Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

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Sorting & Labeling ► 08/06/09

Communicating without making connections

Joseph is overseeing the development of a multi-billion dollar piece of hardware. As project manager, he's responsible for keeping this seven-year enterprise on schedule and on budget.

Every week he delivers a status report to the division executives. And he's driving them crazy.

Joseph has a deep knowledge of the hardware and understands how all the different elements interconnect. But he's stumbling badly with the executives because he's not making those connections clear to them.

So I taught him the tool I call "Sorting & Labeling."

In my 17 years of coaching, this tool is the one my clients most often tell me is transformational. You can hear the tool demonstrated (the most powerful way to learn this tool) here.

Tappers & listeners

Communicating without "Sorting & Labeling" makes you like a tapper in Elizabeth Newton's PhD study at Stanford.

People in her study were either "tappers" or "listeners." Tappers were given a list of 25 well-known songs and asked to tap out the rhythm of one song to a listener. Tappers said they could clearly "hear" the song—complete with lyrics and musical accompaniment—as they tapped away. When asked how well they thought the listeners would do figuring out the song, tappers felt they were setting a pretty low bar by guessing fifty percent. After all, the song was clear as a bell to them.

But it turned out that listeners were able to discern the song only three percent of the time. Three percent! If you've ever played this game as a listener you know that three percent is actually quite an achievement. To listeners, the taps are just disconnected dots of sound.

What's important about this story is the gap between what the tappers think is easy to discern and what the listeners actually experience.

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In those weekly meetings, Joseph is a tapper. All his data points are clear as a bell to him. But to the executives, they're disconnected dots of data.

I'm sure that when you speak, your data is obvious and understandable—to you! But it isn't automatically that way to your listeners. It is your responsibility to sort and label your information so they can understand and organize it.

The four steps of "Sorting & Labeling"
To sort and label your material successfully, do these four things:
1 Create a headline of no more than six words
2 Sort your ideas into a specific number of folders
3 Label each folder
4 Transition from folder to folder with clarity

Here's how to apply those parts.

Joseph showed me a complex slide that illustrated the correlation among the release of funding, meetings with major vendors and the development of software.

In order to sort and label his material, he first had to give this complex model a headline of fewer than six words. Not an easy task. I asked him to think of the headline as simply a high-level indicator, a mere point on a large map.

After some consideration, he decided to call it "Software Development & Funding." That's a great, high-level headline.

Next, he had to decide how many ideas he wanted to introduce. This is the "sorting" part of the exercise. The goal in this step is to arrive at a number.

He decided that the meetings with the vendors didn't actually need their own folder. Good sorting. So there were only two ideas to introduce.

Next I asked him to "label" the two folders he'd created. (Labels should be even shorter than headlines. One, two or three words max.) This went quickly: "Funding" and "Software development."

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Gliding from folder to folder

Then we discussed how many points were in each folder. As he explained his ideas, I often stopped and asked, "Are we still in the 'Funding' folder?" He'd say, no, he had jumped to the "Software development" folder without telling me.

Jumping between folders is not unusual. The problem is that you know you've done it but your listeners don't. If you fail to tell me which folder you're in, all your Sorting & Labeling work is for nothing, because I'm trying to put the information I'm hearing into the wrong folder.

Clear, simple transition statements serve the purpose of closing one folder in your listener's mind and opening another. They let me know where you are in your material so I can keep your information organized.

Transition statements aren't long. They can sound like this: "That's everything about funding. Now I want to talk about software development."

One folder closes and another opens. Simple as that.

Those are the four steps of "Sorting and Labeling."

In addition to the four major steps, here are three elegant refinements of this tool.

Refinement 1: Sort & Label at every level

When I deliver my keynote speeches, they're all sorted and labeled. The whole ninety-minute piece is sorted into three big sections. Then each of those big sections have their own folders. And often those folders have sub-folders.

As long as I'm clear how many sub-folders are within each folder, and as long as I use good transition statements, it's easy to lead people through the multiple levels of folders.

I might say something like this:

> "One major issue I coach on these days is something I call 'managing relationships.' I see that people need help managing relationships with three different groups—managing relationships with their direct reports, their peers and their managers.

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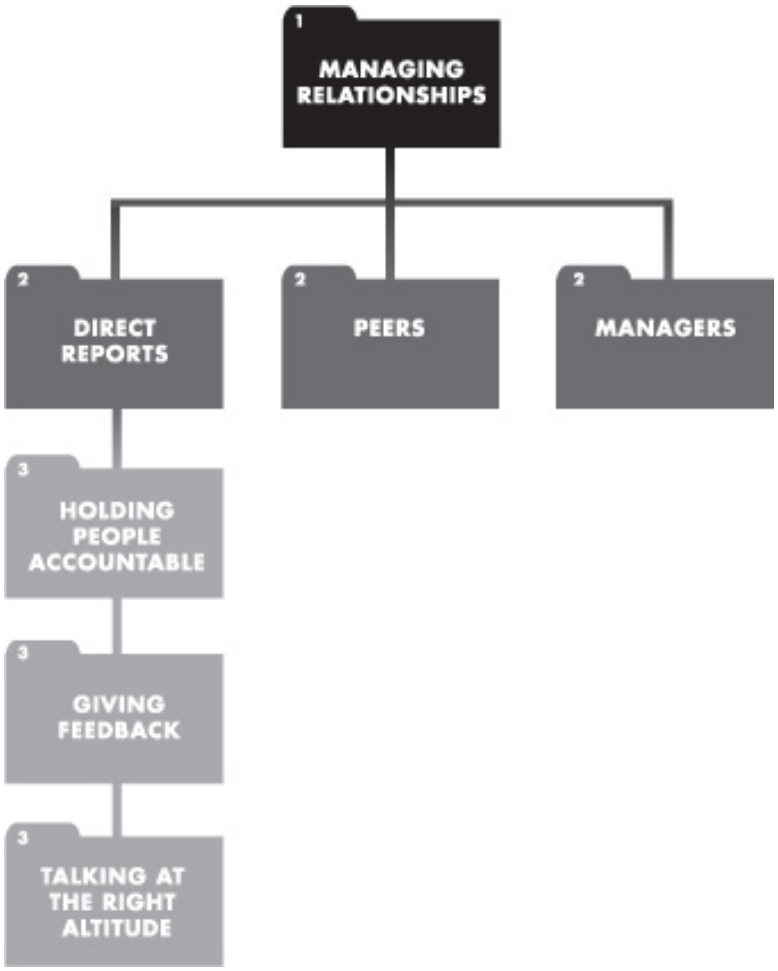
"Of those three, I'd like to talk about the first one: managing direct reports. When people are managing their direct reports, I find they often need help developing three specific skills: One, holding people accountable; two, giving feedback; and three, what I call talking at the right altitude.

"So let's talk about those skills in order. First, holding people accountable. This is a very simple four-part model…"

Can you see how I laid out the hierarchy? If I were going to sketch it, it might look like this:



If you had heard that with no illustration, I believe you'd know exactly what you were about to hear ("holding people accountable") and how it connected to the big picture ("managing relationships").

The point here is that you can sort and label at every level of your information. You can sort at the highest level, like the table of contents of a book. You can also sort at the micro level, for example, bullet points on a slide.

What I've found, and what people tell me who use "Sorting & Labeling," is that it's incredibly helpful for staying on track and knowing where you are in your own material. And of course it helps your listeners, too.

Refinement 2: Highlight your labels

In the example above about managing relationships, did you notice the repeated use of words like, "what I call…"? This was the first sentence: "One major issue I coach on these days is something I call 'managing relationships.'"

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If I don't use the words "something I call," you might not hear the words "managing relationships" as a headline. But I need you to hear it as a headline.

Don't be shy about using phrases like, "this is what I call…" or "we refer to this as…" Those phrases get us to hear your words as a headline or a label. Your words suddenly become important and memorable. And the more you repeat the words, the more important and memorable they become. That's refinement number two: use phrases that draw attention to your labels.

Refinement 3: Use numbers: they make you sound expert

The third refinement is about numbers. (Good transition statement, huh?) "Sorting & Labeling" lends itself to the use of numbers and this is where the tool becomes particularly elegant.

Here's one way I used numbers in the example above: "When people are managing their direct reports, I find they often need help developing three specific skills."

The instant you hear that number, you create three mental buckets and get ready to receive the information. That makes the data more understandable. Also, using a number makes me sound like an expert. I wouldn't know there are three parts if I weren't an expert, right?

When you use numbers, you sound more credible and your information becomes more understandable. That's a big gain from a little technique.

An offer—for free!

I believe strongly that "Sorting & Labeling" can improve the way people experience you as a communicator. I really want you to be able to successfully incorporate this tool into your everyday style at work.

I'd like to send you the illustration that depicts "Sorting & Labeling." I think it'll help you adopt this tool more easily. Hit the reply button and ask for it. It'll be my pleasure to send it to you.

Recap: 4 steps & 3 refinements

So here are the four steps in "Sorting & Labeling:"

1 Create a headline of no more than six words
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Here are the three refinements:

A Sort and label at every level of information. Put folders within folders.

B Draw attention to your labels with phrases like, "we call this..."

C Use numbers. Tell us how many folders are within that folder.

Here's the final beautiful thing about the Sorting & Labeling tool: you can use it all the time! Use it . . .

. . . in every slide in every deck you present from now on;

. . . in your emails and voicemails;

. . . when answering essay questions;

. . . when reporting at a staff meeting;

. . . any time people need to understand complex concepts.

When wouldn't you use it? Well, you wouldn't use it when telling a story. (Look at the "tappers & listeners" story. No sorting there.) "Sorting & Labeling" will speed you down the road that I call *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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