

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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The Narcissistic Executive ▶ 05/07/15

Battling uphill

Sean was battling his boss. And he was losing the war.

The first person to talk to me about Sean was Ronit, the HR executive. "In a world that was fair, Sean would win. But he can't win against Jack. No one can."

Jack stirred people up. Some saw him as a star, blazing a bold path forward for the company. And if some people got burned, well, stars blaze brightly for a reason, right?

Others, the ones who'd gotten burned, seethed at the mention of Jack's name. A lot of people were in that camp. Sean, a direct report of Jack's, was one.

"We really don't want to lose Sean," Ronit told me. "If you ask me, he's the real star. But he has to get smart about handling Jack. If Sean keeps up the war, at some point he's going to lose and then he'll leave."

She told me Sean would have to report to Jack for at least another year, probably more, before a position opened up at his level. "When the time comes," she said, "I hope I'll be able to promote him."

"And make him Jack's peer?" I asked.

"That'll be a battle to watch, won't it?" she said with a laugh.

The battle continues

At our first coaching session, it only took the slightest nudge to get Sean fuming about Jack.

Jack was a credit hogging grand-stander, a self-obsessed, self-deluded, thin-skinned, bloody executioner. Sean's stories about Jack were similar to the ones I'd heard from Ronit. But when Ronit told her stories, she was an observer; when Sean told his, he was a front-line survivor. To him, they were personal. He couldn't talk calmly about Jack.



"I mean, come on!" he said, "how hard is it to say 'thank you'? Or to not name a meeting a 'status report' when all you really want is an audience so you can pontificate about whatever bug is up your ass that day? Really? Is it *that* hard?"

"For him, I guess it is."

"Yeah! I guess!"

"Is it worth your job?" I asked.

After a long consideration, he said, "You know what? Maybe it is."

"Really? Wow. You must be really pissed at this guy."

After another long consideration, he said, "I guess I am, aren't I? And that pisses me off at myself. I shouldn't be fighting with my boss. I know better. But, man, he pushes my buttons."

"I understand," I said. And I did. I had met Jack. He'd been charming but totally self-oriented. He knew best about every topic we discussed—including Sean's coaching. He was eager to tell me the approach he thought I should use with Sean. You see, he had worked with a coach himself (I'd heard he'd burned through three!) and had learned so much, he wanted to share what he knew to help me with the coaching. I humbly accepted his gifts.

Drowning in his image

Back with Sean, I said, "I think there are five important actions when you're dealing with someone like Jack."

"He's a narcissist, isn't he?"

I had known that word would come up. I said, "That's a clinical term and I'm not trained to make a diagnosis. But do you know The Myth of Narcissus?"

"Narcissus? Is that a place?"



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"It is a 'he.' Narcissus is a person in a Greek myth. The myth says Narcissus was so beautiful that, one day, he saw his reflection in a river and couldn't look away. He fell in love with his own image. His beauty blinded him so completely, he couldn't see reality. He leaned in to kiss the river-mirror and drowned. He drowned in his own reflection. Think about that. That's an intense image."

Sean said, "That's perfect. With him, it's all Jack all the time."

"When I meet someone like Jack, I imagine he's wearing a visor in front of his eyes, like a virtual reality helmet. Projected on the visor is a version of the world that's slightly altered. Anything that might make him look bad in his own eyes gets filtered out."

"Like that guy's reflection in the river. He's blind to reality. That's Jack!"

"So if there are complaints about him, well, people just don't understand the situation. Or if other people score a big win, well, that wouldn't have happened without his help. Anything that might distort his self-reflected aura gets erased."

"Like criticism!" said Sean.

"Right," I agreed. "They usually aren't able to recognize themselves in feedback."

"You should have heard Jack when we got our climate survey results. He was full of, 'I don't do that!' And 'That's just wrong!'" Sean shook his head as if dispelling a headache. "OK. So what are these five rules to help me cope?"

Numbers 1 and 2

"Number one is don't take anything he does personally. He's got that filter on, right? So he can't see you. You're barely a background player in the movie he's starring in. So whatever he does is about him, not you. Don't take it personally."

"Easy for you to say. He's not in your face every day."

"He's not in your face, either," I said with a smile. "He's in his own face."

"Ha. Ha," Sean said drily. "Ok. Don't take it personally. As if I have a chance at that!"



I told him I could send him an Executive Coaching Tip about 'don't take it personally.'

"Sure! I'll take any help I can get! What's number two?"

"You really want to know? It ain't pretty."

"Go ahead. Hit me. I can take it."

"'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here'," I quoted.

"Which means what?"

"Remember when you said, 'what's so hard about saying 'thank you'? You wouldn't even *think* that thought unless you still had hope. But hope keeps you locked in a struggle you're never going to win. You have to abandon hope."

"Hope of what? That he'll be a good guy?"

"That, or hope that you can get him to see the light."

"Or hope that he'll change. Damn, you're right. I spend a lot of energy thinking about how to get him to change. But he's not going to, is he?"

"No, he's not. Why would he? From where he sits the view is gorgeous."

"Oh, great," he said, deflated. "So I'm going to suck at not taking it personally, number one. And I'm not so great with number two, giving up hope that he'll change. Can't wait for number three!"

The torture of invisibility

"OK. Here goes. Don't make his mistake. Don't fall in love with yourself."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He's not going to change, so you have to."



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"I knew I was going to hate this one!"

"Seriously, Sean. Don't fall in love with yourself. Don't get dug into your position. Don't think you're 'better' than he is. Don't get stuck thinking you're 'right.' Get off your high horse. Adapting to his needs doesn't diminish you. I bet you do it with your direct reports. Why not do it with him?"

"Cause he never appreciates it."

"And you have to abandon any hope that he ever might!" I wagged my finger at him. "Get over yourself. Do what needs doing. He needs an audience? Be one. And be a good one. He needs to take all the credit? Give it to him. He needs adoration from loyal followers? Do it. Stop thinking you have to 'make a stand' or 'prove your case' or whatever button of yours gets pushed."

"I'm sure that's good advice, but I hate hearing it. I don't want to cater to his crazy needs."

"And I know one reason why." He looked up. "Because it never really matters. When you adapt to your direct reports, you help them grow. And someday they might actually thank you. But with someone like Jack — "

"Can we just call him a narcissist?"

" — you can never make a difference. You can't fill up his cup. Or heal his wound. Or take off his helmet. Or turn off his filter. It's like you're invisible. And feeling invisible is an insult to our being."

"Then why should I make the effort if it's not going to make any difference?"

"Because if you keep being a problem, you'll pay a price. People like Jack are good at retaliation and revenge."

"So I've seen!" he said. "Are you saying I can't ever tell him about a work problem because I might get punished for it?"

"No, but when you talk about the work, mold the issue so it fits inside his reflective screen. Make him the hero of the story."



"Compromise myself to pacify him?" he snorted.

"Hey! Don't fall in love with yourself. You can compromise," I said. "And speaking of 'don't fall in love with yourself,' number four is the opposite."

Numbers 4 and 5

"Opposite how?" he asked.

"Be sure to love yourself."

"I'm certain you'll explain."

"Being around someone like Jack can make you feel invisible—which is infuriating—so you need to be really intentional about finding other ways to get appreciated. Find ways to feel good about yourself outside his sphere. And if you choose to do that with people at work, be careful. You need to be savvy and not whisper in dark corners about Jack."

I saw him absorb this new idea. "Since my boss is never going to recognize me, I need to get recognized somewhere else. That actually makes a lot of sense. I would've never thought of that."

"And finally, number five." Holding my fist in front of my mouth like a microphone, I said, "Locate your nearest exit and be ready to evacuate in case of disaster."

"What! Are you saying I should leave?"

"No, no, no, not at all. The first four rules are all about staying. This is just being a prepared Boy Scout."

"It's that retaliation and revenge thing, right?"

"Right. You never know when you might fall out of favor and find your neck on the block."

"Time to start making some lunch dates and get networking, huh?"

"Consult your calendar!"



Dealing with the Jacks in your life

Is someone in your workplace infuriating? Does he/she seem unable to take responsibility but is a master at excuses? Does he/she shift reality to suit the situation? Does he/she have cherished favorites and deadly enemies? Does this person make you think, "It's always about them"? If so, beware.

Can you rightly call that person a narcissist? Who knows. But the label that's critical to recognize is this one: toxic. Use the five strategies below to stay safe and sane:

- 1 Don't take anything the person does personally.
- 2 Stop hoping the person will change. Not possible. Get real. Move on.
- 3 There is no moral high ground. Don't fight to be "right." Instead, be flexible. And be prepared to humble yourself.
- 4 Get fed outside of work.
- 5 Have an exit strategy.

Several years after Sean's coaching ended, I learned that Jack had taken an offer with another company. Many quiet celebrations followed. Sean was named his successor, an affirmation that he had achieved *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.



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