



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

## CONQUERING FEAR

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### Verbal porridge

Elizabeth had my full attention.

She and I were in a conference room in Los Angeles. On speakerphone from Chicago was her boss, Joe. The purpose of the conversation was for Joe to talk about his goals for Elizabeth's coaching. He'd said exactly what we'd expected him to say.

Then he'd asked Elizabeth what she wanted out of her coaching. Prior to the call, confident this question would come up, I'd asked Elizabeth the same thing. She'd been crystal clear: she wanted the coaching to help her gain credibility with Joe so she would get more opportunities. Bingo. Simple.

But now, on speaker with Joe, she was talking gloppy porridge. A minor theme in her feedback report had been muddied communications; I was getting an up-close demonstration of what that meant. She was speaking English but making no sense.

When Joe made a noncommittal response to her porridge, I decided to model directness. I said, "Joe, how would it be for you if one focus of the coaching was how Elizabeth can be ready to take on bigger opportunities?"

Without pause he replied, "That'd be great. I want that, too. How can I help make that happen?"

To Elizabeth I silently gestured "be my guest." My turn was over.

She startled a tiny bit, then said, "I'd like to be presenting at more senior staff meetings."



Joe said, “Sure, that’d be great. I’ve got one next month you can do.” Elizabeth gave a little jerk. “And Tom,” he went on, “you’ll help her with the presentation?”

“If that’s top priority, sure, happy to.”

After we ended the call, I asked Elizabeth how she thought it had gone.

### Ducking and dodging

“Other than the ducking and dodging?”

“Ducking and dodging?”

“Oh, come on, Tom, you heard me babble.”

“Oh! You know you do it? I wasn’t sure.”

“Are you kidding? Of course I know. I’ve been doing it since I was kid. Or some version of it.” Then, like an old vaudevillian, “I gotta million of ‘em!”

“What are you dodging *from*?” I asked.

With directness, she said, “Upsetting people. I know lots and lots of ways to keep from upsetting people. Ducking and dodging is tried and true.”

“Did you sense Joe was upset with me? I don’t think I was ducking and dodging.”

She aimed a finger at me. “I noticed that, Bucko. Think you’re pretty clever, do you? Well, to answer your question, no, I know he wasn’t upset. And he probably won’t be upset when I do it, either. But it scares me. I flinch.”

“Because...?”

“Who knows! Whatever’s the worry *du jour*.”

“What might a worry *du jour* be for you?”



“Maybe that he’ll tell me I don’t deserve it.”

I nodded. “Disapproval.”

“Or that he’ll say no.”

Still nodding, I said, “Rejection.”

“Thanks for the list,” she laughed.

“Well, it’s my list, too,” I said, turning up my palms.

“You know what fear feels like?”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “You think I don’t? How would *that* be possible?”

“You just don’t seem fearful.”

“But I am. It’s just that now, instead of my fear ruling me, I’ve learned to feel the fear and then do whatever it is anyway.”

“Like what?”

“Whatever *my* worry *du jour* is. I’m just like you. And like everyone else. No one’s immune from fear. Everyone worries. You know that, right?”

Taking mock offense, she thumbed her chest in a brag. “Hey! No one worries like me!”

“Hey! You’ve never been around actors!” I said. She knew I used to make my living in television and theatre. I went on. “Have you ever heard the phrase, ‘Feel the fear and do it anyway’?”

### **Feel the fear and do it anyway**

“No,” she said.

“Oh, good,” I said, glad to share this memory. “I first heard it as the title of a book in the 1980’s. [\*Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway\*](#) by Susan Jeffers.”



“Was that when you were still acting?”

“Yep,” I said. “And I knew I wanted some help. My fears hadn’t paralyzed me, but they sure weren’t helping me.”

“And the book did?”

I answered, “That book gave me an idea and that idea has changed my life.”

She touched her heart and laughed. “Holy grail!”

“I remember that idea hitting my brain and feeling as if some locked gate inside me suddenly opened up. I couldn’t keep the idea alive every day at first, but since I had a whole lot of worries, I got a lot of practice. That idea has changed how I think of my fears.”

“So what are these magical words?”

I leaned forward. Slowly, I said, “Any fear you can possibly have, when you really examine it, boils down to just one question: will I be able to handle it? If whatever I’m afraid of actually comes to pass, will I be able to handle it?” I stopped and looked at her.

She considered the idea. “Like if one of my kids died, would I be able to handle it?”

“God forbid. But, yes. Would you be able to handle that?”

“I’ve actually wondered, if one of my kids died, could I still be a mom? If both my kids died, could I still be a wife? And the answer is yes. I would hate it, but I could handle it if happened.”

“Knowing you could handle it – does that make it scarier?”

“No, less,” she said. “That’s why I’ve been thinking about it. Because I don’t want that fear to run my life.”

“Then you completely get the concept,” I said.



### Three kinds of fear

After a moment, she said, "I'm not sure that question applies to every fear."

"How so?" I asked.

"One of my kids dying is something that would happen *to* me. But what about something I do myself? Like making a bad presentation. Or asking for a divorce!"

"In those situations, you don't think the 'could I handle it' question would help."

"No, actually, I guess it does. If I asked for a divorce, could I handle whatever happens? Yes, I could. But it's a different kind of fear from my kids dying."

"I agree, it is," I said. "Jeffers identifies three kinds of fear. You've hit the first two."

She laughed. "The luck of the clueless!"

"First is the fear of something that could happen to you..."

"Like my kids dying."

"Right. Second is the fear of some action you take."

"Like asking for the divorce."

"Right. Both those fears are situational. They're about things that happen. But the third fear isn't situational. It's about you. About your ego. Your sense of self."

"So we're back to things like rejection and disapproval."

"Exactly!" I agreed.

"Or failure," she said.

"Or success!"

"How about being out of control?"



“Absolutely!”

“What about this one?” she said. “In 2009, during the big recession, my husband and I were both out of work. I thought we were going to lose the house. I was terrified most of the year. What kind of fear is that?” Then, answering herself, she said, “Number two. Something happening to you.”

“Could be. Maybe you were also worried about what people would think of you.”

“That, too! Yeah, I really did not want to have to announce that we couldn’t support ourselves. Yeah, that was an ego thing. Number three.”

“So it could be two and three. But for me, no matter which of the three fears has you in its grip, the question to always ask is, ‘If that thing came true, would I be able to handle it?’”

She narrowed her eyes. “I’m going to have to think about this.”

### A sacred relic

Elizabeth announced that, between this session and our next, her homework would be to notice her worries and try to unpack them. She was curious whether she’d always be able to reduce them by asking, “Could I handle it?”

At the next session she reported that, yes, asking herself that question had shifted her thinking.

At the end of our conversation about fear, I gingerly pulled two pieces of paper out of my pad and carefully separated them. Revealed between was a half-sheet of brittle, khaki-colored paper. The words on it, in small flowery font, had been typed on my very first computer.

“Ooh, I love relics!” Elizabeth said, leaning in to see.

“I wrote this for myself when I first read *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. Ever since, whenever I’ve moved, this paper has gone with me and then gone right back up over my bulletin board, directly in my eye line. This paper used to be bright orange!”

I offered it towards her. She read aloud. “If you honestly believed you could handle each and every



thing that came your way, what in the world would you have to fear? Every fear is simply a fear that 'I can't handle it.' She looked at me and said, "So you might as well feel the fear and do it anyway."

I agreed. I feel absolutely certain that, for me, those words pushed me towards *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.™

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