

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Coaching Your People ▶ 04/02/15

Tough new mandate declared

Jillian's coaching had been an unexpected triumph. Before the coaching began, her job was in jeopardy. Then, during our six months together, she accomplished a turnaround that astonished everyone—including me.

Now, over two years later, she'd become an acknowledged pillar in a large, worldwide group. When she invited me to lunch, I jumped at the chance to check in and catch up.

She'd been elevated yet again and had a new boss. "He's on this kick," she said, with amused tolerance. "We all have to become 'coaches.' We have to learn to 'coach' our people." She put up sarcastic air-quotes both times. "But I'm not a coaching kind of gal!"

We both laughed.

It was true. Jillian was fast-paced and results-oriented. It had been hard for her to slow down enough to allow her own coaching process to work.

True to her hurry-up style, she said, only half-jokingly, "So I thought over lunch you could teach me how to be a coach!"

I laughed, saying, "You want the crash course, huh? OK! Buckle up!" I took a gulp of air and said, "For starters, you can't have successful coaching if you don't have specific goals. So I'd say that's number one. Set goals that are specific."

"Like mine were? 'Shape up or ship out'?" she smiled.

"Oh, come on, Jillian, your goals were more specific than that."

"Were they?" she asked sincerely.



I ticked on my fingers. "Improve relationships with your direct reports; collaborate with your peers; better decorum in meetings. Those were all specific."

1 Set specific goals

She nodded. "Those were specified, weren't they? Funny, I didn't remember!" She said, "Those goals were helpful, weren't they?"

"You bet!" I said. "When you're the boss-coach, specific goals will help you keep your coaching separate from your management."

She puzzled on that a minute, then asked, "What's the difference?"

"Managing your people is about the work. But coaching is about the person's development."

Recalling, she nodded. "That was true for me. The coaching was about my development, not the work."

"And development takes time, Jillian," I said with a smile, knowing this would be a challenge for her. "Coaching is a process, not an event."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, great! You know how much I love process! Give me a good task any day."

2 Development is a process, not an event

"But you're the poster child for process, Jillian! You didn't change in a day." When she sighed, I said, "Just make it part of your job. Put it on your calendar every week or two. 'Have a coaching conversation'."

"Are they putting it on *their* calendars, too?"

"If you tell them to. I think it'd be great if you said, 'You and I are going to talk about this development goal for the next six months'."

She got an idea. "Why not go from this year's performance review all the way to next year's?"

"That's a great idea, Jillian."



"OK. Set specific development goals and discuss them over time." I could tell she was ready to move on. Then she interrupted herself. "Can you give me an example of what development goals sound like?"

"Sure," I said. "'Increase your executive presence.' 'Think more strategically.' 'Mend fences with your peers.' Those are all development goals."

"But not, say, 'be better with deadlines'."

"That could be a development goal," I said, "if it's a pattern you want the person to improve."

"OK. I'm looking for patterns. Great. What's next in the crash course?"

"Next is the mindset of a coach. And it's hard for some people."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Four words: 'It's not about you.' Period. Not ever." I stopped and looked at her.

3 It's not about you

"Do you mean you're neutral? Because, if so, I remember you did that at the start of my coaching. Your neutrality was helpful."

"I'm glad, Jillian. I try hard to stay aware that the coaching is not about me. If the coaching succeeds, great. But I have to be prepared that it might not."

"But that's crazy, Tom. I'm completely invested in whether my people succeed. I'm their boss! My success is all tied up in their success. It *is* about me."

"But regarding their development, you have to stay separate. Imagine there's a woman on your team and you can see, without a doubt, how she would become a huge star if she would just do this one thing differently. Well, she may not be able to do that thing. Or she may not want to be a star. You have a vision of her, but it's her life. You have to let her choose—because 'it's not about you'."

She smiled, saying, "Well, that sure sucks."



"Doesn't it?" I smiled back. When she didn't reply, I said, "I have two images that help remind me that it's not about me."

Don't scare the rabbits

She nodded for me to continue. I said, "One of my daughters is like a magician when it comes to animals. We have these wild rabbits in our neighborhood. They run from everybody. But she can get right up to them. They let her feed them. They even let her pet them. And it's not just with the rabbits. Once she attracted a swarm of butterflies in a field. Another time, a bird got in our house. The bird was completely panicked until my daughter came. She got it to come to her and she walked it outside."

"Are you serious?"

"I know! Amazing, right?" I went on. "Do you know what I notice? She approaches each animal a little differently. And it doesn't always work. But while it's happening, she is totally focused on that animal and that animal's need. It is absolutely, one-hundred-percent not about her. She does whatever she has to do to get close to that animal."

"Is that my goal as a coach? To get close to the person I'm coaching?" she asked.

"Well, you want to get close enough so you can talk openly about the person's behaviors and thoughts and feelings."

"That's pretty close!"

"So if I don't want to scare off the rabbits, I'm going to watch you for clues. And I'll do whatever I have to do, because it's not about me. It's about you."

She said, "But I can't read people the way you do, Tom. So, it may not be about me, but I don't have a clue how to make it about them."

"That's where the second image comes into play," I said brightly.

What you see is not what they see

"This happened with that same daughter," I said. "We were in a national park about to climb a steep hill that was covered in dark forest. And she said, 'Dad, turn around!' When I did, it was a completely



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different scene. Behind us was a sunny coastal plain. Depending on which way you faced, the picture was radically different.

"My daughter started spinning from one vista to the other. Then she laughed and said, 'Can you imagine two people standing here, looking at each other? One says, 'Oh, look at that fantastic forest!' And the other says, 'What're you talking about? It's the ocean!' They'd never agree!'"

To Jillian, I said, "When you're coaching, you have to remember that the forest that's so obvious to you is completely invisible to the other person. She's seeing ocean. But, since it's not about you, you are going to give up your view and try to see what she sees. I imagine myself standing next to my client, shoulder to shoulder, facing the same direction, looking at the issue from her point of view."

"Perspective taking," said Jillian. "My husband will tell you—not my strong suit!"

"Good luck coaching, then!" We both laughed.

Then, more seriously, she said, "I remember your taking my perspective, Tom. Even though I was pretty hard on myself, you never judged me."

"That's key, Jillian. You can't judge the person you're coaching. They're doing the best they can. If they could do better, they would. One way you're going to help them develop is by trying to see what they see. Be curious. Be interested. They're not 'wrong' because they can't see it your way."

She wrinkled her brow. "But as the boss, there are things I think they should be doing. That's why I'm coaching them in the first place!"

"There's no question that coaching as the boss is hard. So here's a tool that I think helps with this issue."

"Is it going to make me the perfect coach?" she grinned.

"Of course!" Then, "Here it is. Four more words: 'Let them go first'."

She waited.



4 Let them go first

I continued. "Let's say you're going to coach me, and the goal is for me to be more collaborative. Well, you arrived at that goal because you've been thinking about it. You probably have a whole lot to say about it. And you probably have a lot of suggestions, too. Well, you know what? Tough! Let me go first."

"But I have to set the goal, don't I? That's talking about it," she said.

"Yes. But then, stop. Don't tell me all the ideas in your head. Don't tell me your vision for how this is going to change my life and make me a better person or help the department or get me promoted. Instead, say, 'Between now and your next performance review, I'd like to talk with you about being more collaborative.' Then, without giving me any of your opinions, ask, 'What does that goal sound like to you, Tom?' Or 'What do you know about collaboration?' And whatever I tell you, don't start your lecture. It's not about you. It's about them. Keep asking questions."

"And I'd do that because...?"

"Because they're the rabbit. And if you keep asking questions, they'll tell you how to get close to them."

"Really? They will?" She was doubtful.

"Yes. If you are curious about what they're seeing, they will tell you how it looks to them. Then, later, if you've let them go first and haven't judged them, *then*, you can put in a few ideas of your own."

"So I've got to learn all those open-ended questions again," she said with a sigh.

I told her I'd send her some Executive Coaching Tips that would help sharpen that blade. I sent her [this one](#). And [this one](#).

A month after our lunch, she emailed me to say she'd begun coaching her direct reports. And that she was encouraging them to coach *their* direct reports. She'd created a cheat-sheet for them. It read:

- 1 Set specific goals
- 2 Commit time



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- 3 It's not about you
 Don't scare the rabbits
 Try to see their forest

- 4 Let them go first

I emailed her back, saying that, to me, her list looked like *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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