



The Look & Sound *of* Leadership™ SINCE 1990 *Executive Coaching Tips*

PERSONAL HISTORIES AS YOUR BRAND

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“Tell us about yourself!”

Desmond was competing for a senior executive position. We had spent the first several coaching sessions mapping his political landscape. Now we turned our attention to the interview.

“Will everyone in there know you?” I asked.

“Some only know me as a name and a face. Some know me really well.”

“What have you heard about how they interview?” I asked.

“I know they ask a question I hate,” he said.

“What’s that?”

He made a face and put up air quotes. “Tell us a little about yourself’.”

“Why do you hate that question?” I asked.

He looked away for the briefest glance. “I don’t like talking about myself. Ask me why I’m the best guy for the job? Bang! I’m all over that. But ‘tell us about yourself’? I don’t know where to start. Do I talk about my work? Or do they want to hear about my life? If so, what part of my life?”

“Well, what do you want them to know?” I asked.



Now he looked away and thought deeply. “I want them to know I’ve always been this way. Being great at what I do has always been important to me. I did it from the time I was eleven. Now I’m doing it at the division level. At the president level I’ll still be great at what I do.”

“Why did you mention being eleven?” I asked.

“That was when we came here,” he said. Desmond was Asian and spoke with the tiniest accent. I was guessing he’d come from China or Taiwan.

He went on. “I started working in my parents’ restaurant when I was twelve. I learned English years before they did. I had to do business for them and tell them what was going on. I took that seriously. Being absolutely accurate all the time, and getting stuff done efficiently, you bet. I’ve been doing that all my life.”

I looked at him and asked, “What if that was your answer to ‘tell us about yourself?’”

“That I worked in my parents’ restaurant?”

“Doesn’t have to be *that*,” I said. “But, Desmond, your story is compelling.”

“Because I’m an immigrant?”

Personal Histories for teams

“No,” I said. “Because all personal histories are compelling. Do you know [*The Five Dysfunctions of a Team?*](#)”

“There are only five? Given some teams I’ve been on, I’d’ve said there were more.”

I smiled. “It’s the name of a book.”

He smiled, too.

I explained. “It’s by a consultant named Patrick Lencioni. He’s very generous in the book. He gives you complete instructions on how to build a high functioning team from the ground up.* There’s one exercise he says is fundamental. He calls it ‘Personal Histories.’ I’ve been using it with teams for years, and it’s convinced me that personal histories are compelling.”



“You do this with teams?”

I shrugged and smiled. “I almost didn’t. When I first read the exercise, it seemed so elementary I worried everyone would think it was stupid. But the book says the Personal Histories exercise is a foundational building block for every team, no matter how long they’ve been together. So I did it.”

“And?”

“And it’s amazing. Especially because it’s so simple.”

“Really? This is something I could do with my team?”

“Oh, absolutely!”

“Without a facilitator?”

“That’s the beauty of it, Desmond. You can’t screw it up. And this incredibly simple exercise – it sounds like nothing, believe me! – has the most amazing results.”

“So tell me,” he said.

The Three Questions

“It’s just three questions. Personal history questions. Each person answers: Where were you born? How many kids in your family? What was your most difficult or important challenge of being a kid? And, he says, not your *inner* challenge. Just the normal challenge of being a kid.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” I said. “People’s histories are amazing, Desmond. I’ve heard people say, I was raised by a single mom in a one-room apartment. Or I had a twin sister who died. Or both my parents are deaf. Amazing facts of people’s lives. And when other people hear those simple facts about people they’ve known sometimes for years – it changes how they see each other.”

He tilted his head and gave a little ‘huh!’ He pointed towards an office around the corner. “Susan’s a good example. I’ve met her husband. I know she’s got two kids. I know where they go on vacation. But I have no idea where she’s from or anything about her family. And we’ve been peers for what, six years?”



“Does she know you worked in your parents restaurant? Or that you came here when you were eleven?”

“Probably not. Maybe. I don’t think so.”

“If she knew, do you think it would change how she thinks of you?”

“Change? I don’t know. It might *confirm* some things!” He laughed.

“In a bad way?”

“No!” he said. “No, I think she thinks I’m smart. And I know she thinks I’m efficient.”

“So your personal history would help her understand you’ve been this way a long, long time.”

“Yes, it would.” Then, “So is this what you’d do for ‘tell us about yourself’? Where you were born. How many kids. Biggest challenge?”

“Almost, but not quite.” I held up a finger. “I want to be clear we’re talking about two separate situations that share a tool in common.”

He was listening.

I spread my hands far apart on either side of me, then indicated my right. “This is the team exercise called ‘Personal Histories.’ Everyone answers three questions. Takes about an hour. Never fails.”

He nodded. “Got it.”

I indicated left. “This is the interview question, ‘tell us about yourself’.”

“Which isn’t even a question.”

“Too true!” Indicating both hands, I said, “They both use a tool called ‘Personal Histories.’ But for the interview, I change the tool slightly.”

“Ah!” he said, settling in. We were getting to the idea that had gotten us started.



Personal Histories as your brand

“In an interview, when I’m asked to tell about myself, I’ll do the first two ‘Personal Histories’ questions. Born where. How many kids. But then, instead of the third one, the challenge of being a kid, I’ll tell a learning from when I was a kid. Or a knowing.”

“A knowing like what?” he asked.

“Well, let’s take you. You said Susan knows you’re smart. Is that true? Are you smart?”

“I think so. People tell me I am. I’ve heard that a long time.”

“So it’s something you know about yourself. A knowing.”

“Ah,” he said. “That kind of knowing.”

“When did you first know you were smart?” I asked.

He looked away and thought, but not for long. He smiled at a memory. “When I was fifteen, my parents had a big contract to sign. They had a lawyer but they asked me to look it over, too. I didn’t know a good deal from a bad deal, and I’d never seen a contract, so I just started reading, trying to understand what it all meant. And I found something no one knew was there. It was just standard language, but it could’ve been a problem for everyone. So I asked about it and it got changed. Everyone thought I was the magic whiz kid.”

“Were you?”

“Magic? No. To me it just felt like paying attention and being smart. I had *thought* I was smart, but that was when I *knew* I was smart.”

I nodded as if he’d proven a point. “That’s a great story about a knowing. Knowing you were smart. You could tell a story just like that.”

“Is that what I want to do? Tell a story about being smart?”

“I don’t know, but there’s a way to find out.”

“OK,” he said.



The first step in building your history

“First, picture yourself in the interview. Got a picture of the people?”

“More or less,” he said.

“Now picture yourself leaving. You were great. The people are behind you. Ask yourself, ‘What do I want those people to say about me?’”

“Oh, I see!” He rubbed his hands. “I want them to say I’m fast but not sloppy. That I’m honorable. And, well, I guess I’ll keep smart.”

“OK! Then, for each attribute you want them to say, give them a little personal history story, just like you gave me.”

“The contract story?”

“If that’s how you learned you were fast or honorable or smart, yes.”

He laughed. “This is like making up an origin story for a comic book hero!”

I nodded. “That’s why it’s a little different from the Personal Histories exercise you’d do with your team. There, it doesn’t really matter what fact people tell. It’s all going to be interesting. That’s more like people talking at a party. It’s pretty casual. But for the interview...”

“Yeah, I want to sculpt it. Pick stories that support the attributes. And pick the attributes with intention.” Then he asked, “Can you give me an example of what it would really sound like? How would you answer ‘tell us about yourself?’”

I took in a breath. “I grew up in a fairly exclusive suburb of Chicago where I was the third generation. My parents had both been touched by War World II. I was the youngest of four. And from a very young age, I knew two things about myself. I knew I was a teacher. And I knew I could make things happen by talking.”



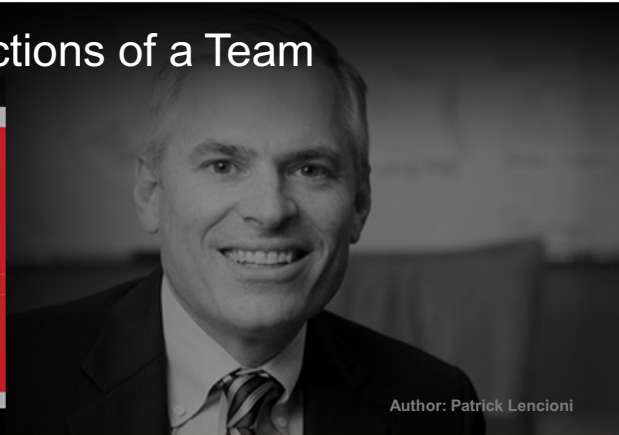
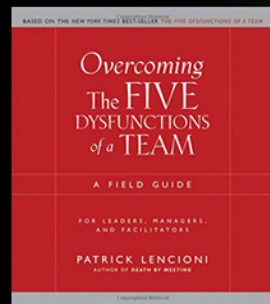
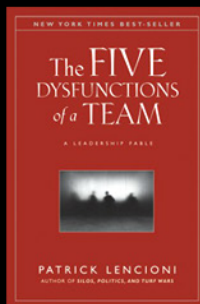
I made a little ‘time out’ gesture, then said, “Then I’d tell a little story about me as a teacher when I was a kid. And I’d tell a little story about me making things happen through words when I was a kid. They’d be stories like yours about the contract. Little portraits that tell how I learned something or came to know something about myself.”

He laughed. “It really *is* an origin story.”

“And the whole thing, start to finish, lasts maybe three minutes. Max. It’s short. But when you pick the right details – like the contract, which is a great story! – that’s going to stick with people. It might even prompt some questions. Or not. But I think the people in the interview will have a different picture of you once they’ve heard it.”

Desmond no longer hated “tell us about yourself” but rather saw it as an opportunity to display *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.”

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team



Author: Patrick Lencioni

****The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* has a juicy story about a team struggling to succeed. In the back of the book, Lencioni teaches *The Five Dysfunctions* and explains at a relatively high level how to overcome them. The tools in this book are useful. Even more useful is *Overcoming The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Field Guide for Leaders, Managers and Facilitators*. This book has detailed, step-by-step instructions for creating a high performing team.**



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