

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Speaking for Yourself ▶ 07/12/06

Karen's mandate from her division president was to "be more executive." A natural relationship builder, Karen originally thought being more executive meant holding people more accountable and being more efficient with time. But data collected from her peers and direct reports revealed something quite surprising: they all had widely divergent experiences of her. No one really knew who Karen was or understood her vision for her department.

Observing Karen in action, I saw that she was high in empathy and was able to accurately reflect what she heard. This made her very likeable. However it did not make her "executive." To do that, we worked on a skill I call *Speak for Yourself*.

There are three voices you can use as a leader: "The I Voice", "The We Voice", and "The You Voice." Each is valuable at the right time. But all too often the "You" and "We" voices are used inappropriately. When they are, they cause confusion, emotional distance and frequently make the leader sound as if she's ducking responsibility. That's what Karen had been doing and it was a major factor in the foggy picture people had of her.

The *Speak for Yourself* skill is at the core of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™. It injects passion and clarity into your style. Here's a crash course in how to develop it.

First, learn to identify it. Here's what it sounds like versus what it does not sound like.

"I'm proposing we add thirty minutes to our staff meetings." (Yes!)

Versus: "We could really use more time in our staff meetings, don't you think?"

"I'd like more time to think about that." (Yes!)

Versus: "One shouldn't rush into decisions like this."

"I'll find out the answer and get back to you." (Yes!)

Versus: "We're going to want to research that before we get back to you."

"Here's my idea." (Yes!)

Versus: "Let's think about this a different way."



Leaders who employ *Speak for Yourself* signal high self-esteem and self-awareness. They present themselves as responsible and accountable. Their messages are clear and easy to hear.

Some people call speaking this way, "I" statements. That's fine. But please note that not all the above examples begin with (or, in some cases, even contain!) the word "I."

As she explored the *Speak for Yourself* skill, Karen expressed concern that this direct style might stifle debate. Actually, the opposite is true. When you "Speak for Yourself" and own your position with clarity, you permit others to speak for *themselves* which encourages more differing opinions, not fewer.

The opposite of *Speak for Yourself* is speaking for no one. Here are some actual examples I heard in just the past few days.

"It might be good to consider this."

"You could get upset if someone said that to you."

"Some people just don't care about the quality of their work."

"You just learn to live with nervousness."

"You should always offer people alternatives." (This last example not only speaks for no one, it also uses "always" which, along with "never," usually results in an inaccurate statement.)

There's no real accountability or ownership in those statements. Listen to conversations around you. Over and over people speak for no one when in fact they could speak for themselves. Don't get me wrong, "The You Voice" can be compelling when used appropriately. For example:

"It seems to me you struggle with the details in these reports."

"The email you sent came at just the right time and set just the right tone."

"Your team needs you to hold them accountable."

Use "The You Voice" when you want people to know you're speaking directly to them, either as an individual or a group.

"The We Voice" is terrific, too, as long as we, your listeners, know who "we" are. At a recent presentation, I heard a sentence where "we" was used three times, each time referring to a different group. Talk about confusing! To be effective, be sure you define who "we" is when using this voice.



Don't default into using "we" when you really mean "I." If you do, you'll end up sounding like Queen Victoria ("We are not amused") or an elementary school teacher ("We're going to work on this all together").

*Speak for Yourself.* It makes you visible. Accountable. Dependable. Executive.

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