr. Paul Ekman found that, although they last a mere quarter of a second, they can convey complex emotions like contempt and pride quite clearly.

She said she knew about microexpressions from the TV show “Lie to Me” in which investigators used them to catch criminals. She had assumed the show’s science was made-up, so she was intrigued to hear that the show was based on Ekman’s actual work.

“I mention microexpressions,” I said, “because I think we’re all sensitive to the tiny messages we send each other. Yours are just a few words. Other people have a little eye roll or a thing with their lips. But people notice those little behaviors and they assume those are our true feelings are leaking out. It colors how they feel about us.”

With some alarm she replied, “But if I don’t even know I’m doing it, how could I ever stop?”

### **Three powerful words**

“Oh, I think those little behaviors are unconscious. We can’t really stop them,” I told her. “Instead, I think it’s important to try to manage which messages are being sent. Are they mostly disapproving and dark? Or welcoming and bright?”



Claire said, "I think my default setting has always been more dark than light."

Then she said, "I don't want to send disapproving messages. I'm sure it's terribly discouraging for people around me. But how in the world would I change my default setting from dark to light?"

I told her that a great tool to use was made up of just three words: "unconditional positive regard."

The famed psychologist Carl Rogers coined the phrase "unconditional positive regard" in the 1960's. I told her that in my mind, the phrase has always had two different applications.

The first application is about others. To build trusting relationships, you must hold the other person in "unconditional positive regard." You do not need to agree with what comes out of that person's mouth, but you must allow that whatever does come out of his mouth is worth consideration simply because you hold him in unconditional positive regard. In the most elementary sense, unconditional positive regard means suspending judgment and being open-minded.

"And that would change my default setting?" Claire asked.

I assured her it could. As soon as you try holding other people in unconditional positive regard, your awareness about your default setting spikes. That raised awareness gives you the choice to reset your default if you want to.

She looked away, thinking. "That sure would be different," she said. "Do you really think it would change my team?"

### **Positive regard conquers resistance**

I answered, "I know for a fact that unconditional positive regard can create devoted followers. I see it in my coaching all the time. Can I tell you about a client named Ian?"

"You bet," she said, leaning in.

"Everyone warned me that Ian was going to be tough," I said. "The head of HR told me Ian didn't want the coaching. His boss said Ian was probably uncoachable. Everyone agreed that Ian was one big dark cloud. They apologized for putting me alone in a room with him.



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"When we first met, he was argumentative and combative. He told me how stupid everyone around him was—including me. He told me flat-out the coaching was a big waste of time. That was fine. I didn't take it personally. And when he saw I didn't disapprove of him for attacking me, he lightened up."

I said, "I didn't agree with him a lot of the time, but I always held him in high regard. And he could feel that. It was a heady experience for him. He wasn't used to being treated with high regard. He used to being treated as if he was a problem."

Claire said, "I can relate to that! One of my first bosses didn't hold *anyone* in positive regard. In her eyes, we were all problems!"

"And how was it to work for her?" I asked.

"Horrible!"

"I'm sure it was. No one wants to be treated with *negative* regard. But we do it to each other subtly—and sometimes not so subtly—all the time."

"Yeah," she said, "like with the microexpressions." She took a breath then said, "Do you know where I think my microexpressions are leaking out? With my teenage sons. They're fine until they sense even the slightest bit of disapproval from me. Then, wham! Their ears are shut and I've lost them."

"Not devoted followers at that point, huh?"

"Not at all! I need to inject myself with mental Botox when I'm around them!" We both laughed.

### **Creating devoted followers**

"Speaking of devoted followers," I said, "do you know how it played out with Ian? Far from hating the coaching, he became my biggest advocate. Before we'd finished his coaching, he had me coaching two of his direct reports and was saying all his peers should get coaching, too!"

"I bet that shocked everyone!" she said.

"They all thought it was a miracle," I agreed. "But to me it was incredibly simple. It was just unconditional positive regard. It creates devoted followers."



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She nodded thoughtfully.

Then I said, "Remember I said 'unconditional positive regard' has always had two applications for me? We've been talking about the first one: treating others with unconditional positive regard. That's a great goal to aim for even though it's not easy."

I went on. "But in my life the second application has been even harder: treating *myself* with unconditional positive regard.

"When I try to hold myself in high regard, unconditionally, I have to ask myself if I'm willing to truly accept every thought I have. Will I hold each one of my thoughts in high regard even if I don't *like* them? What about when I'm not smart or logical or right? Can I hold myself in high regard then? Believe me, it's tough!

I said to Claire, "I can't do it all the time, but when I am able to hold *myself* in positive regard, it's way easier to hold *others* in high regard."

She replied, "I bet the inverse is true, too: if you don't hold yourself in positive regard, it's probably hard to hold anyone else in positive regard."

She was thoughtful for a moment, then said, "This reminds me of something my grandmother used to tell us. She always said to watch how our boyfriends treated people—their family members or their friends or waiters in restaurants—because however they treated those people would probably mirror how they felt about themselves. And however they felt about themselves is how they'd end up treating us."

I agreed, saying, "That's my experience, too. People who are constantly critical and can't hold others in high regard are usually pretty self-punishing. They don't have a lot of kindness for others because they don't have a lot of kindness for themselves."

Claire worked at having unconditional positive regard for others and for herself. She found that her awareness of her "dark" default setting rose almost overnight. She wasn't always able to switch all the way to unconditional positive regard, but she became extremely conscious of how close or far from it she was.



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Then, one day, during a project meeting, she found herself truly welcoming people's ideas. There was no muttering. She said she felt her dark default setting vanish from the room. She said she felt a shift in other people's energy, too.

She couldn't sustain "unconditional positive regard" very long that first day. But she'd tasted it. And she liked it. She believed it was a small first step towards creating devoted followers. I agreed. I also believed it was a big step towards *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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