

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



ESSENTIAL  
COMMUNICATIONS

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

## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



Listen to this Podcast

Don't Take It Personally ▶ 06/10/10

### **This feels personal, doesn't it?**

Karin once ran a department at a state university and managed a six-figure budget. When she transitioned into the corporate world, her boss wouldn't let her authorize any expenditures over \$100. At first she understood, but after three years, she was steamed.

When I asked why, she said, "I've given him every reason to trust me. But he obviously doesn't!"

"Do you think if someone else was in your role he'd let her handle her own budget?"

She stopped. "Maybe. I don't know. But after three years, wouldn't you think I'd have earned his trust?"

"I think you *have* earned his trust. I think his decision to control your budget has nothing to do with you. I think it's about him and how he sees his job as a manager."

"It sure *feels* like it's about me," she said. And we began a discussion about what it means to take things personally.

### **It doesn't get more personal than this**

Stefan, the manager of a small group, was also struggling with a situation that felt personal.

While reviewing data with a direct report named Robert, Stefan had asked a lot of questions. After a bit, Robert had blown up, accusing Stefan of being a micro-manager, of causing turnover in the department, of being obsessively detail-oriented without adding value, and more. It was an emotional and highly personal attack.

Not surprisingly, Stefan had responded with emotion of his own. The encounter degenerated until Stefan finally left the room.

"Wow," I said when he told me about it, "you really took that personally."

"It was personal," he declared. "Everything he said was about me!"



"No," I said quietly. "It was about him."

I asked if all his direct reports felt he was an obsessive micro-manager. He said no. "So," I said, "this is just Robert's experience of you, right?"

"Yes. And he thinks I'm a screw-up!"

### **Same input, different results**

I smiled and asked if I could use his computer. I pulled up a review in the *Los Angeles Times* of a little movie called, "She's Out of My League." The critic wrote that, "much of the film's good humor comes courtesy of [lead actor] Jay Baruchel. Nothing would work without the appealing Baruchel." Heady stuff! The *LA Times* says if it weren't for Baruchel, the movie would be a dud.

Then I pulled up a review in the *New York Times* in which the critic said, in essence, that the movie WAS a dud BECAUSE of Jay Baruchel.

I turned to Stefan. "Imagine being Jay Baruchel the morning those reviews came out. The *LA Times* says your performance makes the movie. The *NY Times* says your performance kills the movie. What're you supposed to believe?"

I went on. "Those two critics saw the same movie, but they have different backgrounds and educations and tastes. So what they saw in that actor's performance is really about *them*, not about the actor at all. And what Robert experiences in you is all about him and his background and his preferences, not about you at all."

### **"You're a pelican!"**

I asked Stefan if I could play a little game with him. He said okay. I told him in this game he had to do three things. First, he had to listen to everything I said without answering; second, he had to maintain eye contact with me; third, he had to pay attention to any internal responses he had. He said okay.

Then, with a fair amount of energy, I said, "Stefan, you're a pelican." I waited. "Stefan, you're short." He isn't, by the way. "Stefan, you're stupid." I waited again. "You're intuitive." Then, "You're a dreadful manager." I did a few more, then stopped and asked him about his responses.



He reported that when I'd said he was intuitive, he'd felt puzzled. "And when you said I was stupid, my gut clenched up for a second."

### **Why we take things personally**

When I'd called him a pelican, Stefan had no response. Why? Because he knows, on a deep, cellular level, that he's not a pelican. But when I called him stupid, his stomach lurched. Why? Because somewhere inside him is a receptor, no matter how tiny, that accepted my comment as having some truth. So it felt personal and he responded to it.

Here's what's important to know.

Things that make you angry are things you're taking personally. If you're upset, you're taking it personally. Period.

I'm not saying you shouldn't feel angry or helpless or whatever you're feeling. Not taking it personally is not about controlling your feelings. Your feelings will be what they will be. That's fine.

Not taking it personally is about controlling your *reactions* to your feelings. When feelings drive your actions, you behave in ways that are not in your best interest. Your feelings hijack you. You don't help your cause.

### **Ignore all input? Not if you're smart.**

Am I saying you should ignore everything any one says about you? Absolutely not. There's lots of feedback out there for you and you ignore it at your peril. But don't take it personally. Don't react emotionally to it. It's just someone's opinion. It's their review of the movie called "You."

So how can you help yourself when you're upset and taking something personally? First, acknowledge that you're taking it personally. That helps get some distance.

Second, calm down and decide what you want to do and how you want to show up. Once you stop your emotions from driving your actions, you have choices. An assistant won't give you the help the company is paying her to give? Don't take it personally. Decide what you want to do next and how you'd like to be experienced.

A contract you need executed is stuck in the legal department and they won't respond to your emails? Tough situation. But it's not personal. What do you want to do next? And how do you want them to experience you? You have lots of choices.



You just got the worst performance review of your career and it's going to affect your bonus? I'm sorry that happened. But it's not personal. It's just what happened. Choose how you want to respond.

I could give a hundred examples. I'm sure you have your own! But don't take it personally. Step away from the emotion. Consider what you really want.

Karin, who wasn't allowed to make hundred dollar decisions, began to see her boss's restrictions were about his conservatism and not about her, so she could begin to let it go.

Stefan saw that Robert's criticisms were more about Robert than about Stefan's behaviors. He could decide which criticisms were real areas of development and which were just Robert's issues. He began to make intelligent choices instead of just reacting.

When you stop taking things personally, you can decide how you want to show up. Responding consciously, with intention, is the core of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*<sup>TM</sup>.

Read related Tips:

[\*Act with Intention\*](#)

[\*Be Impeccable with Your Word\*](#)

[\*Choose the Impression You Make\*](#)

[\*Disagree Agreeably\*](#)

[\*Handling Feedback Effectively\*](#)

[\*Leadership & Self-Deception\*](#)

---

To SUBSCRIBE or to CONTRIBUTE an idea for future Executive Coaching Tips, email us at:  
[info@essentialcomm.com](mailto:info@essentialcomm.com)

To SUBSCRIBE to the Podcasts (iTunes), [click here](#)

To SUBSCRIBE to the Podcasts (RSS), [click here](#)

To VIEW the entire archive of Executive Coaching Tips, visit:  
<http://www.essentialcomm.com/tips/execcoachtips.html>



**ESSENTIAL  
COMMUNICATIONS**

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

To CONTACT [Tom Henschel](#) or learn about the Essential Communications team, [click here](#)

To UNSUBSCRIBE to future Executive Coaching Tips, email us at:  
[unsubscribe@essentialcomm.com](mailto:unsubscribe@essentialcomm.com)

"The Look & Sound of Leadership" is a trademark of Essential Communications. We believe you are receiving this email in response to a subscription request. If you are experiencing difficulties with the above HTML graphics, [click here](#).