

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Choose the Impression You Make ▶ 08/31/05

A client recently got some tough feedback from his four-year-old daughter in the form of a question. While absorbed in a report from work, his little girl asked, "Daddy, why are you angry?"

One reason I like this guy is because he's open to feedback. He responded by asking, "Do you think I'm angry?"

"Well," she said without hesitation, "you *look* angry."

For months he'd been struggling to understand feedback from his staff. He perceived himself as encouraging, positive and enthusiastic, but his feedback revealed words like intense, serious and down beat. The mismatch between his self-image and his feedback troubled him deeply. But his daughter's question gave him the "ah-ha!" he'd been seeking.

His insight? When lost in thought, he scowls which makes him appear angry. Since this guy spends a lot of time lost in thought, it was no wonder his team experienced him as "intense"!

This story illustrates the concept I call "neutral."

"Neutral" is what you project to others when you're absorbed in what you're doing.

Think you're just glancing through a report or answering email or pouring a cup of coffee? Think again. Chances are someone is experiencing your "neutral." Your unguarded moment becomes part of the impression you make on people.

I can't tell you how often I'm brought in to help someone whose feedback is, "She just doesn't feel like a V.P." In those instances, the person's "neutral" is often one of the stumbling blocks.

You experience "neutral" in other people. You walk down a hall and catch a glimpse of someone at their desk. Or someone walks past the elevator doors just as they're closing. Or, across the lunch-



room, you observe someone paying the cashier. In every case, after the briefest glance, words leap to your mind: “competent” or “stressed out” or whatever. Here’s the shocker: in just such moments, people are assigning words to *you*.

I don’t suggest you adopt a relentlessly upbeat persona like some deranged cheerleader. But I do believe you should choose the impression you want to make in all those little “unconscious” moments. To do that, you can’t be unconscious.

Carry the weight that comes with being a leading actor on the corporate stage: people are watching you and making up their minds about you without knowing you well. Is it fair? Who knows. But, hey, we’re all acting on the corporate stage. And knowing how to act can make you a star.

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