

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



ESSENTIAL
COMMUNICATIONS

TELE 818.788.5357
info@essentialcomm.com
www.essentialcomm.com

EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Getting Growth Acknowledged ▶ 04/19/06

I remember when I first saw John without his beard and mustache. I'd known him for seven or eight years and he'd always had facial hair. Then, suddenly, one day he didn't. It was disorienting and I told him so. "Well, at least you noticed," he said. "Most people have no idea what's changed. They keep asking if I've lost weight!"

For months after, I was aware of making a mental adjustment each time I saw him. "Oh, right!" I'd remind myself. "He shaved." It was a long time before the new, clean-shaven John was imprinted in my head.

This same thing played out recently at one of the world's largest food packaging and distribution companies. I'd been coaching Todd, the Chief Information Officer, for months. He was the classic example of someone who, when asked the time, would give a lesson on watch making. His boss, Richard, the CEO, had asked him to work on one professional development issue: be concise.

During our coaching Todd developed a new, more concise style but had gotten no feedback from Richard. My guess was that Richard had benefited from Todd's new behavior but, like John's clean-shaven face, Todd's change was going unnoticed.

During a phone call with Richard, I raised the issue. "I'm experiencing Todd as more succinct these days. I wonder what your experience is." His answer was exactly what I expected.

After a pause, Richard said, "Now that you mention it, he has been better about that lately. In fact . . ." He then related a success story from a conference call the week before.

Here's the point. If I hadn't asked Richard to focus on Todd's changes (or if Todd hadn't asked on his own behalf), Richard would have continued to see the old Todd even though a new Todd was showing up consistently. Richard's blindness to Todd's changes would have continued *even though Richard was getting the change he had asked for!*

Richard is not to blame here. Richard's default setting about Todd has many facets: smart, reliable, creative and verbose. The fact that Todd had recently stopped being verbose didn't create new



default settings in Richard's head. The absence of the old annoying behavior wasn't even noted—until I asked Richard to focus on it.

The lesson for you? Your growth won't get noticed without your help.

Many of us are reluctant to talk about ourselves. We mistakenly think that getting new behaviors recognized is bragging. Or we naively believe that because we've worked so hard creating new behavior that our changes must be blazingly obvious to everyone else. But most people see what they expect to see. They continue to see John with a beard and Todd as verbose even those things are no longer true.

Here's how you might get your changes noticed:

To your boss who asked for more polished presentations during staff meetings:

"I've been working to be more polished when I present during staff meetings. I'm wondering how you're experiencing that."

To a peer with whom you've often clashed:

"We've talked about trying to be less prickly with each other. I'm wondering what the prickle factor is for you these days."

To a subordinate who asked for clearer directions from you:

"I've been trying to give you clearer directions. I wonder what you've been experiencing in that regard."

Notice that in each case no questions were asked. It is not: "Am I better?" (A close-ended question.) Nor is it: "What do you think?" (An open-ended question.) Rather, an invitation is extended to the other person to think out loud.

Of course it's hoped that in each case these people will say, "Yeah, now that you mention it . . . !" But they may not. Remember, feedback is just someone's opinion. And when receiving feedback there are only two appropriate responses: a clarifying question or a thank you. Explanations are not allowed. *(For a refresher on this, see [Getting Good Feedback](#).)*

You deserve to have your hard-won development noticed by people around you. Get the recognition you deserve—by invitation only!



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