

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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COMMUNICATIONS**

TELE 818.788.5357  
info@essentialcomm.com  
www.essentialcomm.com

## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

**Holding People Accountable ▶ 08/02/06**

I recently attended a personal growth workshop. The morning of the first day, the leader read a list of behaviors she wanted us to commit to. One was about confidentiality, another was about respectful interactions and so on. One I particularly liked was about punctuality. It went like this: "At the end of each break I agree to have my butt in my chair by the time the music ends." She then played the music. Most of us recognized it as the opening to "2001: A Space Odyssey." We laughed appreciatively.

After reading the entire list of behaviors, the leader said rather formally, "All those who agree to abide by these behaviors, please indicate your agreement by standing up." We stood. She looked around at us then asked us to sit. Then she formally invited all who disagreed to stand. No one did.

At the end of the first break, the stirring fanfare began to play. People raced for their chairs. The music built to its long, final note. In the silence that followed, we saw there were two empty chairs. The leader turned to a staffer and said quietly, "There are two people who've broken their agreement. Would you please close the door and wait outside for them?" The staffer went quickly and the leader launched into the next segment of the workshop. In a few minutes, one person, then another, entered the room and swiftly took their seats. The leader seemed to do nothing at all about their having been late.

Intrigued, I approached the leader at lunch and asked what had happened out in the hallway to the two latecomers. With a smile she replied, "Why don't you ask them?" So I did.

They both told the same story. When they'd arrived at the closed door, the staffer had asked them, "What was your understanding of the agreement about punctuality?" After they'd told their understanding, they were asked, "Did you stand up to show your agreement?" They said they had and then were asked, "Do you agree that you broke your agreement?" To which they answered, "Yes." At that point the staffer opened the door for them and they came in.

I smiled when I heard this story because it's a wonderful model for holding people accountable. The steps are:

- 1 Set a clear, unambiguous expectation.
- 2 Get clear, unambiguous agreement to the expectation.



If the expectation is not met:

- 3 Ask what their understanding of the expectation was.
- 4 Ask if they acknowledge they broke the agreement.

This is personal accountability in a simple and direct form.

As you strive to hold people accountable, be sure you're being unambiguous with your expectations. Get clear! Then, if people don't meet expectations, don't begin by talking and teaching, begin by asking and listening. Get people to acknowledge that they broke their agreement. It's powerful.

Here are two codas to the workshop story.

First, I was impressed that throughout the weekend, as various people were late, no one on the staff sought to create any feelings of guilt or shame about the broken agreement. People were treated like adults. They were asked if they'd broken an agreement and were left to live with that acknowledgement.

Second, one person was repeatedly late. Over the weekend, as she repeatedly broke an agreement we all were keeping, she seemed to move herself further and further to the fringes of the group. By the end of the weekend, she was one of two people who didn't seem to get much from the workshop. Interesting.

In the world of work, when someone repeatedly breaks an agreement you're left with a tough choice. If you've really taken the four steps above, then it's reasonable to believe that the person's behavior most likely will not change. While there's no one-size-fits-all solution here, it's clear that you need to weigh your options, be decisive about your next steps, and then communicate your decision clearly to everyone who's affected by it. Tough stuff. But that's why you're the boss.

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