

Achieving *the* LOOK & SOUND *of* LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Your Goodwill Bank Account ▶ 04/03/13

A young exec in trouble

I hadn't heard from Caroline since her coaching ended several years before. I had loved coaching Caroline. Her high self-esteem allowed her to examine her thoughts and behaviors without defensiveness. During the coaching, she'd accomplished significant growth and had been rewarded with a promotion.

Now she was calling about Avi, one of her direct reports.

"I know he's not the easiest guy to be around, but I didn't realize how bad things had gotten. Two of his peers are declining his meeting invitations. An enormous project is stalling because Avi is the leader and people are boycotting him."

"Yikes," I said. "What have you done?"

"Well, I've done a lot of listening and found out why people are so upset with him."

"And?"

"To begin with, everyone agrees he's a credit hog. He takes credit for everything. And it pisses people off!"

"I'm sure," I agreed. "How is it that you didn't know?"

"He doesn't do it with me! Here's an example. People complain he dominates meetings. They say he has to have the first word *and* the last word. But he's not like that in my staff meetings. He puts on a completely different face when I'm around."

"Ooh, I bet that pisses people off even more! So what have you told him?"

"I've told him how angry everyone is. Usually he minimizes it. Or justifies himself. I can't get him to see how serious this is."



"Have you told him about the bank account?" I asked.

"What bank account?"

"You and I talked about 'bank accounts' during your coaching, didn't we?"

"Not that I remember," she said.

I laughed. "Well, we should have!"

She laughed, too, saying, "Now you *have* to tell me about bank accounts!"

Everyone has a 'bank account'

I explained, "I think each of us has an account with the people we see a lot. It's an account of goodwill. You either have a positive balance of goodwill with people or a negative balance."

I reminded Caroline of her situation when I'd first met her. She'd had a reputation for being territorial. People complained she withheld information. They complained she was often late for other people's meetings but would get huffy when people were late to hers. Happily, all that had changed during the coaching.

"When we first met," I continued, "you were in danger of overdrawing your account. That sort of negative movement in someone's account of goodwill is often what triggers a request for coaching."

"Yeah, like now with Avi." She went on. "I've never thought about having a bank balance, but it's true, isn't it? The coaching really taught me how important it is to do things that foster goodwill. And every now and then I do something just because it's thoughtful, not because it helps the work."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Well, just the other day, I sent this colleague an email. She and I were hired about the same time, so we've always known each other but never worked together. Recently, during a meeting, someone mentioned her name and there was this nice little ripple of comments. People obviously like her. So I just sent her an email and told her that.



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"Then the next day she shows up at my door. We talk for about twenty minutes and then she tells me about this project she thinks I should be involved in."

"Wow," I said, "that was a really fast *quid pro quo*."

"No kidding. But I wasn't fishing for a favor."

"That's part of how you've built the balance in your bank account, Caroline," I said. "You don't make deposits hoping for a payout. You just make the deposit and move on."

Deposits to them pay to you

"When you say it like that," Caroline said, "it sounds like I'm depositing in *her* account, not mine."

"I hadn't really thought about it that way but I think you're right. The only way to increase your balance of goodwill is by making deposits into *other people's* accounts, not yours. Good observation!"

We fell silent. I wondered which thread she'd pick up; there'd been so many.

Finally, she said, "I guess there are bank accounts everywhere."

I asked what she meant.

"It's happening in my family. We've all run out of patience with one of our brothers-in-law. He never does what he says he'll do. He's completely unreliable. None of us trust him any more."

Then she said, "I think he's finally overdrawn his balance with my sister. I think she's about to close his account and get a divorce."

"Accounts do get closed sometimes," I agreed.

"I think it's about to happen to one of my boss's peers. This guy has been blaming one of his lieutenants for an initiative that went off track. But it suddenly became clear that it's actually this leader who's been messing up from the beginning. I think they're going to 'close his account'—if you know what I mean."



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"Sorry to hear it."

"Oh, no. I think he deserves it. His account has been overdrawn with me for a long time."

Manage your personal account

I heard an opportunity and asked, "Caroline, is that situation common knowledge? Could you talk to Avi and use that guy as an example to show that 'bank accounts' really matter?"

"Absolutely. That's a good idea." Then she sighed. "Couldn't you just come in and fix him like you did me?"

"I think you can do this yourself," I replied.

"If you say so," she said. "Wait a second, I have to get a pen. OK. So tell me how I'm going to teach Avi about bank accounts."

"I'd chunk it into four ideas. The first idea is the framework for the whole concept. Picture one of those billboard-sized fund raising thermometers. You can see at a glance whether the balance is near the top or the bottom or hovering near the middle. Of course, the goal is to get the balance as far up as you can.

"So that's the first idea: Accounts of goodwill are real and their balances are plain to see."

She piggy-backed on my thought, saying, "And he's either depositing goodwill into other people's accounts or withdrawing from his own."

"Right," I agreed. "That's second. Everything we do, all day every day, affects our balance. Every conversation you have, every meeting you go to, every email you send—or don't send!—either adds or subtracts from your account."

She continued, "You know what else I want to tell him? That balances move slowly. If he starts making deposits but they don't seem to count for anything at first, he shouldn't take it personally. I'm a good example of that. I had to make a lot of deposits before I could change the direction my account was moving. He can't just make one or two generous gestures and think the needle will move."



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"I like the word 'generous,' Caroline. That's a great way of thinking about it: spend your goodwill generously."

I went on, saying, "You hit on numbers three and four. Number three is about being generous. That's one of the best ways to make deposits. Be generous with your time, with information, with permission, with support, with praise, with positivity in general. Generosity creates goodwill."

"And number four," I said, "is that growing your balance takes time."

She countered with a rueful laugh. "But withdrawing from your account can happen pretty fast."

"No kidding," I said. "Unless you have a strong positive balance."

"Oh, that is so true. When someone has a flush account with me, I cut them all sorts of slack. When they screw something up that I'd be pissed about with someone else, I give them a pass."

"I do the same thing. That's another reason why having a positive balance is so important."

Knowing she was making notes, I recapped the four ideas we'd discussed.

- 1 Your account of goodwill is real. People know your balance and act towards you accordingly.
- 2 Everything you do—everything!—either deposits to or withdraws from your account of goodwill.
- 3 Being generous is one of the best ways to make deposits. If you see the people around you as obstacles to be overcome, you're most likely not acting generously towards them.
- 4 Growing your account takes time. But withdrawals can happen suddenly. Strong positive reserves protect against bankruptcies.

"This will help enormously, Tom," she said. And we went on to talk about other things.

A month later, she called to give me an update. She told me she was talking to Avi about his account almost daily.



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"I'm constantly saying things like, 'That email to Francie did not make a positive deposit in her account.' The metaphor has been so helpful that I've introduced it in my staff meetings. I'm telling them that everything they do is either making a deposit or a withdrawal. And I think it's making a difference. People are being more mindful about their actions."

Your bank account of goodwill is real. Everything you do affects the balance. I challenge you to do something today that will make a deposit of goodwill. Be assured that people with a rich positive balance of goodwill are often already displaying *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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