



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

## INFLUENCE

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Who wouldn't benefit from heftier influence? This month's coaching conversation digs into three ideas to help build your influence.

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### Responsibilities without authority

Jared was pissed. And he was making no secret of it.

Assigned to a special projects team, he had responsibilities but no authority. He felt he spent all his time pleading with people for resources or work hours. But people had their own jobs and their own responsibilities. They said they wanted to help. They gladly put Jared on their "to do" list. But, with no authority, Jared just had to wait.

Feeling constantly stonewalled, Jared asked for help and was given a coach with the goal of increasing his influence.

During our very first coaching conversation, I heard Jared lament, "I know I'm not being very influential. I can see that! But I don't really know why."

Over many sessions, I learned how Jared approached people and how those conversations went.

At one point I observed, "It sounds like one of your natural strengths is your ability to strongly make your case." I emphasized those last three words.



“I’m glad to hear you think so!” he said. “I think so, too! So why can’t I get anything done?”

I asked Jared if I could tell him a story. He said yes. I waited while he changed positions.

### **Home front shortages**

Then I began, “This takes place back during World War II. On the home front. There were all kinds of shortages. Gas shortages. Rubber shortages. And food shortages. One food shortage was meat. One solution to that problem was to have women buy less regular meat and, instead, buy more organ meat. Hearts and livers and tongues. Those cuts of meat.”

“Tongue! My grandmother cooked tongue!” he said.

I laughed. Then, “Here’s where the story really starts. The government saw this as an opportunity to learn something about influence. They designed two different methods for influencing women to use more organ meat, then they measured which method was more effective.

“In one town, they’d hold a meeting in a library or a school or a church. They handed out recipes. They showed charts. They presented pictures. They gave lots and lots of reasons why the women should use more organ meat.

“In another town, they’d go in and meet in someone’s home. They’d sit down with small groups of women and say, ‘Help us out. We want this whole town to use more organ meat. We know it’s not popular. But suppose you had to convince your neighbor next door. How would you do it?’

“And then, instead of the government having the ideas, like in the first town, the women came up with ideas themselves. Were they great ideas? It didn’t really matter, because what was really being measured was which of the two methods would create more compliance – in other words, which method had more influence.”

### **Involvement = influence**

“I assume it was the second town!” he said.



“Why do you think so?”

“Well, in the second town the women were more involved. They were in small groups.”

“And why does that matter?” I asked.

“I don’t know. You’re closer to the action. You get to have a say. Everyone wants to have their say.” He went on. “Another thing that second town did better was to have the women come up with the solutions themselves. When it’s your idea you’re more likely to do it, right?”

“Seems you don’t think the first town’s method was very influential,” I said.

“It might have been, sure. But I still like the second one better. In the first town, the government was the only one doing any talking, like they were telling the women what to do. Nobody likes to be told what to do.”

Hesitantly, I said, “So could we say that, in the first town, the government was really good at ‘making their case’?” I paused, hoping he’d hear my echo to his own style.

He did. “Oh my gosh. Is that what I’ve been doing?”

“I don’t know. Is it?”

“Maybe!” He slowed down. “I’m certainly not being like the second town. I’m not involving people. I’m just telling them all reasons they should help the special projects team.” Then, he cocked his head. “So how would I involve people?”

### **Involvement through questions**

“Great question,” I said. “What do you do in other situations?”

“Well, when my direct reports tell me they aren’t going to be able to do something, I ask them two questions. ‘What’s stopping you?’ and ‘How can I help?’” He laughed with surprise. “Those questions would sure change my conversations, wouldn’t they?”



I agreed, saying, “They do sound more like the second town.”

He asked, “Is this a legitimate influence technique?”

“Getting people involved? Having them participate in the solution? Asking them questions? Absolutely!” I said. “I think of it like giving people a test drive.”

“I like that! Get them in the driver’s seat, they’re more likely to buy!” He wrote his two questions on his pad, then said, “Got any other tricks up your sleeve?”

### **Matching = influence**

“I do. It’s separate from involving people. I call it matching. Maybe you already use it. I’ve been using it for years. It can be great for influence.”

“I don’t know if I use it or not,” he said. “Can you explain matching?”

“Sure! You can match someone in any number of ways. For example, I could match your breathing. Or I could match your rate of speech. Or your expressiveness. Or lack thereof. Those are all behavioral ways I could match you.

“Or,” I said with emphasis, “I could match your preference for how you communicate. I match people’s communication preferences all the time. I don’t know that you would’ve noticed, Jared, but I do it with you.”

“How? What are you matching?”

“Do you remember I asked your permission to tell you that story about the women and meat?”

“Yes,” he said cautiously, not knowing where this was headed.

“I did that because you and I are calibrated differently when it comes to storytelling. To me, everything is a story to me. But you’re a data guy. You’re not always ready to receive a story. Or at least that’s my sense. So that’s where matching comes in. I pay attention to how you prefer to communicate and I try to match



your preference.”

“And tell me again, why, exactly do we want to match someone’s preference?”

“Because we all like to work with people who are like us,” I said. “If you sense that I’m like you – that we match – lots of things get easier. Communication. Attributions. Affinity. Matching makes all those easier.” Then I laughed. “At least that’s the hope!”

“What do you mean?” he asked, sensing another story.

I shook my head, still smiling. “At one of the very first companies where I ever consulted – this was when I was a baby, baby consultant – all the employees had completed a behavioral self-assessment called **DiSC**. And it just so happened that I had gotten certified in DiSC. This was a huge gift for me. I felt like I knew something!”

“DiSC is some sort of test?” he asked.

“An assessment, yes. It measures four behavioral preferences. Each person prefers **one of the four styles**. It’s simple and helpful. I love it. I still use it. It’s great.

“Well, this company did something fantastic,” I said. “They posted each person’s DiSC profile right next to their nameplate. So I could stand outside someone’s office, glance at their profile, then walk in and match the person right off the bat. Sounds great, right?”

Smiling, he said, “But...?”

### **Resistance to flexing your style**

“In DiSC, one of the four styles doesn’t like to chat. They think chat is a waste of time. They might even view chat with suspicion. Well, three of this company’s leaders were that style. So intellectually I knew that if I wanted to match with these leaders, I had to go in and get down to business. No chatting! Easy enough, you’d think.



“However!” I held up a finger dramatically, “I am the product of my parents’ household where, as young children, my siblings and I were taught a set of behaviors. Like, for example, I was taught how to shake hands.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, dead seriously! Shaking hands was a thing you learned. And you learned to look someone in the eye while you were doing it!”

“How old were you?”

“Young. Six, seven, eight. And, here’s the point of the story, we were also taught to chat. It was drilled into us that chat was something everyone with good manners was supposed to do. If you didn’t chat, you were rude and inconsiderate. Chat made you a better person!

“So there I am sitting with this one leader, knowing I should cut to the chase, skip the chat. But all my programming was screaming, ‘Don’t be rude! Chat!’”

“And what happened?” he asked.

I laughed. “I started sweating buckets. But I didn’t chat. I probably looked like I was having a heart attack, but I did cut to the chase. And I could tell it was better than if I’d tried to chat with her.” More seriously, I said, “What I learned about matching is to do two things. First, notice the other person’s style – which, by the way, is why an instrument like DiSC can be so helpful. And second, learn to flex your own style. That can take a lot of practice.”

Nodding his head, Jared took out his pen. “So for me to have more influence, I need to stop ‘making my case.’ Stop telling everyone all the reasons why I’m right. I need to ask what’s getting in their way and how I can help.”

I gave a thumbs up but didn’t speak.



“And match them,” he went on. “Notice how they like to communicate and then adopt their style. Everyone has their preferences, right?”

“Indeed they do!” I said, feeling certain each of these ideas would help Jared get his influence back on the path towards *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

**Core Concepts:**

- When we like people, we’re more likely to allow them to have influence.
- Matching is a powerful way to build influence.
- When you meet resistance, offer help.
- Don’t “make your case.” Understand theirs.

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