

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Act "As If" ▶ 02/11/10

### Behaviors create "style"

When Lawrence was passed over for promotion to vice-president, the feedback was clear: his expertise was top-notch; his executive presence was not. "He just doesn't feel like one of our vice-presidents," the CEO told me.

Lawrence vowed that by the end of the coaching he'd look more vice-presidential than any of the vice-presidents. With lips thinned by determination, he asked, "What do I need to do to 'feel' like a VP?" I answered by giving him the following homework.

"When you're with your VP's, watch them like a video camera. Make a list with two columns. In one column, list all the behaviors they're doing that you're doing, too. In the other column, list all the behaviors they're doing that you're not doing. At our next session we'll compare the columns."

Many people have trouble observing behavior but Lawrence was masterful. His list of vice-presidential behaviors he was already doing had four points: "Leaning forward at meetings, strong eye contact, stillness and authentic listening." Of even more interest to me was the list of behaviors he'd observed but that he wasn't doing. He had three. "Able to articulate complex ideas, conciseness and an ability to ask powerful questions."

After he'd read me the list, I said, "If we can get you to do those three behaviors, you'll look vice-presidential, right?" He agreed.

### Act "As If" is elementary for actors

This exercise in observable behaviors is called *Act "As If."* For Lawrence, it meant, "Act 'as if' you're already a vice-president."

*Act "As If"* is a basic tool among actors. It is why, prior to filming a war movie, actors spend a month living with Marines: they can observe, practice and integrate behaviors that would otherwise be quite foreign to them.



That three-step process is important. First, observe. Second, practice. Third, integrate.

That's a great formula for creating new behaviors. But, for those of us in the workplace, it carries risks that actors don't face. Before actors try out new behaviors in front of a camera or an audience, they get to do step two—practice—in private. But those of us who are actors on the corporate stage don't get that luxury. Our first attempt at practicing is usually in front of people who have no idea we're trying to execute new behavior that might still be a little unrefined.

### **Practice new behaviors in low-risk settings**

So when it comes to step number one, observing behaviors, I tell people to do it as often as possible, any time, any place. But when it comes to step number two, practice, I urge people to choose low-risk settings, like a one-on-one meeting with a direct report, lunch with a close colleague or at home on the weekend. Low-risk settings allow you to devote part of your attention to actually doing the practice. And if it doesn't go so well, the price to pay is minimal.

The final step, integration, comes after lots of low-risk practice. You know a behavior is becoming integrated when you need less attention to attain the same results. At that point, the behavior is moving from the realm of the conscious to the unconscious; it's becoming a new habit.

Earlier I said that *Act "As If"* is an exercise in observable behaviors. And for Lawrence it was. But for Martin it wasn't. At least, he wasn't observing the behavior of *others*.

### **A variation on Act "As If"**

Martin was the head of a large IT group. The HR executive who contacted me about helping him said he was a nice guy who was so boring that people couldn't listen to him. She laughingly said the company was thinking about giving out caffeine pills prior to his staff meetings.

I began to understand what she meant at my very first meeting. When I'd ask Martin a simple yes/no question, he'd drone on in long, complex sentences with an expressionless face. Staying connected to him was virtually impossible because he didn't seem connected to himself.

I wanted to break his dull demeanor. Surely, I thought, he has to be passionate about *something!* I began to probe about his kids, his church, his home town, his personal causes. Every inquiry was met with a lifeless monologue that kept me struggling to stay tuned in.



Then, during our third session, he happened to mention ATVs. At first I thought "ATV" was yet another of his arcane IT acronyms. But when I asked, he told me ATV stood for "All Terrain Vehicle."

Now I was genuinely intrigued. You see, Martin was extremely tall. He was also a polio survivor. He wore metal braces on one leg and walked with metal crutches. If this guy was folding himself into some ATV, I wanted to hear about it.

I began asking all about this hobby of his and, lo and behold!, he came alive. His speech accelerated, his face become expressive and he began to gesture. Suddenly there was no doubt that he cared about what he was talking about. It was "as if" he had suddenly found his passion.

### **Inner and outer worlds of Act "As If"**

This is the other way you can use Act "As If." Instead of looking to the outside world for behaviors to emulate, you can look inward for places where the desired behavior already exists within you.

Let's imagine that people want you to be more confident in client meetings. You could observe behaviors in others that appear to be confident. That would be good. But you could also look to your own life for areas where you are already naturally confident.

For example, maybe you're confident in the kitchen. Or around animals. Or discussing sports. Observe yourself when you're talking about those things. What do you sound like? What do you look like? How does it feel? Then, as you think about those client meetings, imagine yourself acting "as if" you're in the kitchen. Or around animals. Or discussing sports. In other words, you want to transfer behavior that's already organically yours from one situation to another.

Actors of course do this all the time. The actor playing Romeo discovers the supposedly dead body of Juliet. For the next forty lines of verse he must grieve for her. Intellectually the actor knows the actress isn't dead. And, most likely, when he's offstage, he isn't in love with her. But he acts "as if" she is someone he adores whom he's found dead. He's connecting with feelings that already live within him.

As an actor on the corporate stage, your audience is all around you. You are making impressions all day long. The Act "As If" tool is specifically designed to help you be perceived the way you want to be perceived, which, after all, is at the heart of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.



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