ESSENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS

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Executive Coaching Tips

SHORT SOUNDS CONFIDENT

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JUNE 2017

Holding the attention of others is a constant challenge. You can't achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership* if you can't get people to keep listening to you. This month's coaching conversation provides alternatives to some of the most common behaviors that drive our listeners away from us.

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Changing your broadcast channel

Kevin was proud of having been an engineer. Now that he was a corporate vice-president, he saw his technical background as a major asset. His colleagues disagreed.

"Shut him up!" someone wrote in the feedback report I'd created for him. While that was the bluntest comment in the report, it was not unusual. People desperately wanted Kevin to talk shorter.

"But if I don't give them all the information," Kevin said as we discussed his feedback, "I feel like I'm not doing my job. Or they can't do theirs."

"You're helping," I offered.

"Absolutely. What if I know something and don't tell them, then they do something they shouldn't? Or they don't do something they should? I'd be responsible. That'd be negligent."

"Is that what the feedback is telling you?" I asked.

He froze as he ran that question through his mental computer. “No. You’re right. They’re saying they don’t like my engineer-speak, where every detail has to get explained.”

I remained silent.

He gave a wistful little laugh, saying, “It’s like someone took away my decoder ring.”

I’d have thought decoder rings were before his time.

I said, “It’s more like you’ve got a broadcasting ring. It broadcasts in engineer-speak. But no one is tuned to that channel up here. You can keep broadcasting, but people are not pulling you in loud and clear.”

His engineer wheels were turning. “So am I supposed to change my channel?”

“Yes, Kevin, that’s exactly what you and I are going to do. You’re going to change your broadcast channel from engineer-speak to executive-speak.”

He perked up and smiled. “I like the sound of that! Where do we start?”

Change the behavior, change the channel

When I have the chance to talk about how to sound executive, I have any number of ways I might start. I didn’t know what would make the most sense to Kevin. I looked at him.

Finally, I said, “I’ll tell you what I’m thinking. I’m thinking there are many threads I want to follow with you. But I don’t want to start blathering. I really want to give you one little bullet point. And it’s hard to reduce all my ideas down to – no! I know. Here it is. Here’s the whole key to sounding like an executive. Ready?”

“Ready!”

“Short. Sounds. Confident.” I stopped talking.

It was great to watch Kevin when his mental computer kicked in. He snapped to some far away place, then, just as fast, would snap back, having thought things through.

Now he said, “I see people do that up here. They move fast. They talk short.”

“Everyone’s carrying a lot of weight,” I said, having coached two of his peers.

“Short sounds confident.” He mulled the words. “That’s a good phrase.”

“I learned it from one of my early mentors,” I said quietly. He was still thinking.

Finally, discouraged, he shook his head. “It’s a great idea, Tom, but I can’t see myself ever getting there. I keep coming up against this sense that, now that I’m one of them, it’s more important than ever to be sure I tell them everything I know.”

“It’s a sense, right? It’s how you feel.”

“Yes, I should tell people what I know.”

“That’s your belief,” I said. “But I’m talking about behavior. Look, you are welcome to your beliefs. Do what you want with them. Keep them. Don’t keep them. But let’s change the behavior. What do you say?”

Again, he considered seriously, then asked, “Change it how?”

“Can I give you a metaphor?” I asked.

“Okay.” He liked metaphors and spun some good ones himself.

Sort your ideas

“So let’s imagine you and I are talking about some project. Your brain is firing away like it does. You have a whole boxful of ideas. And there are all kinds of things in the box. Some relate to what you and I are talking about, but there are other things in the box, too, because you’re a bright guy and you have lots of ideas.

“So when it’s your turn to start talking, you just take that boxful of ideas and dump it out all over me. All the ideas at once. Jumbled together. Here they come! And since they’re tangled up, all the ideas seem equally important.

“When that happens, you know what I think? I think, ‘Hey, wait a second! All those ideas *can’t* be equal. Some *have* to be more important to you than others. Why is it MY job to sort *your* ideas? They’re yours! You sort them!’ Besides, if I sort them, I’ll probably do it in a way you won’t like. So you do it. Sort your ideas.”

“Before I talk?”

He looked so aghast I laughed. “Yes. That’s the point. You are going to sort your ideas before you start talking.”

“If I have to sort through all my ideas first,” he said seriously, “I might never get started. But I see your point. A lot of times, you’re right, I don’t start with what’s most important. I just dive in.”

“And, for some of your listeners, your first point will be the only one they hear, because they’re going to start talking back the first chance they get.”

He laughed happily. “That is so true! Man, I thought *I* was a bad listener. These folks, they are in first place on that score.” Then he fell silent, following a thought. He made some determination, came back, and said, “It’s lazy. Not pre-sorting my ideas. It’s really sloppy thinking on my part.”

“Kevin, wait. May I reframe that?” I asked. He nodded.

Confidence requires energy

I said, “We’re talking about your default setting, this engineer-speak. It’s your preferred natural behavior. Just because you and I have started examining it, don’t judge it. I don’t think it’s helpful to call it names or make it ‘bad’. That behavior serves you well in certain situations. So how about if we call it something neutral? Or maybe even something good!”

“It does make me effective sometimes,” he said.

“How about if we call it ‘comfortable’? That engineer-speak, with all those details, that is you communicating comfortably. Being natural. OK?”

He smiled. “OK. I like what you just did, by the way. That reframing.”

“Good.” I smiled, too. “But if you want to sound executive, if you want to display ‘short sounds confident,’ you can’t be comfortable as a communicator. You can’t be lounging in some chair with your feet up, your hands behind your head and a drink on the side table. To sound executive you have to sit up, feet on the floor, leaning forward, fully alert. It takes energy. I certainly feel a lot of energy up here. Folks are working hard.”

After the briefest pause, he said, “You did it earlier.”

“Did what?” I asked.

Narrate while you sort

“Remember when I said I might never start talking if I have to sort my ideas first? I was imagining one of my big pauses. I know I stop speaking while I think. I don’t want to replace my engineer-speak with big gaping silences. But you did it perfectly before.”

I waited, fairly certain I knew what he was talking about.

He went on. “You said, ‘Wait a second while I think,’ or something like that. You told me you were thinking. And I waited. And then you said, ‘Short sounds confident.’ I think all that narration beforehand actually got me ready to hear your idea. Like the presenter who says, ‘And now here’s the one big thing!’ Makes you sit forward and listen.”

I nodded. “I hadn’t thought of that, but I see what you mean.”

“You were narrating your thinking. A lot of people wouldn’t be able to do that. Is that part of short sounds confident?” he asked.

"You don't *have* to narrate your thoughts. But you do have to sort them. I understand it's a stretch for some folks. Not everyone has the same capacity for it. Like not everyone has the same capacity for running. Or rock climbing. But I think everyone can pre-sort at least a little and sound a bit more executive."

"Fair enough," he said. "So I have to pre-sort my ideas. And do that, I have to figure out what's important to you."

"Ah, well, that depends. If you really, really, really know what's important to me, like if I've actually *told* you, then, yes, sort your ideas according to what's important to me.

"But," I continued, "most of the time you don't know what's really important to me. So, instead of guessing about that, tell me what's important to *you*. That's what makes you sound executive: articulating what's important to you."

"And tell it shortly." He looked at me and asked, "Right?"

I nodded. "Saying what's important to you in a concise, bite-size way would sound pretty damned executive."

"OK. So, while I'm sorting my ideas in my head, I tell them what I'm thinking. Then I say something like, 'Here's something that's important to me…' And I put the most important thing first."

"Great!"

"Does that change my channel to executive-speak?"

Tell us *why*

"Yes. Plus one more thing," I said. "Tell me why. You can't just say something is important you. You have to tell me why. Why is it important to you? That's what's going to distinguish it as yours."

He thought, then said, "I was wondering, if I were able to sort my ideas, would I also be able to figure out *why* they were important. And the answer is, of course. I know what I think about my ideas. I know

why they're important to me."

"Not everyone does, you know," I said.

"I've noticed," he grinned.

"It's important to tell us *why* because of how we listen to each other. I think all of us, all the time, have an unspoken question revving non-stop in our heads."

"Which is…?" he asked.

"'Why should I listen to this?' I think we ask ourselves that ten times a minute. That's how we listen. And when we don't know why we should listen, we don't. You better tell me why I should listen to you, because a million things are competing for attention in my head."

He laughed, almost fiendishly. "That is true, isn't it!"

"May I give you my final analogy?" I asked.

"You bet!" He fell back and breathed out, fingers laced across his buckle.

I sat straight, raising an imaginary teacup and saucer up to my chest. "When I make the choice to listen to you, it's like I'm extending a little teacup. I'm ready for you to fill it up so I can drink it in. But most people, when they sense that invitation to speak, pull out a fire hose, slam open the nozzle, and blast the hell out of whoever's listening. It's too much to take in. Bye-bye teacup."

He laughed heartily. "I do that! Blast people with information."

"But not any more," I suggested.

"Right! Because short sounds confident."

And sounding confident is one great way to achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership.*

Core Concepts:

- "Broadcast" on a channel your colleagues are receiving.
- "Short sounds confident" means, 'stop talking sooner.' Use fewer words. Talk shorter!
- It is your job to sort your ideas before you speak.
- Talking shorter requires energy. No lounging while communicating.
- Tell us what is important to you and why.

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