

# *The* Look & Sound *of* Leadership

*Executive Coaching Tips*

## **COACHING UNDER ATTACK**

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### **Interrogation begins**

“You’re not a business coach,” Charlotte stated, looking at me squarely. Was there a challenge in her statement? I wasn’t sure.

I had done a lot of homework prior to this meeting with Charlotte. She was the newly installed president at a consumer goods company where I’d been coaching the past six years – [until she had arrived](#). Since then, I’d had no work at her company. Recently, surprisingly, she asked to meet me.

My contacts in the company helped me prepare a report for Charlotte showing the history of my work there. They also told me it was likely she would grill me. If that was to be the game, I was ready. Given her opening statement, I wasn’t certain if the grilling had just begun.

I answered Charlotte agreeably, “You’re right, I’m not. I’m a professional coach, but not a business coach.”

“You think they’re different.” Again, it was a statement, not a question.

“I do. I think business coaches are subject matter experts. They have deep knowledge of a function or a sector. But professional coaches, like me, work across all sectors and all functions because everyone needs professional development.”

“Really? Everyone? You believe everyone needs development?”



“Absolutely.” This felt like such a softball question, I wondered if there was a trap in it, so I asked, “Don’t you?”

“I surround myself with smart people. I don’t want them to have a lot of development needs.”

“Understandable. Even so, the needs are there,” I said. “They may not be derailers, but I’ll bet you could name a few things you’d like each of those people to do differently.”

“That I could,” she answered seriously.

“So they have needs. It doesn’t mean they need coaching. Some people never do. But sometimes someone is too valuable to lose, but she’ll never reach her potential unless she learns how to lead a team or learns to handle herself better in front of the executive committee. That’s where my kind of coaching can help.”

“Her boss should be able to coach her,” she said with a jerk of her chin. “I want my leaders to coach and [develop their people themselves.](#)”

“And sometimes they can,” I said. This was feeling less like a conversation than an interrogation.

I consciously kept my tone light and non-defensive. “I’ve been talking with leaders a lot the last few years about coaching their people. Picture someone at your level. You’re already working long days with little or no time to reflect. You can sustain it, but your capacity is pretty much at the ‘full’ line. Then your boss says, ‘Oh, and we’re going to tie your bonus to how well you coach your people. So do a lot of coaching this year’.”

She gave the tiniest snort, which might have indicated a laugh of recognition. Or derision.

I went on. “The leaders I talk with, first of all, don’t have the time to give coaching the attention it requires to get results. And, second, they often don’t know how to coach. Or it’s not their natural strength.”

“So they hire you instead.”



### Why an outside coach?

I made light of her comment with a smile, saying, “Exactly.” She did not smile back. I went on. “That’s where I become the subject matter expert. That sort of professional development is my meat and potatoes.”

“So that’s the goal of your kind of coaching. Professional development.” She did not sound enthusiastic.

“The general goal for executive coaching is to help you get past whatever barriers are blocking your particular path.”

I knew the report I’d generated for her was on the table in front of her. She touched it now, saying, “75% of the people you’ve coached here have gotten promoted. I see Richard was one of those.” Richard reported directly to Charlotte. I had coached him four years ago, long before she had arrived.

Charlotte went on, “What sort of barrier was blocking his path?”

In a convenient coincidence, Richard was one of the people I had talked with when preparing for this meeting. I had expressly told Richard what I would like to say if his name happened to come up.

He’d been fine with my suggestion, so I felt comfortable saying, “When I met Richard, the feedback about him was that he was brilliant. Everyone agreed he’d be a senior leader one day. But he had sharp elbows and if he didn’t learn how to play nice in the sandbox, he wasn’t going to get to be with the big kids. And that’s what we worked on.”

“His boss couldn’t have done that?” Her bias was clear.

“Not the way I can,” I said. “When I show up, I have nothing else to talk about. It’s like a time out from business as usual. I’m only there to focus on that one thing. And I listen in ways most bosses don’t.”

“Which is what?”

“Two ways. First, I believe people have a deep desire to tell their stories and be heard. When I show up committed to listening, they talk in a way that’s often new to them. It’s why years later, when people see me, they light up and give me long hugs. Most people don’t get [listened to in that way](#). When they do, they feel they’ve been given a gift.”



I waited a second. She was silent. I went on.

“Second, I have no private agenda. I’m not the boss. I’m not from HR. I’m not your husband or your wife. I don’t have any skin in the game except to help you achieve success – however you define that.”

“But you must have an agenda. The company’s paying you. You have to support their goals.”

“Absolutely. Good coaching can’t happen without clear goals. And the organization’s goals are often what drives the coaching.”

“So you *do* have an agenda,” she said as if scoring a point.

“I want the coaching to succeed, yes. I suppose that’s an agenda. But I know I can’t *make* anyone achieve their goals. If they’re not ready to learn, I won’t be able to teach them. But since that’s the only reason I’m there, I’ll use every tool I have. And I have a lot of tools.”

### **Touchy-feely therapy nonsense**

“Tools,” she said. I assumed it was a question.

“Mental models. Analogies. Stories. Tactics. If people like to read, I send them books. If people like to reflect, I give them homework.”

“Give me an example of a mental model.”

“Here’s one I use in almost every coaching engagement: ‘In order to be an effective executive, you have to do two things every day: you have to hit your goals and you have to build and maintain positive relationships.’ That’s a mental model. I used it with Richard. He was high in task and not nearly as high in relationships. We talked about that a lot.”

“And now he’s a different person.” She sounded skeptical.

“I hope not,” I said, trying to sound light, as if she wasn’t attacking me. “He learned new skills and he’s displaying new behaviors, but his personality didn’t change. Coaching can’t change anyone’s personality.” I decided to throw in a little humor. “Once people get coached, they often show up differently. Lots of my clients tell me the person who’s most excited about their coaching is their spouse!”



There was no hint of a smile. She asked, “Isn’t this just corporate therapy?”

I kept reminding myself to stay calm and conversational. “I’m not a psychologist. The work I do with people isn’t psychological. Richard and I didn’t delve into *why* he had sharp elbows. We just worked on his behavior.”

“The two connect, surely,” she said. “I wouldn’t have sharp elbows if there wasn’t something going on psychologically.”

Did she know she just spoke in the first person?

“I’m with you on that,” I said. “And I may help you think differently about an issue, but I’m not going to help you develop psychologically. Heck, we don’t have time. We usually only have six months.”

### **Do people change? Really?**

“How do you teach someone to lose their sharp elbows?”

“One way is feedback. Richard’s feedback report was crystal clear – what people loved and what they didn’t. People’s verbatim comments made a big impression on him. He didn’t like that he was having a negative impact on people.”

“The gap between intention and impact,” she said.

“Yes, I talk about that with people all the time.”

“So do I,” she said. “People hear the feedback but they’re slow to change.”

“Often,” I agreed.

Then she spoke at length about giving people feedback but not seeing any change in the behavior. After one example that seemed to particularly frustrate her, she fixed her stare on me and said, “If someone has been hearing the feedback from people at work and people at home, you’d think they’d change.”

“Wouldn’t you?” I agreed.



“But they don’t.” Then, again skeptically, “But you’re saying with coaching they do.”

“That’s my experience. Many do.”

“Why?”

“Three reasons. First, the population. In the bad old days, coaching was given to poor performers. So the results were poor. But now coaching is seen as an investment for high performers. So the population is better and the results are, too.

“Second, getting coached is like going to the gym on a schedule with a trainer. If you work with someone knowledgeable, and you work out regularly, you’re going to improve.”

“And number three?”

“Importance. Usually by the time I show up, the person has missed an opportunity – or two or three – and she doesn’t want to miss another.”

“And executive opportunities can be rare.”

“At your level, very rare! Plus, at the executive level, everyone is smart. Everyone is expert. Everyone works hard.”

“So the skills you teach are even more important.”

“They’re often the differentiator.” Then I took a risk, not knowing how she’d answer the question I was about to ask. “If you had two candidates who are equally skilled, would you choose the one people want to follow?”

“You think that’s teachable,” she said, not answering the question.

“Absolutely. Not everyone is ready to learn it, but is it teachable? Sure.”

“What’s the trick to being someone people want to follow?”



I smiled. “In a nutshell? That mental model I mentioned: balance tasks and relationships. Kick butt and be likable.”

“I have the first half,” she said, leaving the second half of the equation unspoken. “Which is why I’d like you to coach me.”

The fact that I said, “That’d be a pleasure,” without showing my enormous surprise, without even a blink, was, I think, one of my finest displays of *The Look & Sound of Leadership™*.

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