

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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**Keeping Repeated Material Fresh ▶ 08/02/07**

Richard, head of engineering for a consumer products company, had to inform offices from Singapore to Siberia about new processes and procedures. Being fairly introverted, he felt robotic and awkward after just three presentations. The fourth time out he gave an uncomfortable performance that left his audience more glazed than a day-old donut. And he still had half the world to go!

Ellie is an exuberant trainer for a leisure-service company. Every week she delivers the new employee orientation and a time management course. Recently, after a break, she couldn't remember which material she was delivering. Her slides answered that question for her, but she couldn't remember if she'd already covered the slide that was up or if that was the one she should begin with after the break. She'd been on autopilot in front of a group of living, breathing participants and it freaked her out.

Alan, a dynamic sales person for a global software company, loves his job. But recently he felt he'd delivered the same slides in the same way for so long he could no longer tell if he was any good. He got so self-conscious about his performance that he became anxious—something he hadn't experienced in a dozen years. His anxiety began to spiral out of control to the point where he began to dread presenting.

Each of these smart, high-performing professionals had to deliver the same material over and over and didn't know how to turn it to their advantage.

I struggle with the same issue. For example, I have a communications tool called "Sorting & Labeling." I love this tool. It's great. It changes people. And I've been explaining it to individuals and groups for over a decade! Here are three tools I use to keep it fresh every time.

First, I give myself permission to change things around. I know I have to cover all the important points, but I don't have to say it exactly the way I said it last week. Heck, it ain't Shakespeare!

I imagine that getting through my "Sorting & Labeling" material is like taking a walk through a stand of trees that's as familiar to me as my reflection. My participants, who've never seen these trees



before, are standing in the grass on the edge of the forest. My job is to guide them into the trees and get them all out the other side at the same time and place.

Because I've been inside the trees so many times, I can see tiny differences in the forest. But they can't. So I give myself liberty to take a new turn here or linger a little there or hurry my way over that little hillock. They don't know the difference. To them, it's all new and exciting. But changing my path creates interest and newness for me. Since there are no ruts to follow, I don't get stuck in deadening repetition.

Here's the second tool. Because I've said the material so many times before, my brain has lots of extra capacity to focus on things other than my words. I dedicate that capacity to the people in front of me. The more I focus on them—really looking at them, really seeing them, really wondering if they're understanding me—the more I stay connected to them and to my material.

I guard against spending my extra capacity on things like that email I didn't answer this morning or what I have to pick up at the store on my way home. It'd be easy to do that—as Ellie did in the example above—but I rigorously focus and re-focus my attention on the people in the room.

Tool three. I banish any negative thoughts about the fact that I'm doing this material for the eleventh year. ("I've got to do 'Sorting & Labeling' again today? Damn!") I never disparage the material by calling it names. ("Here's that tired old chestnut again!") Negative thinking programs you to end up like the three suffering folks at the top of this Tip.

What I do tell myself is the same thing I told myself when I was in the second or sixth month of performing a play eight times a week: "The people hearing this right now have never heard it before. They don't know how many times I've done it before and they don't care. It's their one time hearing it for the first time and they deserve my best."

Whether you have to leave the same ninety-second voicemail a dozen times or deliver a sixty-minute presentation seventy times, these three steps will keep you connected and fresh:

- 1 Give yourself permission to mix things up a little and talk in a new way
- 2 Use your extra brain capacity to really focus on the people. Ask yourself, "Is that guy understanding this? What about her? And him?"
- 3 Avoid negative self-talk about the repetition. Instead, connect to the idea that your listeners are hearing it for first time.



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