

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Your Team's Best Interests - Part One ▶ 01/12/12

"Does my boss have my best interest at heart?"

The original goal for Brendan's coaching was to polish his executive presence. But after I heard that two of his team members had transferred to other divisions and a third had left the company, I began to explore how he was managing his team.

I started the conversation by asking not about his team but rather about when in his career he'd felt most engaged and motivated. He described a job he'd had a decade earlier in another city.

"Maybe I've painted it rosier than it was," he said, "but my memory is that it was a great job at a great company. And," he added with a fond smile, "I had a great boss."

I wasn't at all surprised that Brendan's memory of a great job was connected to his memory of a great boss. Research consistently shows a link between employees who are fully engaged with an affirmative answer to the following question: "Does my boss have my best interest at heart?" When the answer to that question is "yes," employees rank higher in job satisfaction and productivity than those who answer "no."

An old saying demonstrates this in the negative: "People don't quit their jobs, they quit their bosses." My fear for Brendan was that the departures from his team were the proof of that point.

Brendan and I began to discuss the wide variety of ways bosses can demonstrate that they have their direct reports' best interests at heart. He and I discussed eleven different behaviors that help ensure employees rave about their bosses. What follows are five of those; the other six behaviors will be in next month's Tip.

I've numbered the eleven behaviors for your convenience as a reader, but they aren't ranked by importance. None of them is more or less significant than another.

Nor will every behavior be a perfect match for every leader or every employee or every workplace. But leaders who authentically display at least three or four of these behaviors are almost guaranteed to have employees who are engaged and productive.



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Here are the first five.

1 Be sure employees understand their job.

Bosses need to establish clear expectations for each role. On the simplest level this means a job description for each role, followed by a thoughtful conversation (or several conversations) that examines the job description in detail.

But a job description is only the beginning.

Each employee also needs to understand how his or her role contributes to the outcomes of the team and how the team contributes to the overall success of the company.

In the 1990's, the Gallup organization began categorizing how aspects of work drove performance. The top indicator of success ended up being this single sentence: "I know what's expected of me at work."

The study found that knowing what was expected of them was most meaningful when employees understood not just the demands of their particular role, but how their role fit into the bigger picture. Conversely, companies experienced lower productivity when employees were unclear how their role contributed to the greater success.

Be sure the members of your team see how their contributions connect to the big picture.

2 Deliver lots of feedback—both praise and developmental

Long-time readers of these Executive Coaching Tips know I have written extensively about feedback over the years. There are three reasons.

First, experience tells me that the majority of people just aren't very comfortable giving feedback. Yet I strongly believe bosses simply cannot be effective unless they're able to give feedback in a meaningful way.

Second, people who do have comfort giving feedback tend to prefer one side of the coin or the other: either they naturally dispense lots of praise without much developmental feedback or vice versa. An imbalance in their own abilities usually results in an imbalance in their team.



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Finally, I give feedback for a living. I see how transformative it can be. There simply is no substitute for letting people know how they're succeeding and what they need to do to improve.

I want to put as many tools at your disposal as I can to help you master the art of giving great feedback. To that end, I'm providing a link to an archive that has more than a dozen Executive Coaching Tips specifically designed to strengthen your feedback skills. Once in the archive, you can read the Tips online, download them as PDFs or listen to them as podcasts. They're free. Help yourself!
<http://www.essentialcomm.com/tips/execcoachtips-feedback.html>

3 Create opportunities for new responsibilities

When I talk with executives about their most positive work experiences, they often tell me about a time when they had the opportunity to learn new skills or master new content. The challenges and subsequent growth energized them.

Bosses who have their direct reports' best interests at heart diligently look for just such ways to grow their direct reports. Often this means resisting the temptation to do the work themselves. Is it easier and faster when the executive performs the work? Of course. But it robs direct reports of opportunities to take on new responsibilities.

Choosing to give your direct reports new responsibilities requires a shift in thinking: expanding your direct reports' skill sets beyond where they are today must become a conscious priority or it won't happen.

Will giving new responsibilities to people slow the team down? For a while, yes, it may. That concern is the most common reason I hear from leaders when they explain why they aren't delegating. But when delegation happens, does the team as a whole get stronger? Absolutely. And do your direct reports feel you have their best interests at heart? Without a doubt.

Not surprisingly, assigning new responsibilities links back to your ability to give effective feedback: the person learning new responsibilities will need to know what he's doing well and what he needs to do differently.

4 Allow employees to have high visibility

I once coached three young executives who all reported to the same senior leader. The three young executives each raved about this boss for one reason: he allowed them to present their material at the CEO's staff meetings.



For weeks prior to the presentation, the leader would give them feedback on their slides and would carve out time to watch them rehearse. Afterwards he would share the feedback he'd heard from the CEO and his staff. These employees were fervent believers that their boss had their best interests at heart.

That's just one of many ways to give your employees visibility.

Another executive rotates the leadership of her staff meetings so each member, no matter how junior, has a chance to create an agenda and lead the meeting. And she gives feedback afterwards every time.

A different executive works diligently to transfer meeting invitations to his direct reports, letting his peers know that the person he is sending in his place is fully empowered to speak on his behalf. Of course, he is careful to prep those people ahead of time and debrief with them after.

Another team leader who has a fairly young staff vigilantly notes who doesn't participate during her weekly staff meetings. Later, she meets privately with those people and stresses how highly she values participation. Her real goal is to help them get comfortable speaking up. During her struggles to overcome her own introversion, she had learned that her career would stall if she wasn't visible. She wanted to develop her people's comfort with visibility as early in their careers as possible.

Giving your people visibility will mean different things in different situations. But most often it means the boss needs to step away from the spotlight and allow his or her subordinates to step in. This is an important challenge to take.

5 Position people for promotion

I once coached a vice-president with eight direct reports. Not one of them was at a level immediately below the vice-presidential level; they all were at least two, if not three, levels below her.

Each year at performance review time, she encouraged her team by telling them they were "almost" ready for a promotion and that most likely this would be their year. Some of them had been hearing that for five years.

Although she gave them interesting work and lots of feedback, none of them felt she had their best interests at heart. Surprised?



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I often talk with my coaching clients about their plans for their highest performing direct reports. I understand how hard it is to lose your highest performers, but it's simply not fair to hold them back just so your life will be easier.

One way to measure your success as a leader is to chart how many people you've developed and then promoted out of your group. Unless you're experiencing a rigid hiring freeze that won't allow you to replace your head count, I can't imagine any downside if you gained a reputation for developing people and promoting them upwards.

Soliciting your personal stories

During the more than six years I've been distributing these Executive Coaching Tips, I have heard from many of you with stories of your successes and challenges. Those exchanges have been meaningful to me. I am always grateful for your input.

Now, for the first time, I'd like to actively solicit your ideas.

I'd like to hear how you as a leader demonstrate to your employees that you have their best interests at heart. Or how a boss has demonstrated that to you. Later this year, I'll compile the stories and share them. (If you want to remain anonymous, just let me know.)

Send your stories to me at: tips@essentialcomm.com

Next month, I'll tell you the end of Brendan's story. And I'll share the other six behaviors that show your direct reports you have their best interest at heart. Without doubt, when your direct reports are your raving fans, you must be exhibiting a crucial part of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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