

TURN UP THE VOLUME

The ‘quiet man’ in an investment bank will only make director if he gives a better first impression. He has been offered coaching, but will it help? And what exactly do his ‘loud’ new bosses want?

Michael is a 56-year-old assistant director who has worked at a large investment bank for the past 17 years. He has been relatively successful and is known as the “silent assassin” in that in meetings he speaks only to ask a pertinent question, clarify points or move things forward.

His new bosses, who he calls “very loud people”, have told him that to become a director he needs to make a better first impression in one-to-one and team meetings with clients and staff.

He describes himself as a quiet person and says he is uncomfortable at social gatherings and large group meetings. He is not opposed to the idea of coaching, though he is sceptical about how it may help him. He is also not sure how comfortable he feels about the bosses’ suggestions, and is uncertain whether he’s prepared to make the changes.

Michael has already attended training courses aimed at improving his self-presentation, which is why his HR manager has suggested coaching.

Michael comes across as pleasant yet reserved and makes little eye contact. He says that while he knows he has to make a better first impression, he is not sure what his bosses mean by this.



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This is a common coaching requirement: improving the communication skills of a technically competent individual. It is essentially about aligning values and behaviours.

The first thing I would do is to identify if Michael believes there is an acceptable fit between who he is and the organisation under these new, so-called “very loud people”.

If he accepts that there is, then he is motivated to keep going. We would

contract to find a way to build on this fit. I would reframe the idea that he must “change”. If his bosses are saying, “You are unacceptable as you are and you must be like us to be acceptable”, this will alienate Michael, as it amounts to an attack on his identity. A more effective interpretation might be, “You do not need to change who you are, but would it be useful to expand your range of behaviours to be more effective in this, your chosen field?”

Assuming Michael agreed to this, I would then look at his values. It is likely that he would

value professionalism highly. In financial services, professionalism must also involve relating effectively to customers and colleagues. We would then be able to agree what skills he would want to acquire and how he might manifest them.

I would encourage Michael to specify in writing exactly what new behaviours he will manifest, as part of a coaching contract, which he would copy to his bosses. A written agreement can help to clarify outcomes and produce the basis for an improved employment relationship.

“Does he believe there is an acceptable fit between who he is and the organisation?”