

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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**The Honorable Executive ▶ 12/04/14**

### **Serious consequences**

Brad was in hot water. He just wasn't sure how hot.

"Frank doesn't forgive easily," he said, referring to his boss, the division president. "And he's really pissed at me. But I hope everyone appreciates the irony that he's pissed because somebody talked behind *his* back. Man, he's the king of trash talk!"

I'd heard that about Frank. A quiet man who spoke without much expression, he was known for openly making snide remarks about people. For example, he'd ask who was running a certain project. Upon hearing a name, he'd shoot out a dismissive comment, like, "She's a moron," or "Well, *that's* a mistake," or "I never liked him."

Now Brad had been caught making a snide remark about Frank.

It had happened during a one-on-one meeting with a new direct report of Brad's named Cassandra. She was telling Brad about problems she was having with a project. The problems all stemmed from a guy named Josh.

Brad assured her, "Josh always makes problems." And they traded stories about Josh.

When Cassandra asked if it was true that Frank had handpicked Josh, Brad replied, "Yep! We have Frank to thank for Josh. What an idiot to hire him."

Later, venting her frustrations about Josh with a colleague, Cassandra had said, "Brad says Frank was an idiot for hiring him in the first place."

Before long, Frank knew Brad had called him an idiot.

In the room with me, Brad shook his head. "I'm the idiot, right? But, come on, that's not what I meant. Am I really going to pay a price for an off-hand remark? That seems pretty out of proportion."

The situation seemed serious enough for it to move front and center in our coaching.

I thought there were at least three issues we could examine. First, creating culture. Second, talking about people. Third, repairing damage.

### **1 Creating culture**

Brad said, "Cassandra shouldn't be talking about Josh all over the place, but I can't blame her. Frank bad mouths people in front of everybody, so everybody else does, too! He's made it culturally acceptable."

"Do you think he'd agree that he's created that kind of culture?"

"Probably not," Brad answered.

I spoke slowly. "In my experience, mature leaders accept responsibility for creating the culture for their people."

"Like parents with kids," said Brad, the father of three.

"Right. I use the parent analogy all the time," I agreed.

"Meaning Frank is our dad?" He laughed at the idea.

"Absolutely!" I said. "If you're a kid sitting at dinner, and your dad talks smack about Uncle Teddy, it'd be reasonable for you to assume it's okay for *you* to talk smack about Uncle Teddy. And a smart kid will test the waters. Is it only okay to talk smack about Uncle Teddy? Or can I talk smack about my teacher? Or Grandma? Or Mom? If dad talks smack, you do, too."

Brad laughed ruefully. "I talked trash about Josh, but I didn't get in trouble for *that*. Only talking about 'Dad'."

I was silent. Brad said quietly, "I shouldn't have been talking that way about either of them."

I remained silent. After a moment, Brad said, "I'm thinking about myself as the dad for my team. I'm not sure what culture I've created for them. It wasn't in my feedback report."



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"Not specifically, but I think the clues are there," I said. "Your feedback said you have high standards and are impatient sometimes. From that, you can imagine the culture you might create."

He frowned. "I can?"

"Imagine being a kid. What would it be like if every one of your teachers had those traits? How would it be if they held you to really high standards and were impatient with you?"

Almost without thinking, he said, "I'd work my ass off so I wouldn't get it kicked!"

"Sounds like there's some fear in there."

"Yeah," he smiled. "But the good kind."

"For you."

"Right, it'd be good for me but maybe not for everyone," he said, acknowledging that he was only [speaking for himself](#), not others. We'd been working on that.

He suddenly looked concerned. "Are you saying my team fears me?"

"Not necessarily, Brad. I was trying to help you figure out what culture you've created for your team. One way to do that, pick your biggest development areas. Then exaggerate those traits and imagine a kid surrounded by all that. Ask yourself, what might that feel like? Your answers can help you figure out the culture you've created as a leader."

He considered that, then smiled slyly, as if he'd discovered a trick. "But since the traits are mine, I might be biased towards liking them."

"Good point. You may have to use some imagination and empathy."

"And get good feedback, too," he said.

"That, too," I agreed.



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Brad was intrigued by the idea of culture. "One of the guys I manage only has three direct reports, but I can see that his group has its own culture."

I agreed that culture can be company-wide and can also exist within a team. And it flows from the leader. I said again, "Mature leaders accept responsibility for creating the culture for their people."

## 2 Talking about people

"I'm not a gossip," Brad said when we discussed talking about people.

"I agree, Brad, you're not."

"I was just trying to help Cassandra be more effective with Josh. She doesn't know him. And we all do. We all know the frustration she's feeling. We've all been there."

I reminded Brad to [speak for himself](#).

"Whoops," he said. "Okay, speaking just for me, I know how frustrating it can be to work with Josh. I do."

"And it's hard to resist talking about all those feelings." I cocked my head. "Brad, I don't think you're unusual. I think all sorts of people—well-intentioned, smart, ethical people, just like you—make the same sort of comments you made about Josh."

"And about Frank. Let's not forget the 'idiot' comment . . ."

"Heaven forbid!"

". . . because none of this would've happened if Cassandra hadn't repeated that little gem."

"Really? Is this about Cassandra?" I asked.

He smiled sheepishly. "No, of course not. She wouldn't have had any little gem to repeat if I hadn't shot my mouth off."

"Well, I'm glad we're not going to make this about Cassandra," I said. "But, Brad, I don't think you 'shot your mouth off.' You weren't ranting or raving. You were trying to help. That's why no alarm bells went off in your head. It felt like a normal conversation."

"So how do you talk about someone like Josh who really is a problem?" he asked.

"I think talking honorably about people has one simple measure: would you say the same thing the same way if that person was in the room?"

Brad leaned back and smiled. "My dad used to say that. And if I'd followed that rule, Cassandra could've repeated anything I said and there wouldn't be any hot water!"

I nodded.

After a moment, he said, "Frank has not created a culture of talking honorably about people. But I'd like talking honorably to be part of my group's culture." Then he shook his head. "Man, that's going to be hard."

"Because...?" I asked.

"Because I think there has to be zero tolerance for it. Every comment has to be honorable. And I'll be trying to instill this in the midst of a larger culture that doesn't value it," he said. "But I'm going to start talking about it today."

### **3 Repairing damage**

Then we explored whether Frank's anger needed to be managed. Was the damage large enough that it needed repair? Brad wasn't sure.

I asked, "Well, do you want to make a peace offering or just wait it out?"

"What would a peace offering look like?" asked Brad.

I smiled. "An apology. Something short and simple."

"Boy, Frank would hate that conversation!" Brad said.



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"This isn't about Frank. Besides, his feelings aren't your responsibility. Just focus on repairing the damage. Do you want to apologize or not?"

"Do you think I owe him an apology?"

"That's not for me to decide, Brad. I'm just saying that when there's damage to repair—and, in this case, I don't know that there is—the easiest way to fix it is with an apology. But apologies can feel risky in the workplace, so a lot of times, we avoid them."

After some thought, Brad looked at me, saying, "I don't know how to decide. I can argue either way. There are a million things to consider."

"Like what?"

Brad laid out the political ramifications of taking either action. His thinking was complex and multi-layered. And a bit tortured.

At the end, I said, "A lot of the factors you're considering seem out of your control."

"No kidding! That's why it's so crazy-making."

"Then simplify it, Brad."

"How?"

"Just ask, 'Is it the right thing to do? Would I want an apology in the same situation?'"

He laughed. "Are you channeling my dad today? You sound just like him!"

I laughed, too. "Look," I said, "apologies can build relationships, but they can damage relationships, too."

"They can? Really?"

"I think so, yes." I told him I'd send him an Executive Coaching Tip I'd written about [Strategic Apologies](#) that examined both kinds.



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Later, after reading the Tip and discussing it more, Brad decided he would apologize to Frank. Even though the situation didn't feel serious, Brad felt it was the honorable thing to do.

Months later, as our coaching wound down, Brad reflected on the issue of being honorable. He said he'd taken responsibility for the culture in his group.

"You know what I notice? The little things we do, all those everyday acts, are what create the culture. Like how we talk about other people and whether we apologize to each other. Some days it's a burden to pay attention at that granular level, but most of the time it's exhilarating."

Examining himself and his team through the lens of being honorable had changed Brad. I observed that the shift had moved him firmly in the direction of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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