

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Fanula loved her role as second-in-command to the division president. As the public face of her boss's policies, Fanula got to put her innate Irish love of language and her gift with people on full display.

She told me her goal for our coaching was to buff up her public speaking skills. When I asked what she thought was wrong she shook her head. "Nothing's wrong. In fact I'm just fine, but 'fine' isn't good enough for my position. I want to be terrific."

I went to one of her presentations and sat in the back of the room as people filed in. My sense was the group was neutral: she could win them over or lose them.

For forty minutes, Fanula laid out an upbeat business story. She spoke with her natural eloquence and answered questions fairly succinctly. When she concluded, there was a small murmur that sounded like approval. One person clapped a couple of times. Then they all filed out.

In the empty room afterwards Fanula said to me, "Do you see what I mean? There's nothing really wrong, but there was no fire in the room. And I want those folks to be on fire when they leave."

I asked Fanula if I could give her some feedback about the very first words she had spoken. She said sure.

Fanula had begun as many people do with a rather perfunctory, "I'm really glad to be here." On paper those words seem welcoming but when I mimicked her delivery she couldn't help but laugh. Her voice had been flat, her face serious and her head down as she looked at her pages. Her physical behavior had not been at all congruent with her words—a potentially damaging non-verbal message for any presenter.

That small but important incongruity was the gateway to larger issue I wanted to address with Fanula: I felt certain that by focusing on just one word we could bring her comfortable simmer up to a rolling boil. The word? Joy.



Speakers who exude delight are unexpected and charismatic. Nothing is more winning than a presenter who sincerely transmits the message "I'm glad to be here."

Contrast that with a speaker who takes her position at the front of the room and looks as if she's facing a group of stern, disapproving judges. She unwittingly broadcasts tension and, no matter how low the voltage, we sense it. We end up projecting onto her the very qualities she's projecting onto us: she appears stern and slightly disapproving. Not a recipe for success.

But the person who stands before us with joy seems welcoming and undefended. She seems to convey, "I'm completely comfortable with you looking at me."

The willingness to be looked at is a hurdle that trips many speakers. When I talk with people about this they say, "I'm *not* comfortable being looked at. I don't even like seeing myself in photos!" If this resonates with you, and if you want to achieve charisma, you have to find a way to overcome this core resistance. But how?

One way is with video. Imagine that I tape you making a short presentation. I'd then ask you to talk about the person you see presenting on the tape, yourself, in the third person.

What would quickly become clear is that the feelings you experience while presenting don't reflect reality. The messages in your head listing all your mistakes (I was too slow or too fast or using my hands too much or not enough) are completely inaudible to me. And none of those "mistakes" show up on the tape. Looking at yourself on screen objectively reveals that the person on the tape isn't nearly as bad as your feelings would have you believe.

The acknowledgement that you're better than you thought lays the groundwork for your willingness to be looked at. And that seed will later sprout into joy.

"I'm willing to be looked at" is the first of two messages that joyous speakers convey. The other is not about how their listeners will view them but rather about how they will view their listeners. The message is, "I'm going to talk with you as if we were sitting in a booth at a diner. And I'm going to actually look at you and notice you. I'm going to actually be present in the room with you."

That sense of connection captures us and keeps us engaged.



When you're in front of a group it's not easy to really see the people you're speaking to. To do it, you have to free yourself from any negative narration about what you see. That guy with the frown and the folded arms? Don't tell yourself a negative story about him; you don't know what he's frowning about. Maybe that's the face he makes when he's concentrating on something he's really interested in. That woman texting? Don't tell yourself a negative story about her; maybe she's writing down your ideas so she can share them.

No matter what you see (and you will see some outrageous behaviors!), your desire to connect with people must remain dominant. If it's genuine, your listeners will see it's not a performance trick that you slipped on like a mask. They'll see you're truly glad to be talking with them and, in return, they'll be willing to have their fires lit.

But, people ask, what do you do when the business story is serious and joy's not appropriate?

Of course the style should suit the content. It would be no more fitting to announce layoffs with a wide grin than it would be to announce record profits while looking funereal.

But even in the direst circumstances, the underlying messages you send about how you relate to your audience don't change. In fact, when the business story is grim it becomes even more important to transmit a sense of being glad to be there—not because you're glad about that particular communication, but glad that you're the one to personally deliver it to people you care about. You're willing to shoulder the burden and to be looked at during a difficult time. And you will talk with them as if you're in a booth at the diner. And you will really see them. And you'll be glad to be there.

This willingness to be joyous is a profound display of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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