

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Compassion During Change ▶ 11/04/10

A startling sudden decline

Jay's boss was concerned about him. A star performer recruited by the CEO, Jay suddenly seemed to be floundering. He'd goofed up two major projects and had blown up during a staff meeting. Jay's boss was hoping I could help.

Within minutes of meeting this smiling hulk of a guy, I liked him. He opened up right away, saying he was just as puzzled as his boss. "I know things are going south," he told me, "but it's not intentional. I don't know what's going on."

He told me how the CEO, an old business school buddy, had been recruiting him for years. Jay had lived in the middle of the country with his wife and two kids. For eighteen years, he'd run his own company with his best friend. But the CEO had been increasingly persuasive until, finally, Jay began to commute and consult. After a year of that, his family agreed to move to the coast. Jay sold his half of the business to his friend, pulled up his roots and joined the company full-time as one of the senior executives.

At first, his kids had had a tough time adjusting to their new city. So had his wife, who had never lived anywhere but their hometown. But now, he told me with relief, they were settling in. They all seemed to have made friends and to have gotten over their period of adjustment.

"And what about you?" I asked. "Have you settled in?"

He sighed and told me how much he missed his best friend, and how different it was to be an employee instead of the head of the business. He assured me he really loved his new company, his job and his new boss. "I like everything I have here," he told me, "but sometimes I miss what I had."

"I'd rather be a checker!"

Mila's story was quite different. She had been rising steadily for several years at the giant software company where she worked. In recognition of her high potential ranking, she was given a coach.



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Because I'd coached at the company for several years, she and I had known many of the same people—most of whom were no longer there. Her division had suffered four rounds of lay-offs and the departure of two top executives.

She was grateful to have someone to talk with confidentially. "At the end of every day I just want to go home and cry. I feel like I've been beaten up. Sometimes I just want to quit and go be a checker at Trader Joe's."

Although their situations were different, I told Mila and Jay the same story.

The story of caring villages

A hundred years ago, in small Russian villages, there was a tradition if you suffered the loss of a spouse or child. This tradition didn't occur if you lost a parent or grandparent—that was considered to be the natural order of things. This tradition only took place if you suffered a loss that was outside the natural order.

The tradition was a releasing of your responsibilities. If you ran crying through the snow naked, it was no mark against you. If you failed to feed your livestock, it would be done for you. The community understood your grief overwhelmed your good sense.

As long as you didn't do anything rash, like remarry or sell your farm, the community would not hold you accountable for your actions—for one year.

Then, at the end of that year, you had to rejoin the community and take up your responsibilities once again. But for that year, you had permission to experience your grief in whatever way was natural for you.

I love that story because it is so compassionate. In the face of grief, we're all powerless. No one can predict when grief will show up or what form it will take.

I felt both Mila and Jay needed to hear that story because, although they'd both experienced major life changes, now that those changes were over, they expected themselves to just carry on.

Then I told them a story from my own life.



The story of my collapse

Several years ago, my oldest daughter experienced a life-changing crisis. After getting past the initial shock, I kicked into problem-solving mode and did everything I could to help her. Even though every day had an undercurrent of terror that my oldest girl might not be okay, I did my coaching work and parented my other daughter. Despite my fear, I actually functioned fairly effectively—until a few months after the crisis ended.

Then, suddenly, I found myself unable to sleep. During the day my attention wandered. I cried at the most inappropriate moments. And I kept saying to myself, “What’s wrong with me? She’s okay now! It’s over!”

I was only half-right: it was over for *her*, but not for me. Having held it together for so long, the easing of tensions released the grief I’d been holding off. Because I was in the middle of it, I couldn’t recognize what was happening to me.

The point of the story of the Russian village is not that it takes a caring community to look after people—although that’s an idea I welcome. Rather, the point is that often emotional reactions go underground for quite a while before surfacing. That’s why the villages gave mourners an entire year of grace.

During a crisis, high performing professionals often hold it together quite well. But some time later, after the dust has settled, *then* a reaction sets in. And everyone, including the person it’s happening to, scratches their head and wonders, “What’s wrong?”

So it was with Jay. His sadness didn’t overwhelm him until after his family arrived at a place of acceptance about the move. Then his performance declined.

So it was with Mila. Her resilience didn’t collapse until long after her co-workers were let go and her division imploded. Then she began to feel fragile.

In both cases, neither Jay nor Mila could understand why they were experiencing tough times.

Consider compassion

During the past few years, many people have been through difficult times. Some have seen family or friends reduced in ways that would have been unthinkable just a few years before. Some have lost equity in their homes and, consequently, their futures look darker. Some have lost their retirement funds. Some have lost their jobs.



Watching these quiet horrors takes a toll.

Is there someone at work who seems inexplicably less effective than they were in times past? If so, they may be reacting to events you thought were long over. Consider being compassionate with them.

Or perhaps *you* are the person who is not quite as resilient as in times past. If so, look behind you to see where you've been. It's possible you're reacting to some of the profound changes that have taken place around you. Or to changes of your own. Consider being compassionate with yourself.

Driving for results is an important part of your job as a leader. Equally important is knowing when to tend to the well-being of those around you. Or to yourself. Compassion is a crucial part of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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