

# Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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## EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Unmasking a Stand-In ▶ 09/09/10

### Hijacked by rage

Over a two-year span, Scott had four hostile, explosive outbursts. After the last one, which happened during his own staff meeting, he was asked to get coaching.

At our first meeting, he was understandably defensive. He admitted that, yes, the incidents had happened, but he was full of justifications about why. Then he became sheepish, acknowledging that there really was no excuse for his red-faced, vitriolic outbursts.

I asked him to describe where in his body he experienced his rage. He was quite articulate about that and how the four experiences were similar to each other. But when I asked how the four situations leading up to the incidents were similar—in essence, what had triggered his rage—he was stumped. To him the situations felt distinct and unrelated.

Over several sessions, we explored what had set him off in each incident. I began to feel that, in each case, the inciting incident had felt to him as though he might look bad to his boss. When I suggested this idea, he looked me in the eyes but was clearly turning inward. After a long silence he whispered, "I think that's right."

He then began to connect different dots in his life. In college and grad school, he'd had similar explosions when he felt he might look bad to his professors. He traced his rage back to his youth, saying, "I once beat up one of my brothers because he told on me to our dad. I went sort of crazy."

He told me how his dad had been a scary, punishing man. Nothing Scott experienced as a child was as bad as getting in trouble with his dad. He began to see his pattern.

### Hijacked by fear

Allen's story is quite different. Everyone agrees that Allen is the guy you want negotiating a tough deal. Part of a large team of corporate lawyers, he's assertive on behalf of his clients and fiercely protective of his direct reports. But with his boss, he becomes invisible. He's unable to push back when he hears ideas he knows are wrong or to hold boundaries about his workload or set limits that will protect his family life. When it comes to his boss, his assertive self vanishes.



I asked Allen to be objective about his boss. Was his boss particularly intimidating? He told me, no, he actually was quite approachable. That matched my own experience of his boss and the feedback I'd heard about him from others.

Nevertheless, Allen felt himself collapsing into helpless silence almost every time he dealt with his boss. Exploring it further, he observed a related behavior he had with his wife: when a difficult conversation was called for, he often simply left the room, telling her that whatever she decided was okay with him, whether it was or not.

I ventured, "I'll bet that that 'becoming invisible' behavior is really old in your life."

He smiled ruefully. "Oh, yeah," he said. "That's how I was around my mom. She wasn't a very strong person. Any sort of argument or disagreement could send her to bed for days, so we all lived in fear of making her sick. We learned to protect her by being silent and never making any sort of problem."

### **Identifying the hijacker**

On the face of it, Scott's explosions and Allen's silent vanishing acts have nothing in common. But both men were able to trace the origin of their behaviors to how they'd related to the dominant grown-up in their home. (Make no mistake, even though Allen's mom appeared fragile, she was the dominant grown-up in that house!)

What Scott and Allen have in common is that, as adults, each is reacting to a stand-in from their pasts.

We're all familiar with the idea of a stand-in on a movie set. During the tedious work of lighting a set, the actors are allowed to leave so they can rest and prepare. But in order for the work to go forward, someone else stands in their place—literally a stand-in.

In Scott and Allen's life, people in their workplace (their bosses, in both cases) had become stand-ins for people from their past. It's not that Scott's boss was scary and punishing as his actual dad had been. And it is not that Allen's boss was sickly and fragile as his mom had been. Rather, Scott and Allen projected those qualities onto their bosses: their bosses became stand-ins for the primary people in their pasts. Their resulting behaviors were overreactions that ended up being detrimental to their personal and professional development.



### **Separating past from present**

Robyn Sewitz, a gifted therapist in Southern California, describes the phenomenon this way: “When strong, out-of-proportion reactions occur, the person is no longer living in real time. The person experiencing the reaction *feels* the situation is happening now, but what they’re actually reacting to is someone who exists in the past.”

Certainly we all have imprints from our past that influence how we behave in our present. That is inevitable and quite normal. And in most cases, even though we’re playing out patterns we learned as children, our behaviors fit the situation. But when we repeat patterns of behavior that clearly do not fit the situation, it’s a good bet there is a stand-in at play.

Because stand-ins most often come from a time when we felt victimized and helpless, the feelings they evoke often overwhelm our ability to reason. We get flooded with feelings of helplessness and, *bang!*, we’re suddenly hijacked, emotionally interacting with someone from our past. And our actions are inappropriate.

### **Unmasking the hijacker**

Gaining control over a stand-in is crucial. As Sewitz unequivocally states, “No one in the workplace is emotionally important enough to cause you to have that sort of behavior.”

Here are three steps for gaining control over a stand-in:

- 1 Recognize what’s happening. If you have repeated behavior that’s out of proportion to the situation, explore how old the behavior is in your life. Be a good detective.
- 2 Once you identify the actual person from your past that you’re reacting to, recognize that you’ve put that person’s mask on someone in the present. Consciously separate the actual person in your present from the phantom in your past.
- 3 The next time you begin to feel flooded with those old emotions, coach yourself. Tell yourself that what you’re feeling is not from your present circumstances. Remind yourself that you’ve put a mask on a current person and work to unmask the stand-in. Strive to put the situation where it belongs—in the past. And put your reaction where *it* belongs—in the present.



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