



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

Overcoming the "Grey Hair" Complex

Your palms are sweaty. You stumble over your words. You don't seem to be getting a clear message across. You look around the table - - everyone is more senior than you... both in age and title. You wonder if they will ever take you seriously. Sound familiar? If so, you are among many who experience the "Grey Hair" complex. The "grey hair" complex is a self-induced state of intimidation in the presence of more senior executives. It often begins with the false conviction that one would have more credibility if only they had the physical attributes that convey a higher level of seniority - - that physical attribute is often aptly summarized as "grey hair" connoting experience, wisdom and credibility. Dealing with the grey hair complex requires more than just changing your physical appearance... it requires conditioning oneself in three areas: Mental, Technical and Physical*.

Mental Conditioning: Believe That You Belong

A key success factor to conveying confidence in any given situation is determined by how you see yourself in that situation. In order to feel confident in the face of more senior executives, one must carry beliefs that support them in that effort. Mark, a client, had been a star at managing consulting teams for his firm. He was recently promoted to Senior Manager and was in line for partnership. But his new role required him to spend much more face time with internal and external senior executives. The time well spent would have a direct impact on his ability to cultivate, manage and convert client relationships into additional firm business. For several months, Mark struggled with the transition and lost confidence in how he interacted with senior individuals. Often the youngest one at the high-level client meetings, he deferred to the more senior partners with him. He hesitated to challenge his senior clients with questions or his point of view. While Mark wished for the day when executives would see him as a peer, he refused to see himself as such. Because he did not believe that he had a place at the table, his impact was limited. Mark's first requirement was to replace this limiting belief with one that actually helped him - - namely, that he brought value to these interactions through his knowledge and his superior ability to help clients identify and articulate their needs.

Technical Conditioning: Communicate Like You Belong

Feeling intimidated by more senior individuals often leads to one of two outcomes in terms of how one communicates: either you overcompensate by aggressively advocating your points of view, emphasizing your accomplishments, proving your expertise or you undermine yourself by not saying much, hesitating in your responses and acquiescing to other's knowledge above your own. Needless to say, neither is an effective strategy to making a strong impression on anyone! To overcome these blunders, one must prepare themselves by mastering core communication techniques. Chief among these techniques is the ability to helicopter up and speak from the executive's perspective taking into account their issues, agenda, and the decisions they have to make. Another is the ability to communicate value in terms of what you bring to the table and the results (rather than the process) of your work. Mark often got mired in the details when communicating with his high level clients thereby missing the opportunity to make an impact with the insights he could provide. He practiced having two to three key messages in his back pocket before every meeting. He became eloquent in crisply summarizing at least three prior engagements so that he could provide that information at opportune times. He developed his own messaging of what his firm does rather than relying on canned marketing speak. In essence, Mark conditioned himself for the expected, leaving his "thinking on his feet" energy for those situations that were least predictable.

Physical Conditioning: Look Like You Belong

Beyond the genetics one is born with, one should certainly consider what physical attributes within one's control negatively impact their executive presence. The culprits are often dress, voice and posture. On casual Fridays, Mark wore his version of casual - - his favorite khakis with now-frayed cuffs and his scuffed up but comfortable loafers. Certainly not an attire that screams credibility at to a senior audience. Mark reworked his Friday wardrobe to reflect a comfortable yet confident persona. After seeing himself on video, Mark realized that his voice often betrayed him - - the pace of his speech would quicken the more uncomfortable he was in a situation. With the help

of breathing exercises, Mark learned to slow down in the moment and be more deliberate with his points. Lastly, Mark realized that the way he held himself – his posture – held him back. Instead of taking his typical stance of casually leaning back in his chair at meetings, he began leaning forward, hands on the table and making good use of his physical presence to express himself.

While one cannot control their audience, Mark realized that there are many things within his control that he could use to enhance his impact at the executive level. And not one of those things included feigning to be older than he really is!

- Muriel Maignan Wilkins

* Adapted from the Isis Associates Signature Voice for Leaders Program

Quarterly Reflection: Beliefs that Support You

Sustainable change often begins with an examination of how one sees the situation. There are limiting beliefs that will hinder you from making your desired impact. And, there are supportive beliefs - - those that are aligned with what you want to accomplish.

Reflection Questions:

1. What limiting beliefs do you hold regarding your interactions at the executive level?
2. What supportive beliefs do you hold regarding your interactions at the executive level?
3. What impact on your presence do these beliefs have?
4. What existing or new supportive beliefs can you use to replace your limiting beliefs?

Quarterly Book Selection: Full Catastrophe Living

What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here's our book selection for this quarter:

"Full Catastrophe Living"

by Jon Kabat-Zinn

In this breakthrough book, Jon Kabat-Zinn shares with readers the program of the Stress Reduction Clinic at University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Kabat-Zinn provides us with the meditative practices, which help us to develop mindfulness – a state of living in the moment, paying attention, and cultivating focus. While the book provides detail and empirical medical data on the benefits of mindfulness to medical patients, it is a book that has tremendous leadership application as well.

In our fast paced world we live in today, the practice of mindfulness and the ability to regulate our attention is a powerful way to manage energy. We learn to experience and focus on what is actually happening in the moment rather than draining away energy lost in anticipation, worry, or fantasy. With this, mindfulness becomes a significant foundation for building "executive endurance" necessary for running both the sprints and marathons in business. This clarity of mind also has implications on a leader's ability to see the "big picture", respond to ambiguous situations as well as increase one's confidence and composure when facing difficult situations (see our Coach's Corner on the next page.) The sections on stress, time, and work are especially applicable for those looking for new perspectives and ideas for living life more fully. Ultimately, as Kabat-Zinn himself says, "*When it comes right down to it, the challenge of mindfulness is to realize 'this is it.' Right now is my life. The question is what is my relationship to [life] going to be?*"

From the Client: Increase Confidence & Composure with the Four P's

From the Client:

"I have an upcoming meeting with the CEO of my organization about my team and the work that we have been doing. I want this meeting to go well both as an opportunity to showcase my team's efforts but also as an opportunity to highlight my career development within the company. Sometimes in high stakes situations such as these, I let my nerves get the best of me and the interaction does not go as planned. This is one interaction, I want to appear confident and composed – what can I do?"

From the Coach's Corner:

Not to worry - your situation is one that we have all faced – letting our nerves and anxiety get the best of us. For some of us this can occur during a meeting with a C-suite member. For others, disruptive situations can include public speaking before a large audience, giving difficult performance feedback, or dealing with a hostile, resistant client. Like any athlete about to step onto a tough playing field, remember the four P's to increase your confidence and composure for any interaction.

Step One: Preparation: What you do before the "game", can make all the difference in how it turns out. Consider the outcome you would like. Is this interaction about relationship building? About selling? Or ensuring recognition for the team? Be clear on your hopes and expectations. Then, couple your hopes with the needs and concerns of your audience. Given your CEO's view of the organization, he/she will likely care more about the results your team has produced and the impact on the overall business than the technical detail of the processes you are involved in. Have key messages in your "back pocket" so that they are accessible through the interaction.

Step Two: Pre-Interaction Ritual: When we lose our composure, a physiological response usually manifests – we speed up talking, turn red in the face, or fidget in our chairs. The best offense is therefore having a "ritual", which centers you physiologically before the interaction begins. The most classic form of centering is spending some time consciously breathing before you walk in. Other clients have found listening to music, reading a favorite quote, or light stretching useful. When possible, go to the room early and feel comfortable with the physical space itself. For meetings, consider your seat and position at the table. For presentations, be sure to check the acoustics, layout, and design of the room itself.

Step Three: Present-moment Course Correcting: What can you do if you still get thrown off in the middle of the interaction? Before throwing in the towel too soon, get present to what is going on and course-correct. Know your own red flags -- do you start to speak louder and get defensive? Or do you clam up and hope the interaction will end soon? Once you know you have been "triggered", anchor back into the conversation. A physical anchor such as simply pressing your foot into the ground can get you "out of your head" and back into the game. Another benefit to being fully in the "game" (versus being disengaged or lost in negative emotion), is you are able to be more open and flexible to what the stakeholder is saying or how your audience is responding. By being open and receptive to what is happening, you can adapt more easily or find ways of bridging your key messages to their needs and concerns.

Step Four: Post Interaction Diagnosis: After the interaction, spend some time consciously making note of what went well or what did not. What worked effectively? What were key messages that worked well? What did not go well? What could you have done differently before or during the interaction? What will you take-away from this that can help you prepare for future similar situations? By integrating your learning from each experience, you ensure adding to your repertoire and expanding in your leadership communication abilities.

Champion athletes become masters at their game through continual practice, knowing their strengths and weaknesses, and stepping onto the field time and again. Likewise, great leaders know the value of self-management, experimenting to find the techniques that work best for them, and being open to new experiences to keep growing.

- Amy Jen Su