

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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TELE 818.788.5357
info@essentialcomm.com
www.essentialcomm.com

EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Choosing Persistence ▶ 05/14/09

Fears and frustrations

Last fall, in the middle of our coaching engagement, Gavon got laid off. I told him I'd be happy to re-engage with him any time it would be helpful. A few weeks ago he got back in touch. He was still unemployed.

"I've been on a bunch of interviews," he told me. "What's freaking me out is the anxiety I'm having. I wasn't anxious before, but since I'm not landing any jobs, I'm beginning to stress about whether I'm as good at interviewing as I think I am."

"And you know another worry?" he continued. "I worry that all my worrying is following me into the interview like some storm cloud I can't shake."

I told him I completely empathized with that concern and asked if I could tell him two stories. He said sure. Here's the first one I told him.

Tales from Hollywood

After years of acting in Hollywood, I came to believe that my real job wasn't working in front of the cameras. Rather, my real job was auditioning. But, like Gavon, I found that worrying about getting the job often affected how I performed during the audition.

Finally I developed an image that was transformative. I imagined myself standing at the edge of a big pond. At my feet was a pile of pebbles. My task was to pick up one pebble at a time and pitch it into the center of the pond. The goal was to throw enough pebbles to the exact same spot so they would pile up and one would finally break the surface of the water. I never knew how deep the pond was or how big the pile under the water was. My job was to just keep pitching. Any pebble that broke the surface of the water was a job I landed.

In my imagination, every pebble had the possibility of being "the" one; I never knew beforehand which pebble would break the surface. So I had to clear my mind and bring all my technique to bear on whatever stone was at hand. I couldn't be distracted by the previous stone or the ones still to come. And I couldn't worry about what would happen if the stone didn't break the surface of the



water or get seduced thinking about my rewards if it *did* break the surface. Every stone was its own event and I had to attend to each one with care.

I also had to believe that every stone made a difference. I had to believe the stones were piling up underwater even though I couldn't see them. I had to trust I was doing the right thing in the right way even though I had no feedback to prove that was true. It was easy to fall into doubt—doubt that the task was too difficult, too tiresome, too hopeless, too unfair, too whatever. I had to keep choosing my positive belief over my doubt.

The second story

Gavon related to that story. He said the idea of pitching the pebbles sounded calming and helpful. And he admitted that choosing to believe positively was really difficult for him as his unemployment continued to stretch on and on.

That's when I told him my second story.

Throughout the 1980's, CBS had a long-running sitcom whose casting director was a fan of mine. Every season, she called me in to audition at least once, if not two or three times.

But I never got cast. Not once.

After the fourth or fifth year of going in to audition, I have to confess I began to cop a bit of an attitude. By the seventh season I barely wanted to go! But I tried my best to keep my personal frustrations from shadowing me into the room. And I tried my best to calm myself by visualizing my pebbles. But, no matter what I did, I never got cast. When the show went off the air after eight seasons, I had a private little celebration.

Several years later I was cast in one episode of a sitcom at Warner Bros. When I arrived the first day, a guy came over to me with a big smile and an outstretched hand. He introduced himself as one of the producers and said, "You know all those years you came in to audition for that show over at CBS? I was in the room and I always thought you were great. I'm sorry you never got cast but I'm glad you're here today. I hope you have a fun week. Welcome."



Lessons for hard times

Whenever I worry whether the pebbles are piling up under the water, I remember that moment. For me the lesson was that you never know where the ripples end. Since you can't see below the surface, you might as well choose to believe that things are working the way they're supposed to be.

Gavon found both these stories helped manage his anxiety. So did another client, Dylan, who as senior vice-president, submitted complex weekly reports to his CEO without ever getting any feedback. Patrick, another client, supervised a huge group of field reps and often felt his various communications were a waste of time and energy. These stories helped him, too.

If there's something you do repeatedly with little or nothing to show for it, don't cop an attitude about it; you're just pitching pebbles. Focus on every pebble and believe that each one leads towards success. Choosing these beliefs will help you achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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