

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Sounding Well-Spoken ▶ 06/21/06

Can you think of anything you do that is its very best the first time you do it? I'm not talking about something where you're the receiver like reading a mystery or tasting a new food, but some act that you perform. Is there an action where your performance is at its peak the first time you do it?

For years I've asked this question to groups and so far I've never heard an answer that held water. Why? Because performance improves after you've done something at least once. That's why professionals rehearse in private.

Why is this important? Here's a story.

Chris, a rising star in a global sales group, is articulate, funny and competitive. She likes handling tough situations on the fly. She calls it "juggling hand grenades." And she's pretty good at it. But not quite as good as she thinks.

We'd been discussing a piece of feedback she'd received. Her homework was to clarify the feedback and get back to me. One morning I got a voicemail from her. She was, as always, bright and friendly but she also was clearly sorting her thoughts as she was speaking. She spoke hesitantly and had to begin two sentences over again to make sense. Then when she was done, she repeated her entire message again! It was not Chris at her best.

I transferred the message and played the entire two and a half minutes of it at our next session. She was mortified. "If I ever did that with a client I wonder what they'd think of me," she said. Then she stopped and said, "Gosh, I probably *have* done that with a client. Okay. What do I have to do so that never happens again?"

"Think before you speak," I answered.

Let me turn this around on you. Think about voicemail you receive. Are there people who consistently leave you concise, articulate messages? If not, don't you wish there were? If there are those people, don't you prize them?



My point is simple: Don't you want to be one of the prized people? It's not hard. Here's how.

The next time you reach for the handset to make a call, stop and ask yourself, "What do I want to tell this person? How many different points do I want to make?" Once you've done a little sorting in your head, *then* dial the phone. If you get voicemail, lead off with how many points you've got. "Hi, Dana. I'm calling about three things. First, the meeting in Denver..." If, on the other hand, you happen to get Dana herself, well, you'll be even better prepared.

Voicemail is a great way to practice *Think Before You Speak* but of course the skill applies to any situation where you're going to speak. I regularly observe staff meetings and know it's a sad fact that people who present crisply and concisely are a rarity. The vast majority of people sound like Chris' voicemail: slightly inarticulate and often redundant. Why? Because they're thinking about their content for the very first time. It's a strain to stay tuned in to these speakers so they're often not seen as "A" players. Don't let that be you.

Think Before You Speak doesn't have to be a burden. You don't have to stop your day and do a minute-by-minute run-through of your material. But you do have to consciously think about what you're going to say before you say it.

The statistic I see cited most often is 10-1: one minute of thoughtful planning increases performance tenfold. One minute! So even as you're walking to the meeting it's not too late to ask yourself, "What do I want them to know? How many parts does this have? How can I label each part?" If you don't *Think Before You Speak*, then every time you talk we're hearing your rehearsal. And, frankly, we'd rather not.

Questions to ask yourself before speaking:

- 1 What ideas am I trying to communicate?
- 2 Exactly how many ideas are there?
- 3 What would be good labels for each idea?

By the way, if you have an answer to the question at the top of this Tip, please let me know. I'll mention it in my keynotes because it will be unique!



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