



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

UNDER EXECUTIVE QUESTIONING

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The danger in questions

Carla, Nathan and Lester were part of a leadership development cohort. These three high-potential employees, who had never worked together before, had to co-manage a joint project over the course of a year. The conclusion of the project needed to be a business recommendation presented to the CEO and the entire senior staff.

Now, with the deadline peeking over the horizon, they were preparing their presentation. I was helping them put their story together.

But they were anxious. At every turn in the discussion, one or the other of them would worry, “But what if they ask us *this*?” or “What if they ask us *that*?”

Not knowing their senior team, I asked why they were concerned about getting questions from the executives.

Carla said, “It’s not like they’re aggressive or anything. But they have high expectations of us, and we don’t want to let them down.”

I looked at Nathan and Lester. Lester spoke first. “It’s different for me. For me, it’s all about Bill, my boss. I know the type of questions he’s going to ask me but there just isn’t enough time in this program to find all the answers. We still have our *real* jobs to do! So I’m going to have to say ‘I don’t know’ a lot. I hate that.”



Nathan began, "It's about my boss, too, but..." He stopped and smiled at the others. There was obviously a shared joke among them. He went on. "My boss doesn't care *what* I say. He just wants me up there talking and not standing back."

"He stands back a lot," Carla deadpanned, thumbing at Nathan.

"I do," agreed Nathan. "I stand back a lot. But not this time!"

The others gave him a little hurrah.

I pointed to each in turn. "So, Carla, you don't want to let them down. Lester, you don't want to say 'I don't know.' And Nathan, you feel you need to stand tall. OK. So I'm still wondering why the idea of getting questions from the executives concerns you." I looked at Carla.

"Will I answer 'right'?"

Carla said, "When I'm presenting my stuff, I kick ass."

"That she does," agreed Nathan, thumbing back at her.

"But I can't guarantee their questions are going to be about something I know," she continued. "Let's face it, they could ask me a question from 50,000 feet when I'm only at, like, 18,000 feet. And 18,000 feet is good, but there's no way I'm going to be able to answer their high-level question in a meaningful way."

"Well, yeah, if the only good answer comes from their level," I said somberly, "then you're right, you're screwed."

She laughed. "Thanks a lot!"

"But you're right," I said. "There is no way you can talk from 50,000 feet. That's not a reasonable expectation. If you were at 50,000 feet, you'd have a seat at that table, which you don't. But what you *do* have is your view from 18,000 feet. Because it is your view. No matter how many other people have flown through 18,000 feet before you, what you see is what you see."

"And, Carla, you do see things differently," said Lester.



“Thanks, Lester,” she said. She looked away, clearly thinking about something else. Then she came back to us, saying, “OK, I get it. Wherever I’m at, that’s what I talk about. ‘This is what I know. This is what I think about what I know.’”

“Boom!” I said.

“I can do that!” She dropped an imaginary mike.

The ‘I don’t know’ moment

Lester said, “That idea – talk about what I know, don’t worry too much about the rest, show them that, hey, I’m not worried – that would really help me.”

Nathan thumbed him now. “A lot of eyes are on him at the moment.”

“Go, Lester, go!” Carla whisper-cheered.

He laughed. “It’s true. My sun is on the rise, or whatever it is they say.”

“How is that for you?” I asked.

“It’s good. But it’s a lot of pressure,” he said.

I smiled at him. “So do you like it in the big leagues?”

Lester’s smile got warmer. “I think I do, yes.”

“And it’s hard sometimes to have to say ‘I don’t know’?” I offered.

Lester nodded. “Sometimes I worry that other people in the big leagues would know the answer. And for that moment, I just don’t feel very smart.”

I asked, “You don’t feel smart? Or you don’t like not knowing something?”

Lester thought about that, then said, “I don’t like not knowing.”

Carla asked him, “When you have to say ‘I don’t know,’ do you give a commitment?”



Nathan jumped in, asking, "You mean like, 'I'll get back to you on that?'"

"Exactly," said Carla. "When I have to say 'I don't know,' I add, 'I'll follow up with you on that.' When I offer to follow up, usually one of two things happens. Either they say 'that's okay, no, thanks,' and that's the end of it. Or, if not, I make a note of it and I put in a little time on it and then I really do follow up."

"You do?" asked Nathan.

"You bet! Even if it's only to say I couldn't find the answer or I'm not going any further or whatever."

Lester laughed. "I'm completely stealing that. 'I'll follow up with you on that.' That's good."

Nathan observed, "I bet it stops you from going down a rat hole. If you say you'll follow up, it could stop everyone from getting stuck on one bullet point."

"There's another technique," I offered. "Maybe you're already using it. Do any of you ask back?"

Asking back

Nathan raised his eyebrows like his pants were on fire. "Like asking, 'Are you crazy? What the hell are you talking about?'" We all laughed.

"Like, 'Is this what you mean?'" asked Carla.

"Or, 'What part of that interests you?'" said Lester. "I've seen my boss ask that. It works."

I nodded. "Right. Like that. Asking back begins a little conversation. 'I don't want to assume I understand your question. What did you mean?'"

Lester nodded towards those exalted ones on high. "Because, after all, you are at 50,000 feet and I'm way down here!"

Carla and Nathan both mock bowed.

I answered earnestly. "But I think it's that exactly! 'I do not fly where you fly, so let me be sure I am reading you loud and clear. Please expand.'"



“But if I ask back,” said Lester, “don’t I slow down the proceedings? Like I’m suddenly facilitating the meeting. And it’s not really my meeting to facilitate.”

When I didn’t answer right away, Carla said, “But we do want to show we have opinions. And that we know how to listen critically. We’re not there just to say yes.”

Lester looked at me.

I said, “I think you ask back because you want to do your best. Asking back creates clarity. I think it shows presence.”

Playing the mental game

Carla said, “I like the idea of taking control of the room a little...”

“Better you than me,” quipped Nathan.

“...because when I’m silent too long, I start doubting myself. And if I start doubting myself, I can feel like I’m falling off the edge of the world.”

Lester said, “I have never, for one moment, seen that part of you.”

She gave a little laugh, saying, “Because I’ve learned to fake it!” She went on. “When I start doubting myself, I imagine that the moment *before* I started doubting myself, I was standing on a map that was fully defined. Full color. Bold lines. Solid footing. When I feel the map starting to fade, I’ve learned that no one but me knows the map’s even there. If I can act the way I was acting just one moment before, it’ll all be fine. I just have to not panic, and trust that I’m not going to start tumbling in space like some cartoon astronaut.”

Nathan, very drily, said, “Inspiring. Dire, but inspiring.”

“I learned that lesson a different way,” said Lester. “I used to work with this guy who made regional presentations. He was on the road all the time and for the most part he liked it – except when someone from corporate showed up. Then, he’d flip out. He thought they were watching him to find a reason to fire him. Seriously! He’d get all worked up and say stuff like, ‘I’m going to lose my job! I’m going to lose my house!’ That’s when I knew, I might not know how I stacked up against any one else, but I was way ahead of *this* guy!”



We all laughed. He continued.

“Seriously! He believed all that. It was all in his head. Just like Carla’s map is all in her head.”

“Except hers *works* for her,” said Nathan. “That guy needed medication!”

Lester smiled, “It was still all in his head. And so’s mine. I’ve gotten good at feeling the pressure and just staying calm – keep listening, don’t freak out, don’t get ahead of myself.”

“And yet you worry about saying, ‘I don’t know,’” observed Carla.

“I’m deep,” Lester said.

“What about me?” asked Nathan. “Advice on how to stand tall?”

Standing tall

I asked, “You said you stand back. What does that mean?”

“It means that unlike Lester’s Zen Buddha master, sometimes I feel a little panicked, like sharks are closing in.”

“Oh, Nathan,” said Carla in sympathy.

“It feels like something bad’s going to happen.”

“Do bad things happen to you?” I asked.

He stopped and thought. “No, I suppose not,” he said. “But it feels like they could.”

“Could you use Carla’s idea against the sharks?”

“Act as if my map’s not fading?”

“Act as if you had a stronger shark cage,” I said.



He looked blank for a moment. Then he said, “I’m going to have to take a week off work to think about that.” Everyone smiled.

But I was serious. The antidote for Nathan’s fear of standing tall was well within his capacity, just as Carla and Lester had created antidotes to their fears. After our session, I sent Nathan links to several past Executive Coaching Tips that addressed this mental game in a variety of ways. (See “Read Related Tips” below.) I assured him that no matter where each Tip started, they all pointed towards *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

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