

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

By Tom Henschel



A DIVISION OF ESS COMM INC.

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

EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



[Listen to the podcast](#)

Status ▶ 03/05/15

An unusual request

Madeline told me she had an unusual request. "It's about Kristi," she said, smiling.

I adored Kristi, Madeline's assistant. My coaching relationship with Madeline had been ongoing for several years and Kristi had been there every step of the way.

Kristi was one of those wonderful executive assistants who adds value all day long. But she was not assertive. Not on her own behalf, nor, Madeline sometimes felt, on behalf of the work. Kristi had ambition but struggled to take action.

Madeline, Kristi's biggest cheerleader, asked me, "What would you think if I gave one of my coaching sessions to Kristi?"

"Sounds like fun!" I answered. Then, "What're you picturing?"

"Well, she's heard everything I have to say about assertiveness. Actually, a lot of times I just repeat what you've told *me!* But there's no movement. And she's frustrated. So I thought, maybe if she talks with you, it'll help her the way it helps me."

I started to speak but she cut in, saying, "And, before you ask, the answer is yes, I've told Kristi my idea and she can't wait."

Vanishing status

Sitting with Kristi, knowing we had an entire coaching session, was a luxury. We'd never been able to talk longer than a leisurely stroll from the elevator to Madeline's office. Or a short chat after a session. We'd talked briefly about her struggle to be more assertive, but now we had time to dive down into topics that had been stuck on the surface.

I asked her for some recent examples of when she'd been less assertive than she wanted to be. She told me how she always flinched when two particular executives' names showed up on her caller I.D. And she told me that she often accepted work from other assistants when she should really refuse.

She shook her head with some disgust and continued, "I grew up in a part of the South where status was like a religion. Who had status and who didn't was a serious topic. Well, around this place, sometimes it's as if my status just evaporates. I try to stop it from - - -. What are you smiling about?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "'Status' is a word I don't use very often. Hearing you say it just now triggered this memory from Juilliard." She knew about my former career as an actor.

She was immediately intrigued.

I said, "Instead of me describing it, would you do it with me?"

"What, an acting exercise?" she said eagerly, with a little shot of terror.

I said yes. To which she gave a little shudder and said, "OK! Why not?"

The Status Game

I told her the exercise was a game about status. "Juilliard was training us to be classical actors, so there we were, these young kids, cast as kings and queens. Or their courtiers. Or the groundlings. In Shakespeare's plays, people are put to death all the time. Status in that world had power we can barely comprehend. So this game helps you think big. Kings and beggars. Life and death."

"OK," she said, grinning.

"The game's simple: one person gets all the status; the other gets none. All or nothing. Completely exaggerated. Then you just see what happens. But, no matter what, until someone calls 'time out', it's 100% one or the other. All king or all beggar. OK?"

"You want me to be the beggar, right?" she asked.

"No, Kristi," I said with a huge smile, "you're the *king!*"

Horror flashed across her face for just an instant, then was gone. After the merest pause, her body shifted slightly taller. She turned her shoulders away from me but kept her eyes dead on mine, gave a tiny smile, and said slowly, "That's right. I am."



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

Her instantaneous transformation into a quiet powerhouse was so far from her usual self that I almost laughed. But, seeing the game was on, I dropped my shoulders and looked away. "Well, it's nice to see you," I said softly.

"I'm sure it is. Things are going to be very different around here." Her voice was more mature than I'd ever heard it.

Our roles quickly became more corporate than geopolitical, more boss than king. There were tasks she wanted done and she wanted me to do them. She never raised her voice, but she was decisive and direct. She was highly assertive without being aggressive. It was a very positive display of personal power.

After some time, she stopped the game and sat down silently. She looked out the window a long while, then turned, grinning. "That. Felt. Great!" She laughed with delight and clapped her hands.

We talked about how it had felt to have such high status.

At one point, she said, "I've always thought having status meant you had to be mean. And some people *are* mean when they have status. But that game showed me I can have status and still keep the good parts of me, too. I can have both. Meanness is a choice and I'm not going to choose it."

Then, Kristi and I talked about the need for her to dial up her status in her daily life.

Status *with* meanness

A month later, in a very different setting, I found myself talking about status and meanness again. Kevin, the head of a division at a Silicon Valley giant, was worried that one of his direct reports, Rick, was mean.

"He manages up really well, so I never see it," Kevin said. "But this feedback about him being mean to people below him has been floating around for years. Now that he's reporting to me, I want it to get better."

While I was gathering feedback about Rick, I found out he had gone through eight assistants in one year. He didn't feel it was a big deal. I thought it was a great way to discuss Rick's use of status and whether people experienced him as mean.

One day, about three months into the coaching, I happened to observe him from a distance with yet another assistant. I saw him inflate himself with status and use it like a brick to get what he wanted.

Later, discussing what I'd observed, he was not apologetic. As he narrated the incident from his point of view, the status game popped into my head again.

When I described the game to him, he was much less eager to play than Kristi had been. He said, "I suppose you want me to be the beggar so I can see what that feels like, right?"

"Actually, no, Rick. I thought it'd be more fun for you to be the king and not have to worry about pissing people off!"

He was still reluctant but more willing than if I'd suggested he be the beggar.

I could see he didn't know where to begin, so I dropped into my low-status role. I began profusely apologizing for having an idea about where we might begin the game. He caught on.

Soon, in a highly condescending tone, he was telling me how I could be a better coach and how I could run my business more profitably. Sticking to my role, I picked up my pad and began furiously writing down every gem he uttered, all the while muttering, "You're right. I should do that. Good idea."

The more compliant I became, the higher he inflated his status. He got so energized he began striding the conference room. And he got mean. He began using words like, "stupid," "ridiculous" and "idiotic."

When he stopped the game, he had the frightened awe of someone who'd survived the ecstasy of a deadly drug. He was shaken. "That was not good, but, man, I could so easily become that guy."

Dial your status default down. Or up!

After that, Rick explored status from many angles, including his family relationships. He observed, for example, that he adopted different status when he interacted with his parents than with his children. And different again with his own siblings versus his wife's. He began noticing that, in response to the status he assigned other people, he dialed his own up or down accordingly.



ESSENTIAL
COMMUNICATIONS

A DIVISION OF ESS COMM INC.

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

“When I’m in high status mode, I get deaf,” he observed. “I’m all puffed up with myself and can’t hear anything the other person says—let alone whether they’re having any feelings!”

He began to see that his shifts into high or low status were triggered by his own beliefs about other people. “I have all sorts of rules and ‘shoulds’ about who’s where on the pecking order. What I never realized before is that there *is* no pecking order. Not really. It’s all in my head. So switching on my status is a choice I’m making.”

Kristi had had the exact same revelation.

Rick worked to keep his status switched off for longer and longer periods of time, which was good for him. On the other hand, Kristi was learning to keep hers switched on. And that was good for her.

We all assign ourselves status. It’s understandable—and appropriate!—to shift your status depending on whether you’re talking to a child or the chairman of the board.

The more important questions are: Are you aware of your status default setting? Are you are aware when you shift your status? Are you aware how other people experience your status?

Your status default might be calibrated just right. But it’s just as likely that you would benefit from dialing it up, like Kristi. Or you might benefit from dialing it down, like Rick. Focusing attention on the default setting of your status will teach you how to control the dial. Finding the healthiest setting for everyone is an essential prerequisite for *The Look & Sound of Leadership*[™].

Read related Tips:

[Assume Equality](#)

[Choosing Stories Over “Truth”](#)

[Leadership & Self-Deception](#)

[Perception is Reality](#)

[Smoothing Harsh Edges](#)

To SUBSCRIBE or to CONTRIBUTE an idea for future Executive Coaching Tips, email us at:
info@essentialcomm.com



**ESSENTIAL
COMMUNICATIONS**

A DIVISION OF ESS COMM INC.

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

To SUBSCRIBE to the Podcasts, [click here](#)

To VIEW the searchable archive of Executive Coaching Tips, visit:
<http://essentialcomm.com/podcast/>

To CONTACT [Tom Henschel](#) or learn about the Essential Communications team, [click here](#)

To UNSUBSCRIBE to future Executive Coaching Tips, email us at:
unsubscribe@essentialcomm.com

"The Look & Sound of Leadership" is a trademark of Essential Communications. We believe you are receiving this email in response to a subscription request. If you are experiencing difficulties with the above HTML graphics, [click here](#).