

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Smiling—The Look of Leadership? ▶ 09/01/11

Two smiles, two outcomes

Gabriella often says she has the best job in the whole company—and she's quick to add that hers is a global company of more than twenty thousand people! She talks about lives changed because of the work she gets to do. She talks about the great performance of her team. She talks about attending international conferences with world leaders where she promotes her group's unique innovation.

Amazingly, she never sounds like she's bragging. Quite the contrary. She wins over virtually everyone she talks with because while she tells her story, she smiles in a way that is authentic and completely unforced.

Hers isn't the dewy-eyed smile of a girl who just glimpsed her latest crush; rather, hers is the smile of someone who loves what she does and can't wait to share it with you. Gabriella is irresistible. A large part of her charisma is her smile.

Contrast Gabriella with Leigh.

Leigh leads a process improvement team for a defense contractor. She holds a PhD, is well into her forties and is mother to two teenagers. She is also petite and youthful in appearance.

At our first meeting, Leigh told me people often talked over her while she was talking. It wasn't just guys on factory floors who did it, sometimes it was her own direct reports!

She told me that in meetings with her peers and senior execs, ideas she proposed often fell flat. Sometimes she'd feel she hadn't even spoken, except that a few minutes later, someone else would voice her idea and people would throw their energy behind it like a downpour after a drought.

Leigh felt she wasn't being taken seriously because of her diminutive size and girlish appearance. I felt the issue was quite different: while telling me about not being taken seriously, she smiled the entire time!



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Unlike Gabriella's smile that felt authentic and unforced, Leigh's smile felt anxious and inappropriate. I told Leigh her smile seemed to say, "Please like me!"

Not a "women's only" issue

Over the years, I have encountered this sort of nervous smiling from more women than men. But it doesn't affect only women. Hardly!

Carlos was the gatekeeper for a powerful senior executive at a fast-paced high tech firm. At the end of each sentence, Carlos flashed a nervous smile. Is it any surprise he had trouble projecting the gravity he needed to keep the executive's calendar running smoothly?

Women like Leigh may struggle more often than men to smile authentically, but, trust me, it's not just a women's issue.

A smile we all use, all the time

In addition to the anxious, "Please like me!" smile, another smile complicates this issue even further. It's a smile we all use all the time. This smile is not connected to a true feeling of enjoyment. Rather we use it to send messages of good intention. It's traded at particular times in a ritualized way like an exchange of business cards. It's the social smile.

The social smile is not a phoney smile. It serves a particular purpose. We accept it from each other—unless it's your default smile.

The social smile is different than a smile of true enjoyment in several ways, and most people can tell the difference between the two. When social smiles, which do not reflect genuine pleasure, become your norm, your observers may experience you as less than sincere.

(If you are interested in learning to distinguish genuine smiles from social smiles, [this website](#) by Dr. Paul Ekman will help you hone your face-reading skills.)

Now it's time to simplify this issue of smiling. Here are three ways you can assess whether your smile is moving you towards, or away from, *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.



Three measures for authentic smiles

First, measure when you smile.

When I first spoke to Leigh about her smiling, she didn't know when she was smiling and when she wasn't. We used video to increase her awareness. I encouraged her to ask herself, "Am I smiling now? What about now? How about right now?"

Carlos, on the other hand, was well aware of his tendency to smile too often. His family and friends had teased him about it for years.

How aware are you of your tendency to smile?

If you feel you have trouble establishing credibility, or if you have trouble setting and holding boundaries, or if it's difficult for you to be assertive on your own behalf, you may want to check and see if smiling is contributing to the problem.

How would you do that? Ask for feedback. This Executive Coaching Tip from 2005 has ideas about [Getting Good Feedback](#). Or use video to record yourself. Build your awareness of when you are and aren't smiling.

Second, measure the appropriateness of your smile.

While you were reading about Leigh wanting to be taken seriously, you might have imagined she had many feelings about her struggle. You might have imagined she felt frustrated, irritated, helpless, even angry. But I doubt you imagined she felt anything that would have caused her to smile. Leigh's smile while telling that story was inappropriate.

Measuring appropriateness will stop you from tossing out the baby with the bath water when it comes to smiling—because I am most definitely *not* advocating that you stop smiling in the workplace. I think most people don't smile enough in the workplace. Smiling is great; it makes us all more attractive. This is not a tirade against smiling. Far from it.

But to appear genuine your smile needs to be appropriate.

Finally, measure the message your smile conveys.



Does your smile signal that you're delighted to be in that particular room at that particular time? If so, that message would go a long way towards [Creating Charisma](#).

Or, like Leigh and Carlos, does your smile convey insecurity? If so, it's hard to imagine how that message could be beneficial for you.

Or is your smile a social smile, sending a message of good will?

Your smile sends a message and people are receiving it. With good feedback, you can find out what that message is. Then you can begin to craft your message with intention. Two Tips that can help with that are [Act "As If,"](#) and [Choose the Impression You Make](#).

Here's the recap. Measure your smile these three ways:

- 1 Build your awareness of when you're smiling;
- 2 Make sure you're smiling when it's appropriate;
- 3 Send the message you intend with your smile.

Those three measures can help you just as they helped Leigh and Carlos. Once your smile becomes authentic, you will be modeling *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

Read related Tips:

[Act "As If"](#)

[Becoming More Expressive](#)

[Choose the Impression You Make](#)

[Creating Charisma](#)

[Getting Good Feedback](#)

[How Behaviors Change](#)

[When Learning Makes Things Worse](#)



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