

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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Positive Opposites ▶ 06 / 11 / 09

A very public failure

Ellie felt like she'd been shot between the eyes.

For six grueling weeks she'd prepped a presentation she would make to the senior execs. She'd painstakingly built a deck of forty-two slides.

During the presentation, the execs began to challenge her at slide four. By slide six they were clearly angry with her. At slide eight they pulled her plug and kicked her out of the room.

Later, her boss, one of the execs, had nothing but blame and accusations. "You did all the things we asked you not to do," he told her. "During the prep interviews we made it clear we wanted strategies and recommendations, but your slides were nothing but tactics and details. The more we asked for high level summarizing, the more you drove down into the details. And this isn't the first time this has happened, Ellie."

Negative opposites

After telling me this story, she sat silently for a long time. Then, in a very quiet voice, she said, "He's talked to me about strategy versus tactics before. But I really thought I was giving them what they'd asked for. What's wrong with me? Am I stupid?"

Of course Ellie is far from stupid. But her leap to all-or-nothing thinking ("I'm either right or stupid") was completely natural. I see it a lot.

For example, Seth, a barrel-chested operations V.P., had gotten feedback for years that he steamrolled people. Early in our coaching I asked him to help me understand his thinking. He explained himself this way: "Look, my job is to get stuff done, so I do. I'd rather be a bully than a doormat."

More all-or-nothing thinking.

All-or-nothing thinking puts two extreme, unrealistic ideas in opposition. It's the creation of a dichotomy. Personally, I love dichotomies. I use them in my coaching all the time. They make difficult situations manageable.



Reframing the fool's choice

But both Ellie and Seth had created dichotomies that made their situations *unmanageable*. Their dichotomies were fool's choices. Ellie felt she had to either be right or stupid. Seth felt he could be a bully or a doormat. Those negative opposites were not helpful. But positive opposites can be.

Here's how I repositioned it for Ellie.

With both hands I drew an imaginary line spreading out along the top of the conference table. I asked Ellie to imagine that at the far left end of the line was behavior called "Detail Orientation." At the far right end was behavior called "Satellite View." In the middle was a divider separating the two sides.

"Which side of this dividing line do you think you live on?" I asked her. She smiled and pointed to the left.

"And how far down the line do you think you live? Are you way far out at the end where it's most extreme?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I think I'm about halfway down."

"OK. Now, which side of the line do you think your boss lives on?" I asked. She pointed to the right side of the mid-point, towards "Satellite View."

"And how far down that side do you think he is?" I asked.

She thought about it and said, "Not that far. He can be highly detail-oriented. But these days he's definitely on the 'Strategic' side more often."

Living on different sides of the line

"So the first thing to understand is that you two live on different sides of the line. That doesn't mean you'll be in conflict with each other, but it does mean you experience situations from different points of view."

She gave a little laugh and said, "No kidding!"

I went on. "If you can see that his feedback is coming from the other side of the line, it's easier to see why he was so frustrated with your presentation. You weren't talking from his side of the line and that's where he wanted you to be."



“But I don’t live there,” she said with frustration. “Am I ever going to succeed with him?”

There was her all-or-nothing thinking kicking in again. I said, “Of course you are. What it means, Ellie, is that your detail orientation is your natural strength. That’s the side of the line you live on. And you probably always will. So you don’t need to develop that side of you any more. Instead, develop skills that will push you towards the mid-point of the line. It may feel uncomfortable because it’s not where you naturally live, but that’s clearly your development opportunity.”

Develop your non-dominant side

For the next several months, Ellie and I did the hard work of moving her behavior toward the midline of this continuum. (Read how at [How Behaviors Change](#).) She began to see that even at her most “strategic,” she still had plenty of “detail” behavior. She understood it wasn’t all-or-nothing; she could blend both.

Seth’s struggle was viewing himself as either bully or doormat. He and I reframed those negative opposites so they became “results oriented” on one side and “relationship oriented” on the other. As with Ellie, I assured him that his natural strengths (“results oriented” behaviors) would always be there. He couldn’t possibly turn them off! He didn’t need to develop those. As we worked together he began to see that becoming more proficient with relationships didn’t exclude his excellence with results. It wasn’t all-or-nothing; he could blend both.

When you find yourself thinking, “They just don’t get it!” that’s a strong indicator that you may be moving toward all-or-nothing thinking. Talk with someone about the situation and listen to the sort of opposites you use to describe what’s happening. It’s completely natural to begin with negatives like Ellie’s and Seth’s.

Create two opposing positives

Reframe the situation so that both labels on the ends of the continuum are acceptable and positive.

Some I’ve used with clients are:

- ▶ Emotional — Contained
- ▶ Analytical — Empathic
- ▶ Accepting — Questioning
- ▶ Confident — Humble
- ▶ Fact-Based — Story Teller
- ▶ All business all the time — Warm and friendly



None of those labels are better than another; it would be okay to live on either side of those lines because they're all positive. Not a fool's choice among them.

But I'll bet that as you read them, you had an immediate preference for one side over the other. The side you prefer is your more developed, more natural style.

You can be sure that many people around you prefer the *other* side of the line. They're not wrong, just different. And they probably wish you were more like them, just as you may wish they were more like you! That other, less-developed side of the line is your development opportunity.

When you meet difficult situations, avoid the fool's choices. Creating challenging, positive opposites will help you achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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