



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

INHABITING EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

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Inhabiting new behaviors

Jenna was not pleased. She'd been expecting a promotion to vice-president but the committee said she didn't *feel* like a VP yet. The committee, recognizing Jenna as a rising star, said they would promote her...as soon as she developed more executive presence.

To show their support, the company invested in a coach for her. And so Jenna and I were brought together.

"How do we do this, Tom?" she asked. "Is there some formula for creating executive presence?"

"There are many," I said.

"Are you serious?"

I was. Having talked with business leaders about executive presence for more than twenty years, I knew many paths through these woods.

I told her, "Given the political climate around here, the 'formula' I think will work best for you – and frankly the one I think you'll enjoy the most – I call 'Inhabiting.' It has three parts."

She sat forward, uncapping her pen. "OK. 'Inhabiting.' What's step one?"



Step One: Observe

“Observe,” I answered. “Collect data. How are you different from the vice-presidents? For example, what are they doing that you aren’t? Do you know?”

She thought, then said slowly, “Nothing I can put my finger on.”

“But there is some difference or the committee wouldn’t have said you need more presence. The idea behind ‘Inhabiting’ is that the gap is behavioral. And you’re going to close that gap by ‘inhabiting’ new behavior. Or stopping old behavior. But you can’t inhabit a behavior until you’ve observed it.”

Using the observations

Jenna’s homework was to document her observations. What behaviors did the VPs have that she didn’t? And what behaviors did she have that they didn’t? And what behaviors of hers did she see mirrored by the VPs?

Knowing Jenna to be a naturally high achiever, I added a caution. “For now, stay with observing. You might be itching to jump in and start *doing* things – adding new behaviors – but that comes later. Your observations are just beginning. Stick with that. Just observe.”

At our next session, Jenna admitted she had been impatient. Observing didn’t feel very active, she complained. But she’d calmed her need to “do” and just observed. She’d built a list long with specific, measurable, behavioral observations.

For example, one way she thought she was like the VPs was efficiency. Her calendar ran smoothly and so did her team’s work. That mirrored the majority of VPs.

She felt she was *not* like the VPs in her energy. She was both too high and too low. Her low energy was in meetings: she noticed the VPs were able to stay tuned in much longer than she could.

Her high energy was when she talked: she noticed she spoke much longer, and at a higher rate of words per minute, than most of the VPs. She felt like a sprinter whereas the VPs appeared to be marathoners.

Nodding towards her rich list, I asked, “Out of all those behaviors, Jenna, if you could pick just one,



which behavior do you think would make the biggest difference in your executive presence?”

Her answer came quickly. “Talking too much. I need to stop that.”

“OK,” I said. “Then that’s the behavior you’ll use in step two.”

“Which is?”

Step Two: Practice

“Practice.”

“Should’ve known.”

I laughed. “Why?”

She said, “I played competitive soccer. I know how to change behavior. That is what ‘Inhabiting’ is all about, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“I thought so. One thing I learned from my years of playing – when you want to change behavior, the only way to make that happen is to practice.”

“I agree! So, Jenna, if you were going to be your own coach, how would you tell yourself to practice this idea of talking shorter?”

“Well, I don’t know yet. But I can tell you this about practice.” She grinned. “Every practice is a good practice. The only sin is not showing up.”

“Wow. That’s great,” I said sincerely.

“A coach of mine said it all the time.”

“So let’s make a plan for practicing talking shorter. How will you practice?”

She thought, then said, “Well, I think I over-talk in meetings. I could practice not over-talking there.”



“OK. Meetings. Good start. Before we dig into that, can I teach you a little trick?” She nodded. “You’ve given the behavior you want to practice a name. ‘Not over-talking.’ I’m glad you’ve named it; naming helps raise awareness. Excellent. But here’s the trick. When you’re creating a name, give it positive action, not negative. So, in this case, instead of telling yourself to not over-talk, you’ll tell yourself to talk shorter.”

It took her only a second before she said, “Oh, I get it. The negative one feels like pulling back on the reins, stepping on the brakes. The positive one feels like stepping on the gas and moving forward. Wow. That’s a powerful shift. Thanks. Got any other tricks for me?”

“Two.” I smiled and said, “First, don’t be an over-achiever again. It’s natural to think, ‘Hey, if I’m going to practice talking shorter in meetings, I might as well practice something else on my list, too!’” I hit an imaginary buzzer and honked, signaling a wrong answer. “Practice one behavior at a time. Just one. Be patient.”

“You’re no fun,” she said. “So what’s the second trick?”

“Practice never lasts long,” I said.

“Ha! Not true in soccer!”

“Well, this isn’t soccer! Imagine you want to practice talking shorter. How would you actually practice?”

After a moment, she said, “I’d try to think of it as often as I can, I guess.”

“I agree. You ask yourself, ‘Am I talking shorter now?’ ‘What about now?’ ‘How about *now*?’ That’s practice. But you can only keep your third eye focused on yourself for so long.” She laughed at the image. I went on. “Pretty quickly you stop focusing on your behavior and start attending to what’s happening in front of you. That’s inevitable. And when your focus shifts away from your behavior, practice is over.”

“And you don’t even know you’ve stopped practicing,” she added.

“Exactly! So practice doesn’t usually last too long. Which is why step three is so important.”

“And step three is called . . . ?”



Step Three: Notice

“Notice,” I said.

She pumped her fist. “Oh, I’m so glad you said that! Our coaches used videotape. I learned so much watching those tapes. I noticed everything. What I did. What I didn’t do. The good. The bad. I learned a ton.”

“Then this should be pretty easy for you,” I said.

She shook her head at a memory. “I had a teammate, Briana. Boy, she hated watching tape. She’d be so hard on herself. She’d say things like, ‘How could I have been so stupid?’ And ‘What’s wrong with me?’ She really beat herself up.”

“Did it make her better?” I asked.

“I don’t think it did! I think she suffered. She couldn’t get over it. So when we went back out to practice, she was all muddled in her head. No, it didn’t help her at all.”

“So what’s the lesson from Briana’s suffering?”

She put her thoughts together, then said, “Just notice. Don’t be a critic.”

Jenna was a star for a reason. “I agree,” I said. “Noticing requires judgment to stay out of the way. Experimenting with new behavior means you’re going to miss the mark as often as not. It’s trial and error. I think it’s hard enough to practice new behaviors without your inner critic pulling up a chair and clicking open the red pen. Notice without judgment.”

“Because every practice is good,” she said in agreement. Then she asked. “So what should I notice about my practice, coach?”

“Even if it only lasts two minutes, ask yourself, ‘How did I do?’ ‘Did I get a different result?’ ‘Why did I stop?’ ‘What would be better next time?’”



“Inhabiting”

She gave a confident nod. “Analyze the game tape. I totally get this.” Then, “But I do have one question, Tom. Why do you call these three steps ‘Inhabiting’?”

I laughed at having given her the in-the-weeds three steps without having shared the 30,000-foot big picture. Whoops!

“I call it ‘Inhabiting’ because, in my life, when I do this, I get to a certain point and feel the shift from consciously working to create the new behavior to having the behavior suddenly manifest on its own.”

“Like a habit,” she offered.

“Yes,” I agreed. “When the behavior begins showing up on its own, it’s like I’ve slipped into a comfortable robe. I’m ‘inhabiting’ the behavior, rather than working at it.”

She nodded. “Exactly. It’s like a habit.”

Jenna got her promotion within eighteen months, which felt just right to her.

Because she was a thirsty learner, she continued developing new behaviors even after the executive presence issue was settled. She used the same three steps – observe-practice-notice – to develop new behaviors during one-on-one’s with her direct reports. She used the three steps in her own staff meetings to develop new behaviors that benefited everyone. Jenna’s commitment to her development was how she displayed *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

The checklist for the “Inhabiting” method of creating new behaviors is:

STEP ONE: OBSERVE

- Think behaviorally. Gather lots of data. Become an expert before jumping to Step Two.



STEP TWO: PRACTICE

- Ask, “Am I doing it now?” “What about now?”
- Strive to stay in awareness as long as possible.
- Misfires are inevitable. That’s how we learn. Leave your inner critic outside.

STEP THREE: NOTICE

- After practice, assess. “How did I do?” “Did I get the results I want?” “What worked?” “What do I want to do differently next time?”
- Push judgment to the side. Noticing is a critic-free activity.

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