Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel

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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

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The Many Parts of You ▶ 03/08/12

Your essence under attack

Ian rose through the ranks of a rough and tumble international petroleum sales organization. Now wearing a shirt and tie, he is ensconced in an office on the executive floor of the global headquarters. His boss, one away from the CEO, repeatedly tells Ian he needs to rein in his volatile style, stop his sailor's mouth and generally get buttoned up. Over and over, Ian's boss tells him, "You're an executive now. Act like one."

"But that's how I am," Ian barked at me. "It's how I got here, for chrissake! I don't want to put a damn muzzle on myself every time I get off the elevator."

Corinne's story is quite different. A gifted artist in a consumer products group, Corinne constantly feels like an outsider. "They're all left-brainers," she says disdainfully about her co-workers. "They love details I couldn't care less about. It's like we're from different planets."

At an earlier time, Corinne thought she'd work at the company until retirement. Now she can't imagine lasting even another year unless a drastic change occurs. She knows the only change she can affect is her own, but she can't imagine changing her overwhelming sense of alienation.

These accomplished professionals were both suffering in their own ways. But to me they shared two commonalities.

First, they each wanted to stay in the positions they'd worked so hard to achieve.

Second, they felt the change they'd have to make in order to succeed in their positions was so big, so fundamental, that, if accomplished, it would compromise their very natures.

Change but maintain your Self

My heart went out to these high achievers: they felt their essences were under attack. I wanted them to achieve a dual outcome: make the required change *and* continue to be true to their core selves. So I told them the following story.

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My siblings and I learned that following rules was a sign of respect. Being a cautious child, I liked following the rules. The world felt orderly and safe when I could figure out what pleased the grown-ups, so following the rules was easy for me.

By high school, I'd become an agreeable teenager, content to work within the system. Inwardly, I noticed risk takers all around me whose lives looked much more thrilling than mine. But my desire to stay safe kept me out of those waters. I stayed compliant and successful, and kept my self-doubts to myself.

In the competitive, artistic world of The Juilliard School, rules were vague at best. Why, I wondered, wouldn't the grown-ups just tell me what to do? But of course they didn't. Trying to survive in such an uncontained world caused me to live in a perpetual state of quiet panic.

After graduation, my anxiety grew. Auditioning—the actors' equivalent of job interviews—forced me to guess wildly about what the "grown-ups" wanted; in the audition process, as in interviews, authority figures usually remain unreadable. How, I asked myself, was I ever going to succeed if I couldn't become bolder?

The discovery of "parts"

During this period, I was helping run an actor's conservatory in Hollywood. There, as a teacher and director, I felt like I'd become one of the grown-ups. The panicked child inside me receded into the background.

Driving home one night after a successful rehearsal, a thought intruded: I had an audition in the morning! Suddenly, as if whacked by a brick, my confident grown-up vanished and my panicked child came roaring back. The psychic switch happened with such ferocity it made me dizzy. I had to stop driving.

There, at the curb in front of a flamenco restaurant, I wondered where had my confident, grown-up feelings gone. And how could I get them back in time for my audition?

That inquiry led me, over time, to a new understanding: the adult part of me and the panicked, child-like part of me were just that—*parts* of me. Neither was the whole me. And they weren't my only two parts. There were other parts of me, too.

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Over the years, I've come to believe we all have wildly different parts within us, sometimes in reaction to the same situation.

Imagine you receive an assignment to lead a new team in China. Part of you might be excited to travel to Asia for the first time while another part of you might be anxious about going. Another part of you might feel confident about your leadership skills while another part of you might be concerned whether those skills will be effective in a foreign culture.

All those different parts of you are distinct. None of them is "right" or "wrong" or "good" or "bad." They don't cancel each other out or invalidate any other part. Rather, each separate part is an entire entity unto itself with its own set of feelings. The parts and the feelings ebb and flow with different intensities at different times.

When one part of you suddenly dominates your thoughts and feelings, it's comforting to step back and remember that no single part is the entirety of who you are. Quite the contrary. Your essence is the sum of *all* those parts interacting together, even when, on the surface, they may appear to contradict each other.

Your parts make up your whole

I felt strongly that if Ian and Corinne could recognize the different parts of themselves, the changes they were resisting would become manageable.

When I introduced the idea of "parts" to Ian, he initially said it sounded positively schizophrenic. I disagreed. Learning to regulate our many inner parts is a sign of resilience and health, I said. I told him an entire discipline of psychotherapy, called Internal Family Systems, was founded on this concept.

Then he surprised me by saying he had parts of his own that he knew quite well. One part of him had been dangerously wild. Then he began imagining a hulking figure with massive folded arms standing in front of a large metal door. He'd named this part of himself "The Enforcer."

"Beyond that door was the chaos I loved," Ian said with a smile. "When The Enforcer appeared in my mind, it was a big message saying 'don't go there,' like my rational mind was saying, 'Slow down!'" He admitted that he often missed the chaos, but the reasonable part of him knew it was better to listen to The Enforcer.

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Corinne, too, already knew there was a part of herself that could calm the alienated part of her. She said that when she was agitated as a child, she'd hear a soothing British nanny inside her head saying, "It's all right, dearie." That internal mantra reminded her that she moved through a world populated by mysterious creatures but that she was safe and under no threat. She was able to watch the people in front of her as if they were behind the glass of an aquarium. She could enjoy their antics without fear.

Summoning the parts you want

The different parts of ourselves swell or shrink depending the situation. One enormously successful woman confessed to me that sometimes she feels like an imposter. Does she feel like that all the time? Absolutely not. But when that part of her swells up, it can cause her to exhibit harsh behaviors that damage her relationships. For years she's been working to recognize when that part of her is taking over. When it does, she strives to remember that it's just one small part of herself and relegates it back to its rightful place.

Recognizing the different parts of yourself, accepting that they're normal, and then managing them, allows you to show up the way you want to show up.

When a peer hurls an insult your way during a staff meeting, which part of you will show itself? The defensive part, the hurt part, the retaliatory part, or the calm, unperturbed part? You can learn to summon the part of yourself you want—and manage the part you don't want.

Parts can also help guide your development. When you get tough feedback from your boss, your entire being is not under attack. Your boss is only talking about one part of you—and you probably already know that part of yourself quite well! Find the other parts of yourself that will help you compensate and adjust.

Calling on the part of yourself that you want at any given moment is one way to display *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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