

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



Stop Giving Away Your Secrets ▶ 04/07/11

"Play Better Poker"

Darcie was in line to become the CFO's heir apparent. Only one thing stood in the way of her promotion: she couldn't contain herself when people said something she perceived as "stupid." Her eye rolls and little snorts of derision were so well known, department members had taken to saying they'd "gotten a Darcie" whenever she—or anyone else!—blew off one of their ideas.

When she asked if I could help, I told her I thought I could. "Do you want to know the secret?" I asked. She assured me she did.

"OK," I said. "Here it is: play better poker."

She looked at me with such skepticism that I laughed out loud. (Hey, at least I didn't get a snort and an eye roll!) Here's what I mean when I say "play better poker."

Do you know what a "tell" is at a poker table?

A tell is an unconscious, consistent reaction in specific situations.

Imagine you and I play poker together once a month. Over time you notice that whenever I'm dealt a hand I think is a winner, I repeatedly flick the corner of my cards with my thumb. You also notice that when I'm dealt a hand that's weak, I repeatedly pick up my cards, fan them, glance at them for a second, then put them down again.

Because my behaviors are unconscious yet consistent, my "tells" give me away. By reading my tells you know what I'm thinking and so gain advantage over me.

Non-verbal "tells" trump your words

Decades ago I met a young man who made his living playing poker in the local Southern California casinos. He said he could spot most players' tells within fifteen minutes. He also said he'd spent years eliminating his own tells. He'd become so sophisticated at that part of the game, he had created an elaborate set of false tells to deceive any player who was able to play at that level.



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How do tells apply to Darcie?

Darcie had gotten feedback about her eye rolls. She was able to notice herself doing them—some of the time. In those instances, she had learned to follow her eye roll by saying, in her most neutral tone of voice, “Really? Tell me more about that.”

But, just like the unaware poker player who raises heavily but whose non-verbal behavior declares his hand is a loser, Darcie’s non-verbal behavior spoke louder than her words. She had given herself away. People knew when she thought their ideas were stupid.

Even more troubling was Darcie’s feeling—with which I concurred—that she was probably able to notice only a certain percentage of her eye rolls. She could never be certain she hadn’t given herself away. And the organization’s message to her was clear: if she couldn’t get a handle on what was seen as disrespectful behavior, she was not going to graduate to the most senior ranks of the company. So eliminating her tells was a serious issue for her.

As Darcie and I discussed this, she admitted she was conflicted. “You know the *real* problem, Tom? Sometimes these ideas *are* stupid. Really. They are!”

“That may be true. But is there a benefit if they know you think that?”

“No,” she said, “of course not.”

“So play better poker. Look, Darcie, maybe the ideas are stupid. But the real point is that you should be able to choose whether you communicate that to them or not. Right now, you aren’t in control of the message. Play better poker.”

Two critical truths

The concept of a poker player eliminating her own tells is a perfect analogy for much of the behavioral work that helps leaders achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

Why? Because the desire to eliminate a tell at the poker table comes only after there is total acceptance of two truths:

- 1 Every behavior at the table, from how you breathe to how you sit to the movement of your eyes, is a public act that someone could observe;
- 2 Every behavior, no matter how small, sends a message.



Once a poker player accepts those two truths, mastering tells becomes imperative.

Similarly, business leaders can't master their messages without accepting this variation of those truths:

- ▶ First, as a leader, you are a public figure. Like it or not, people are watching your every move;
- ▶ Second, as a leader, your behaviors, no matter how subtle, convey messages beyond your words.

So how can you eliminate your tells?

It's a two-step process that, when practiced with discipline, yields powerful results.

Two actions for eliminating "tells"

First, develop your self-awareness.

I asked that young professional poker player how he eliminated his tells. He talked about slowing his mind down so he could watch himself while he played. He found he could split his mind, playing the game at the table with one part of his mind while watching himself, as if on a television screen, with another part. He consciously heightened his self-awareness.

Leaders in the workplace must do the same thing. Develop your "third eye" so you can observe yourself. Darcie learned to ask herself, "Am I doing that eye-roll thing now? What about now? How about *now*?"

Second, learn to intervene on yourself.

Here's an example.

When I work with speakers to eliminate "um's," I often suggest they reel time in backwards. What does that mean?

At first, they can only notice the "um" a second or two after they've said it. That's fine. I tell them to imagine the "um" as a bubble out in front of their faces, moving away from them on the stream of air that's already left their mouths.

Then, through self-awareness, they learn to reel time in backwards until they can observe the "um" closer to their mouths. Soon, they're aware of the "um" at the same instant it's popping off their lips. That's good. Their awareness has reeled the "um" closer to the event!



They continue to reel time backwards until they become aware of the “um” as it’s forming in their throat. And, finally, they reel time so far backwards, and their awareness becomes so heightened, they can intervene before the “um” takes shape at all! The “um” is cut off and never happens.

So it is with a tell.

When Darcie’s awareness was heightened enough, she could intervene and stop her little snort before it happened.

What Darcie loved best was that she didn’t have to change her thinking: if she wanted, she could still think “What a stupid idea!” But she didn’t have to tip her hand. She played better poker.

The ability to disclose only those thoughts you want others to see is crucial to achieving *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

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