



Hosted by Tom Henschel

## How Leaders Can 'Play Better Poker'

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A missed promotion prompts a leader to complain to her CEO. The CEO responds by getting her a coach, which results in explorations of authenticity, self-awareness and self-management.

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### A missed promotion

Ritu had expected a promotion. Not only did she not get promoted, but a peer, whom Ritu thought a much less effective leader, *did* get promoted. Ritu complained to her boss, the CEO, Delwin.

I had led Delwin's offsites for years and had come to know him as a studious man who preferred to avoid conflict. His response to Ritu's complaints about not getting promoted was to give her coaching with me.

I began the coaching engagement by collecting data about Ritu.

When I asked Delwin what success would look like for her coaching, he said, "She has to stop being so reactive. She's emotional all the time. She'll be in a meeting, hear an idea and blurt out, 'That's ridiculous!' It's insulting. Or she'll come to me and propose a project and expect me to green light it just because she gushes about how great it's going to be. You'd think by now she'd know I make decisions based on data. She has to calm down."

In Ritu's 360-degree feedback report, two words were repeated over and over from every

stakeholder group: 'emotional' and 'reactive.'

As we discussed the report, Ritu said, "It's not a surprise. That's who I am. Always have been. Heck, I was probably eight or so when my older sister started calling me Queenie, as in 'Drama Queen.'"

"So the report feels accurate," I observed.

"I didn't think it'd be so obvious to everyone, but, yes, it's accurate. But what am I supposed to do? This is the real me."

"You're being authentic," I suggested.

"Right! What you see is what you get!"

I asked, "How much do you suppose being emotional and reactive was a factor in not getting promoted?"

"Knowing Delwin? Probably a lot!"

"Why do you think so?" I asked.

### **Is authenticity a liability?**

"Well, just look at our DiSC profiles," she said, referring to the behavioral assessment I'd done with the team several years earlier. "I'm way out at the edge for being expressive, and he's on the exact opposite side, on the edge for being cautious. We couldn't get further apart."

I asked, "You think that's why he didn't promote you? Because your style is different from his?"

"Doesn't seem fair, does it? My clients love me. I'm closing deals left and right. I'm racking up better numbers than Melissa!" She was referring to her recently promoted former peer.

I asked, "Do you remember Melissa's style? Are she and Delwin a match?"

"No," she said, "she's actually closer to me than to him."

"But she got promoted and you didn't. How do you make sense of that?"

"She's a suck up," she said, reacting emotionally.

I said, "Ritu, can I repeat back what I'm hearing?" She nodded for me to go ahead. I ticked on my fingers. "You have a boss who isn't wired for emotion. You are. You're being your authentic self, full out. That's not a good match for him. Meanwhile, Melissa flexes her style to match him and gets promoted. That's the story I hear. Sound accurate?"

"Sounds stinky!" she snapped.

"Really?" I asked.

"Look, Tom, I've been married almost seventeen years. My husband is way more like Delwin than he is like me. When he read my 360 he said, 'Yep, that's you.' But he still loves me. We work hard at it, but we accept each other even though we're different."

**Your boss is  
your biggest  
customer.  
Make your  
boss look  
good.**

"I'm glad," I said, "but Delwin's not your husband. He's your boss. It's not his job to accept you. Quite the opposite, actually. You're there to serve *him*. I always say, 'Your boss is your biggest customer. Your primary job is to make your boss look good.' But from what you're saying, I'm not so sure that's your approach with him."

She was silent.

"Can I ask a question, Ritu?"

"Sure," she said.

I asked, "Are you saying you and your husband don't accommodate each other?"

### **Is flexibility still authentic?**

"No, we do," she said. "For example – we were just talking about this! – he needs a lot more time to process things than I do. So after I bring up something that's important to me, I'll give him a day, sometimes two, before I come back to it."

"Is that helpful?" I asked.

"It is for him," she said.

"Not for you?" I asked.

"Well, I'd rather hash it all out while I'm in the middle of it. But it's okay. I've learned it's better in the long run."

Genuinely curious, I asked, "If you flex your style with him, are you still being authentic in your marriage?"

She looked at me, hearing her inconsistent thinking. She squinted and said, "You got me!"

"Ritu, I wasn't trying to play 'Gotcha!'" I said. "But I think it raises an important question: what's the goal of the situation? With your husband, it sounds like the goal is the long-term health of the relationship."

"It is!" she said.

"And what's the goal with Delwin?" I asked.

"To get him to see how good I am at my job," she answered.

"Hmm! How's that going for you?" I asked with a smile.

"Not so good," she smiled back.

"Okay," I said. "Two ideas. First, I'm not sure getting your boss to see that you're good at your job is an achievable goal for anyone. You can't control what he thinks about you. I'd suggest you'd be better off imagining the goal is to make him look good. Or to get yourself promoted!"

"I could definitely get behind that one!" she laughed.

"Here's the second idea, Ritu. It's longer. I'd like to start with an analogy. You ready?"

"Okay," she said.

### Play better poker

"Do you know what a 'tell' is at a poker table?" I asked.

"It's something you do that gives you away, right?"

"Exactly. It's unconscious behavior that telegraphs your situation. Let's suppose every time you get dealt a good hand you tap your finger on your cards. But when you get dealt a bad hand you keep picking up your cards and looking at them. If I watch you play for a while, your 'tells' becomes pretty apparent. And more often than not, I'm going to beat you."

I went on, saying. "Now you could argue that giving free rein to your tells is being your authentic self. In return, I'd ask what your goal is when you sit down to play. Do you want to be authentic? Or do you want to win?"

**You can't control what your boss thinks about you.**

"Can't I do both?" she asked.

"Yes, I think you can," I said emphatically. "But in your case, you say you didn't get promoted partly because you stuck with your authentic style even though you know it's a mismatch with Delwin. If that's true, I'd say your authentic self is contributing to an outcome you don't really want."

"But I don't want to be phony," she said.

I replied, "I think you can master your tells without being phony. I think you can flex your style and still be authentic. You've done it with your husband. You adapt your style to achieve a greater goal. I don't hear you saying you're being a phony in your marriage."

She thought about that, then asked, "So what can I do?"

**Tune in to  
when you  
become  
emotional and  
reactive.**

I said, "I think there are two actions you can take. First, get conscious. Raise your awareness. Tune into when the emotional and reactive parts of you show up. Notice them. How do they feel in your body? What happens on your face? How do they change your voice? Get as aware of them as you can."

She said, "I'm not sure I'd like that."

"Why?" I asked.

"Maybe I won't like what I see," she said.

"The purpose isn't to judge. Or justify, either. The purpose is to notice. You're collecting data, building awareness."

"Okay," she said. "Let's pretend I can do that. What's the second thing?"

"Choose," I replied. "Make a choice. Think about being that poker player. You want to win the hand. Now you know you have a tell. Is the tell going to help you achieve your goal? If not, manage it. Gain mastery. Practice controlling it. Learn to turn it off. Use your awareness to help you make a choice that's in your best interest."

She gave a little laugh. "That knocks the prop out from under my argument about just wanting to be my authentic self!"

I shrugged a little, saying, "I don't know. I think making conscious choices about your behavior to achieve a better outcome can be a pretty high form of being your authentic self."

During the course of our coaching, Ritu and I talked repeatedly about authenticity, awareness and choice. It wasn't her natural path but, over time, those ideas helped shift her towards [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).



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## Core Concepts

- Flexing your style isn't inauthentic.
- Adapting your style to achieve a better outcome is not manipulation.
- We all have "tells" that allow people to read our thinking.
- Gaining awareness of your "tells" requires diligence and focus.
- Learning to manage your "tells" is no different from any other self-management.

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