

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

How Behaviors Change ▶ 01/10/07

"That's it?" Kristina asked, clearly disappointed in me. A high performer used to taking on big challenges, she was reacting to the homework assignment I'd just given her at the end of our first coaching session. She clearly thought it was too easy. "Aren't you going to give me something to *do*?"

"It might not seem like it," I said, "but this *is* something to do."

A major theme had emerged in Kristina's feedback: people felt strongly that she was not a good listener. I'd assigned her a seemingly simple bit of homework: at the end of at least one interaction every day, mentally review how well she had or had not been listening. That was all. Just reflect and gather data. At our next session I would ask her to tell me specific thoughts and behaviors she'd observed in herself.

When we met two weeks later, Kristina told me that at first she hadn't been able to capture many specifics about her thoughts or behaviors. Then, as days went by, she found she was able to observe more and more instances when she had or had not listened well. Her biggest "ah ha" had come during a phone call with her husband: she heard herself talk right over him. Reflecting on it later, she felt pretty certain she'd been doing this for years without any awareness of it at all.

Through this homework Kristina discovered one of the two tools needed to create long-lasting behavioral change: awareness.

Like many eager, results-oriented clients, Kristina had wanted to jump in and start making changes without an awareness of her current behaviors. That rarely works in the long run.

Talk to someone who has worked on developing a behavior over time, say, a golf swing. They're aware of the slightest nuances: the roll of the wrist, the bend of a knee, the tilt of the head. So when they choose to introduce a new behavior, or eliminate an old one, their awareness is already at a level of mastery.



Over time Kristina became aware that her listening behaviors in her staff meetings were different than her listening behaviors during conference calls with her offshore managers. That awareness, and others like it, allowed her to begin managing her behaviors more effectively.

Which brings us to the second tool needed to create long-lasting behavioral change.

Lillian was on track to become CFO of a global retail division if she could conquer her terror of presenting. Unlike Kristina, she knew all about her demons. She told me details of painful incidents from as long ago as elementary school. Awareness was not her trouble; she had that locked. What tripped Lillian up was that she didn't assess her development realistically.

When we first met, she told me she used to be unable to speak at her own staff meetings. When I asked about her current staff meetings, she said dismissively, "Oh, I run them now but I'm still nervous so it doesn't count."

"But it does count. You're better than you were," I said.

"But getting better in front of my direct reports isn't going to get me promoted," she replied.

"Oh, yes, it is!" I insisted. Here's why.

When I asked Lillian how nervous she used to get at her staff meetings, she laughed ruefully and said, "110%!" When I asked how nervous she is at her staff meetings now, she answered, "Now? Oh, 'only' 100%!"

High performing leaders like Lillian often dismiss incremental improvement. Anything less than "all" gets dismissed as "nothing." But "all or nothing" thinking keeps old habits alive.

If you're going to change any habitual behavior, you have to genuinely acknowledge incremental improvement. Growth and development are sloppy, unpredictable, non-linear processes. You need to believe that any minor improvement is the beginning of a trend that will ultimately lead to the elimination of the old habit. Maybe not tomorrow, but eventually.

In order to celebrate incremental success, you need to believe that every step along the path is real and adds value. You need to have the vision that you're heading in the right direction.



As you begin your new year, you may have many resolutions on your list. In order to achieve the ones in the realm of personal growth, remember the two skills critical for long-lasting behavioral change:

**1 Awareness**

Before trying to change a habit, learn as much as you can about the habit.

**2 Acknowledge incremental success**

Don't dismiss small changes, celebrate them. Mastery begins with little steps.

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