



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

COACHING LEADERS WITH 3X3 FEEDBACK

Bert Decker

Bob was like many of the men and women who came into my executive speaking seminars. As soon as we videotaped his talk and got into the private coaching session, he said, “Okay, just tell me what I’m doing wrong so I can fix it.” Direct and to the point, like most overachievers who just want to find the problem and fix it. It’s as if they were machines—all performance and no feelings. But leaders have the same feelings as anyone else and, as we’ll see, feelings are an important area of coaching that is often neglected.

I’ve used a simple system for giving communications feedback that I’ve found also works for any behavior or characteristics in which you may want to give, and receive, coaching. It’s called the 3×3 Coaching Model, and I will describe how it works, then apply it to what I’ve found to be key leadership characteristics that make the most difference in long-term effectiveness.

This methodology works very effectively for leaders. It ensures there will be the balanced feedback that the overachiever professes to eschew. It is quick and continuous, and it can easily be adapted to a variety of situations in which a leader might want to solicit feedback.

The 3×3 Coaching Model

The coaching model uses the 3×3 rule, a process of giving feedback that I developed to use when I had no audio or video feedback available. It is short, sweet, balanced, and particularly appropriate for leaders who want to get right to the point.

The model is to give *three strengths* (keepers) and *three weaknesses* (improvements) when analyzing performance and behavior. It forces you to give balanced feedback, because you are giving three positives along with three areas to work on. In any situation there are literally dozens of pros and cons about someone's behavior, if you really think about it. With the 3×3 model, you emphasize only the first ones that come to mind. They don't have to be the most important, nor the most profound—just the first ones that occur to you. If they stand out for you, they are probably the same ones that stand out for most people, and thus become the most important in practical terms.

Many people are comfortable giving the positives and uncomfortable giving the negatives. Some people can be overly critical, leaving few strokes of encouragement for the person coached. Neither method is productive for the person receiving the feedback. A forced choice is created by 3×3 feedback. You are forced to give a balanced 3×3 assessment, so the person feels supported while taking away valuable lessons to work on. This is as important for the leader as for anyone else.

Three is a good number. Don't ask for a dozen keepers and a dozen improvements. That's too many for people to give and too much for the receiver to remember. For the best learning and skill development for yourself and others, just remember the 3×3 rule.

Three by three feedback can be given in almost any setting. It can be solicited by the leader during or after a speech or meeting. It can be given by an executive coach to a leader on a systematic basis. It can be focused on certain characteristics or be given in general and broad terms. It is flex-

ible and adaptable. It is most useful when you solicit it for yourself and give it to others often.

Receiving three bits of feedback at a time allows people to make course corrections, like a guided missile, as they keep moving onward and upward. They continuously receive feedback, continuously update the awareness of their skills and habits, and continuously make course corrections. This is the best way to hit the target.

Leadership Characteristics

So what do we coach leaders on? There are thousands of books out on leadership, and perhaps as many opinions on the “essential” qualities of leadership. In my experience of teaching and training, three stand out and these are also easily coachable: *communication*, *competence*, and *care*.

Leaders Communicate

Of all the potential skills of leadership, knowing how to communicate effectively is the most important. Leaders listen to their people and their world, synthesize, and then speak in order to influence others to action. Leaders communicate with energy. They speak with a confidence and certainty shown through voice, eye communication, movement, and gestures. They smile at people, and they listen.

Here is a sample of a brief written 3×3 *communication* of a leader who has just finished giving a quarterly update in an open forum to 150 employees:

Keepers

- Good and focused content; you considered their interests;
- Started on time and ended on time; and
- Humorous

Improvements

- Reading the speech cut down on your energy and eye contact;

- Your voice was hard to hear at times; and
- The room was too crowded and hot.

Leaders Are Competent

Measurements of performance and accountability set the standards in the business world. The specifics of the numbers are important feedback tools for leaders, but they are not the subject here.

What is important is to have feedback and coaching on the skills that lead to superior performance in an organization. The shadow of a leader falls long, and the behavior of the leader has impact far beyond the immediate results, because the leader is always showing by example. What the leader does speaks so loudly that it often communicates more than what is said, particularly if it seems to be inconsistent with what is said. So coaching in the following three leadership competencies has the greatest payoff in creating action in others and results:

Focus. The truly great leaders have a singleness of purpose. They have a mission. They are passionate about it. They set targets and goals. Those goals are *specific, physical, time-oriented, and measurable*. They repeat the vision, mission, and goals often. Repeating good ideas is worth repeating. Repeating good ideas is worth repeating.

I'm Responsible. Leaders don't wait for things to happen; they *make* things happen. They do not wait for direction from others, but they *give* direction to others. Leaders like accountability and thrive on achievement and creation. The best leaders do their achieving and creating with and through others. They are not Lone Rangers. Good leaders can be entrepreneurs or managers, but if they are going to reach their optimum, they will leverage any talents they have through the collaborative efforts of others. Leaders take responsibility, but they delegate and keep others accountable. Most leaders I know are harder on themselves than they are on others.

Forward Lean. Years ago I made a documentary film on Robert Kennedy, and the writer of the script wrote a memorable line to de-

scribe Kennedy's arrival as a new Senator in Washington, D.C.: "Senator Kennedy hit the ground leaning forward." That captures a quality that has struck me as most important to success in anyone—going about life with a "forward lean." For instance, leaning forward is to volunteer to take on a job, agree to give a speech, look for the opportunity in adversity, or look to oneself as a leader, model, and mentor for others.

Leaders need coaching in three important qualities in this area (notice that the "Rule of 3" is continuously at work!):

1. *Staying in the Disciplines.* The pressures and stress of leadership require a certain amount of organization and routine in life. Leaders are usually disciplined people, who regularly exercise, or read, or pray, or have dates with their children, or eat certain foods, or a combination of these things—and many others.
2. *Leaders Are Not Sarcastic.* In relating to others, leaders have a forward lean of encouragement. They are cheerleaders. Sarcasm, caustic banter, and double-edged kidding can be fun; the problem is that when you might be "kidding," people don't know whether you're kidding or not. That lack of complete trust can be a real detriment to a leader's credibility and effectiveness. It's best to be a cheerleader.
3. *Leaders Are Savvy.* The leaders of the future (not excluding the present) are tech savvy. They know and use the computer and the Internet. Today is a new age of communicating and commerce—by voice, phone, cell, e-mail, PDAs, Internet, and wireless. Leaders know what means of communication to use when they want information or when they want action, and they are able to use all the tools. It is effective to be an "early adopter."

The competence of leaders can be a laundry list of desired characteristics, but coaches would go a long way by just giving 3×3 coaching on focus, accountability, and "forward lean." A sample of a 3×3 on *competence* is shown below. This was given to a leader of a national service organization after he requested some accountability and feedback. He has several hundred people reporting to him with a budget of over \$10 million.

Keepers

- Great focus; you continuously organize people into single purpose teams;
- Strong example of discipline by running and praying every morning; and
- Always straightforward; people can trust what you say.

Improvements

- E-mail and computer skills are poor;
- Late adopter; better to model competence by learning new tools that are available and using them; and
- You do too much; others can do some of the things you do. Let some things go; delegate to individuals as you do to teams.

Leaders Care

This is probably one of the most neglected characteristics of strong and effective leaders. Good leaders *care* about the people they lead. What is the purpose in leading if it isn't for the betterment of a body of people? Where it is just for the glory of the leader himself or herself, then that leader will ultimately fall short.

Listening is critical to both the communications and caring nature of the leader. Good leaders are good listeners. They not only pause often in their communications, but they also stop talking and just look, nod, assent with “uh, huh’s” and other vocal acknowledgments, particularly when there is conflict, misunderstanding, or hostility in the air. Listening is not lip service, but ear service with the eyes.

Caring means knowing the names of people, responding promptly, smiling, acknowledging with a nod or touch (careful on the appropriateness of touch), and ultimately hanging out. Tom Peters well-worn cliché of “managing by walking around” is worth remembering. By being out with your people, you show you care and are accessible, while also gaining valuable information.

Coaching Caring

Of the 3 C's, *caring characteristics are probably the most difficult to coach*, because it is subjective and sensitive. Coaching should only be done by trusted individuals, and the leader must be open to it and fully committed to the principle that caring is important. Then the 3×3 Coaching process becomes the most effective. A sample of what a written 3×3 on *caring* might look like on a leader who has asked for feedback follows:

Keepers

- You send handwritten notes on birthdays/events;
- Very candid in employee open forum sessions; and
- Your natural smile connects with people in casual contact.

Improvements

- Could spend some time out in people's work areas;
- Often interrupt meetings to answer phone calls; and
- Listen well (eye contact and nodding), but often finish people's sentences and sometimes interrupt before they finish.

Pros Are Always in Training

Professional athletes are in training year-round. They want continuous improvement. Should we do any less as leaders than be in continuous training? Coaching leaders should be just like coaching athletes. Using the 3×3 Coaching Model gives a simple system of practical feedback that you can use on a regular basis for any leadership characteristics you choose to emphasize, measure, and improve.

About the Contributor

Bert Decker is a major figure in the communications field. He has been on NBC's *Today* show many times as a communications expert, often commenting on the presidential debates. He is the author of the best-selling book, *You've Got To Be Believed To Be Heard*, as well as video and audio programs such as "High Impact Communication" and "Creating a Powerful Presence" for Nightingale Conant. Bert has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal* and on ABC's *20/20*, as well as in *Business Week*, the *New York Times*, and *Success Magazine*. His book, *Speaking with Bold Assurance*, is scheduled for publication in 2000.

Bert is founder and chairman of Decker Communications, Inc., specializing in training executives and managers in the spoken word. His company is now a wholly owned subsidiary of PROVANT, Inc., a publicly held international training and development company with over two thousand people. Bert also personally coaches CEOs, such as Charles Schwab, and major sports figures, such as Olympic champion speed skater Bonnie Blair.

Bert now spends much of his time writing books and speaking on the impact of communication in the Marketplace, where he was a main platform speaker at the Million Dollar Round Table. He graduated from Yale University with a degree in psychology, has served on the cabinet of United

Way, and served on the board of directors of the National Speakers Association. He is currently on the board of directors of PROVANT, Inc., and CBMC, and also serves on the Westmont College board of advisors.

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