

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Focus in the Face of Distractions ▶ 02/19/09

Distractions affect performance

Marc's frustration was understandable. He'd been trying to get support for a project since long before our coaching began. In fact, he'd asked for the coaching to learn influencing skills, hoping that would help him generate traction for the project.

The truth was he'd actually moved the ball quite far down the field already: two people had been assigned to the project and a cross-functional team had begun to lay the foundation for the work that would come. But he wasn't across the goal line yet and he was getting impatient attending endless meetings to drum up support. What worried him wasn't just that he was feeling impatient, but that he was *acting* impatiently in those meetings. Worrying about his impatience had become a distraction.

Jessica's story was quite different from Marc's but her frustration was essentially the same. Entering her fourth month of looking for work, she was tired and beaten down. She didn't want to go to another breakfast with a colleague or attend another networking meeting. In spite of feeling that all her efforts were hopeless, she knew she couldn't afford to get off the job search treadmill. Like Marc, she worried she wasn't concealing her frustration very well any more, and that worry had become a distraction.

A story about taming distractions

Marc and Jessica's struggles were very similar. They were both being distracted by strong feelings—in this case, frustration. I could empathize. I'd had the same struggle and so I told them both the same story. Here it is.

After years and years of acting in Hollywood, I had come to see my job not as going to a sound stage to perform in front of a camera, but rather as going to a small office to audition for a group of producers. Flub the audition and there would be no job. And, as I had come to find out, there were lots of ways to flub an audition. After careful examination, I began to see that every way of flubbing an audition essentially came down to the same thing: being distracted.

So I developed an image to help myself stay focused.



I imagined I was standing at the edge of a big pond, pitching pebbles into the center. The goal was to throw enough pebbles at the exact same spot so that, over time, they would pile up under the water and, finally, one of them would break the surface. Pebbles that sank were auditions that didn't result in a job—but they laid the foundation for the ones that did.

Of course I never knew which pebble would break the surface, so each pebble needed all my accumulated skills and complete focus because—who knew?—maybe this would be the one.

This image of calm and focus was sorely tested the day I found myself alone in a cavernous lobby waiting to audition in front of network executives for a role on a television pilot. Although I didn't have the job yet, I'd had to sign a seven-year contract that would pay me more per week than I had made in some *years!* Visions of *Malibu* and *People* magazine danced in my head, totally removing me from the actual event. Then, with a snap, I came back to reality. I banished those sparkling distractions and put myself mentally back at the edge of my pond, attentively picking up the stone at hand.

Focus on the big picture, not the distraction

It's hard to stop thinking about what might happen in the future, which was Jessica's struggle—and mine in that lobby. And it's hard to stop thinking about all the frustrations that have gone before, which was Marc's struggle. But, in fact, those distractions—any distractions—reduce your capacity to be your best. Distractions actually make it more likely that you *won't* get what you want.

Even though I landed that role in the pilot (which never aired), it was hard for Marc and Jessica to hear the lesson in my story. They're both high achievers who feel accomplished when they achieve results; attending to the process didn't feel like success to them.

Chances are, in these difficult times, as everyone's stakes are escalating, you may be experiencing distractions of your own. And they may be affecting your performance. If so, that can't be good for you.

Take the time to find an image that will get you out of the moment and keep you connected to the bigger purpose. For example, when Marc could remember how important his project was to him, he found he could tolerate the small annoyances in all those meetings. Finding an image that keeps you focused on the big picture will increase your odds of achieving *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

Read a related Tip:

[Eliminating Distractions](#)



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