

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



Three Little Phrases with Big Impact ▶ 12/02/10

Why should I listen to this?

Anna walked me through the slides she'd prepared for her upcoming all hands meeting. A new group, including people in China and India, had joined her team and she wanted the meeting be meaningful to everyone.

An articulate, energetic woman, Anna had no trouble explaining the content on her slides. What I couldn't understand was the context.

At first, I thought I didn't get the context because, as an outside consultant, I had no frame of reference. But every time I'd ask her to explain the context, she'd answer by adding information that seemed vital. "Oh, that's good!" she'd say to herself. "I should say that." And she'd make a note of what she'd just said.

The reason I wasn't understanding Anna's context was that she wasn't explaining it. Was she explaining the data itself? Yes, quite clearly. But she was not explaining why she felt the data was important to her people or how it fit into the big picture. The phrase I wanted Anna to speak was, "I'm telling you this because . . ."

Phrase #1: "I'm telling you this because . . ."

These days, with overwhelming amounts of information bombarding us, I think we all listen to each other with unconscious filters that ask, "Why should I listen to this?" "Why is this important to me?" "What's the bottom line here?"

The phrase "I'm telling you this because . . ." answers those unspoken questions. "I'm telling you this because . . ." keeps people listening.

Whether you're making a presentation, giving feedback, delivering a status report, giving direction, or just thinking out loud, tell people why you're telling them whatever it is you're telling them. Phrases like "I'm telling you this because . . ." or "The take away here is . . ." or "I want you to understand why I'm mentioning this point . . ." or "This is important because . . ." should be coming out of your mouth all the time.



Using the phrase “I’m telling you this because . . .” (or some variation of it), forces you to get to your own bottom line. And it forces you to stop assuming people know what you’re talking about. Because they don’t. Believe me.

Phrase #2: “Nevertheless . . .”

Gregor’s coaching was increasingly focused on managing Manish, one of his direct reports. Manish needed a lot of feedback and Gregor tried to deliver it in an unemotional and specific manner.

But Manish would then engage him in hyper-detailed analyses of past situations or extended discussions about hypothetical future situations. Gregor felt Manish’s diversionary tactics were derailing his feedback. So I taught him the phrase, “Nevertheless . . .”

I love “Nevertheless . . .” because it’s a trump card. You can play it any time and it always wins. Here’s how it works.

Let’s say you’re struggling with a direct report of yours named Bob over something simple like punctuality. Bob tells you all the reasons why he can’t possibly comply with the rules that everyone else lives by. His reasons are compelling. You don’t want to appear heartless. But you need him to conform.

At the end of his explanation, you say, “I understand, Bob. That all sounds very important. *Nevertheless*, I need you to be here at the same time as everyone else.”

He then goes into another lengthy explanation. You listen. You nod. And you say, “I really do understand, Bob. *Nevertheless*, I will need you to work those things out and be here at the same time as everyone else.”

“Nevertheless . . .” is endlessly repeatable. Just keep playing it over and over, like a bottomless trump card. “Nevertheless . . .” allows you to hold a firm boundary without arguing endlessly over details or justifications. (And, if you live with children, it’s a lifesaver!)

Phrase #3: “Based on results . . .”

A variation of “Nevertheless . . .” is “Based on results . . .” The difference between the two is that you use “Nevertheless . . .” when you want compliance with a decision you’ve made. You use “Based on results . . .” when two criteria are present: 1) When you’re creating a consequence because of



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past performance and 2) when the person you're talking with is not taking responsibility for their own actions. Here's how it worked for a manager named Dana.

One of her direct reports, a guy named Charlie, often missed the mark in his performance. But whenever the next opportunity came up, he'd want to take the lead as if nothing had gone wrong. When Dana would try to dial his responsibilities down, he'd complain she wasn't being fair, that he should be given a chance to prove he'd learned his lesson.

Dana began to wonder if maybe she was being unfair and overly controlling. But her guts told her that Charlie really wasn't ready for more responsibility. So I taught her "Based on results . . ."

I first learned "Based on results . . ." when my oldest daughter was a teenager. She loved to debate and, like Dana, I got completely sucked in. She and I would argue the finer points of the situation like two lawyers and, although I was the grown-up, I never felt I really won my case. Then I learned "Based on results . . ."

Past performance is the criteria

Let's say my daughter missed her last two curfews. The infractions weren't so egregious that I'd feel the need to ground her, but I'd want to see some compliance before giving her more freedom. I'd tell her I wanted her home at eleven but she'd say she wanted to stay out until midnight.

Of course, she'd have lots of excellent reasons why she should be allowed to stay out that extra hour. But instead of debating those reasons with her, I'd reply, "Those are all good points, but *based on your results* the past couple weeks, I'm not willing to give you until midnight. If you can hit an 11:00 curfew tonight, we can talk about midnight next time."

Here's how it worked for Dana managing Charlie. He argued that, yes, he did make a mistake at that vendor meeting, but he learned his lesson and should be able to attend the next meeting alone. She replied, "I understand your point, Charlie, and I hope you will be leading these meetings by yourself soon. But, *based on results*, I feel it's important you have a partner with you right now."

No matter what Charlie replies, she simply reiterates, "I do understand your point, Charlie. I'm making this decision *based on results*."

"Based on results . . ." allows Dana to use his past performance as the decision-making criterion. And, over time, it makes Charlie take responsibility for his actions. I love this phrase.



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Clearly none of these three phrases are magic bullets. For example, if you deliver them emotionally or in the midst of chaotic thinking, they won't have the significant impact I'm describing here. But when you use them appropriately, they are powerful demonstrations of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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