



WHITEPAPER

# 3x4 Coaching.

BY DANE JENSEN, CEO, THIRD FACTOR  
& PEGGY BAUMGARTNER, CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER, THIRD FACTOR

Three decades of work have led to a model for coaching that we call 3x4 Coaching. The name is rooted in our observation that great coaching can be distilled down to the consistent execution of 3 core plays using 4 communication skills.

**We at Third Factor have spent the better part of 30 years studying coaching. Our co-founder, Peter Jensen, was a pioneer in bringing coaching principles in the workplace. We've worked along-side more than 50 coaches who have helped athletes win Olympic and Paralympic medals, with thousands of corporate leaders who have embraced a coaching mantle, and with academics and educators at our university partners who study coaching and leadership.**

This three decades of work has led to a model for coaching that we call 3x4 Coaching. The name is rooted in our observation that great coaching can be distilled down to the consistent execution of 3 core plays using 4 communication skills.

## **COACHING IS A MINDSET, NOT A TO-DO**

Before we get into the 3 plays and 4 skills, however, we have to start at the beating heart of great coaching. When you strip coaching back to its core - it's ultimately a mindset. It's a way of looking at your job as a leader. Great coaches don't see coaching as a 'to-do.' They don't say "okay - I've got my coaching session with Shruti out of the way - now, back to managing." They see every interaction as an opportunity to strengthen and develop their people.

We call the coaching mindset a "developmental bias." That is - I am biased towards developing the people around me. I look at people and see what's possible for them, and I see it as my job to help them get there. In service of that, I align myself with the part of a person that wants to get better and strengthen and feed that desire to improve.



**THE 3X4  
COACHING  
MODEL**



One thing that we've observed is that many programs on coaching start and end with communication skills: templates for giving feedback like "you did x well, next time consider doing y as well" or lists of "the 5 coaching questions that make all the difference." In our experience these programs ultimately fall short. Simon Sinek has conclusively shown that adults need to know the 'why' behind things if they are going to get committed to them. When we jump right into the skills without building a strong why for coaching – we miss the forest for the trees.

**“Exceptional coaches focus on clarity, competence or recognition in every conversation.”**

If I ask all the right questions and give someone precise performance feedback but at the end of the day they don't believe I care about their growth and development – it's likely to fall flat. On the other hand, if my feedback isn't perfectly worded or I ask a slightly jarring question but the person truly believes that I want to see them succeed they are far more likely to be receptive to the feedback and open with their answers to my not-perfect questions.

### **GREAT COACHES EXECUTE 3 PLAYS IN EVERY CONVERSATION**

Rooted in a developmental bias, great coaches consistently execute 3 core plays: clarity, competence and recognition. If developmental bias is the 'why' – the 3 plays are the 'what' of coaching. Establishing **clarity** around what constitutes high performance and why it matters, building the **competence** and confidence to move towards those expectations, and providing **recognition** for progress is the virtuous cycle that helps people grow, deliver results and stay committed. Exceptional coaches focus on at least one of the three plays in every conversation they have with their people.

### **PLAY #1: CLARITY**

In a conversation Dane had with Women's Soccer legend Christine Sinclair she talked about the first job of a coach as making sure that everyone on the team is "vision clear." Ensuring that the coach and coachee have the same picture in their heads of what constitutes high performance and why it matters is the foundation for driving results while building commitment. As



our co-founder Peter would say: “imagery is the language of performance.” Until we know the picture another person is holding in their head around high performance, we can’t effectively coach.

Often in coaching we skip over this play – when someone does something that isn’t the way we wanted it, or not up to our standards, we jump straight to competence. We think “this person doesn’t have the skill” when, in fact, if we do any kind of diagnosis we will discover that they simply left our previous discussion with a different understanding of what was to be accomplished than the picture we were holding as a coach.

***Key coaching check: Does the person you are coaching have the same picture in their head of what high performance looks like as you? Do they know why our goals matter and how they contribute to achieving them?***

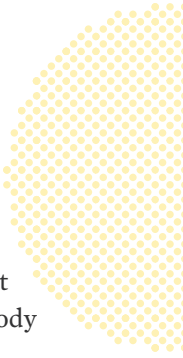
## PLAY #2: COMPETENCE

It’s a general rule that adults don’t get committed to things they don’t believe they can do well. As a coach, once we’ve established clarity, our next play is to help people build the competence to move towards the picture we’ve built. Competence requires both skill and confidence. As a result, building competence is a delicate balance between stretching people to operate outside of their comfort zone while at the same time not allowing them to suffer a significant failure that will destroy their confidence. This is why the concept of progression is so vital in executing the second play.

Great coaches build skill and confidence in tandem through a well-planned series of steps that help people connect with the satisfaction of making progress.

***Key coaching check: Do you know where the person you’re coaching is at on the learning curve? Have you identified what is a manageable stretch for them? Are they clear on the next step in their progression?***

**“**  
***Great coaches build skill and confidence in tandem through a well-planned series of steps that help people connect with the satisfaction of making progress.***



***The role of the coach is to recognize the unseen milestones: the small baby steps that precede hitting that end goal or the performer who is carrying a heavy load in the face of personal challenges.***

### **PLAY #3: RECOGNITION**

Once you've worked with the performer to build clarity and competence, the final play is to ensure that the work feels worth it. Recognition is about ensuring that your people see that their efforts are valued and that somebody they respect cares that they are putting in the work.

In most organizations, formal recognition programs do a good job of recognizing big wins: top sales performers go on trips, bonuses get paid out for hitting quarterly results, high performing employees are nominated for invite-only programs or awards. The role of the coach is to recognize the unseen milestones: the small baby steps that precede hitting that end goal or the performer who is carrying a heavy load in the face of personal challenges. This is where you have the biggest chance to impact both performance and the relationship.

***Key coaching check: Are you looking for opportunities to reinforce progress? Does the person you're coaching feel like the effort they put in is seen and valued by you – or are you only recognizing results?***

### **GREAT COACHES HONE 4 CORE COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

To execute the 3 plays, great coaches hone a set of 4 core communication skills: asking effective questions, actively listening, giving competent, relevant feedback and confronting. Like a set of chef's knives, each of the skills has a specific role to play in executing the three plays.

As a coach, you'll spend a lot of your time asking questions and actively listening. These are dominant skills of a coach. Why? Because people are more likely to get committed to their own ideas than yours. Questions are also one of the only ways we can execute all 3 plays of a coach simultaneously: a great question helps the coachee clarify their thinking, engages their competence as they think it through instead of defaulting to your solution, and asking for someone's thoughts or ideas is almost always perceived as a form of recognition. It shows that you value their input.

Because questions are so vital, in many quarters coaching has become synonymous with asking questions and actively listening. We've sat in numerous discussions where people parsed the difference between 'coaching' and 'teaching' and insisted that it's not coaching unless you are simply acting as a guide to help the other person discover their own solution.



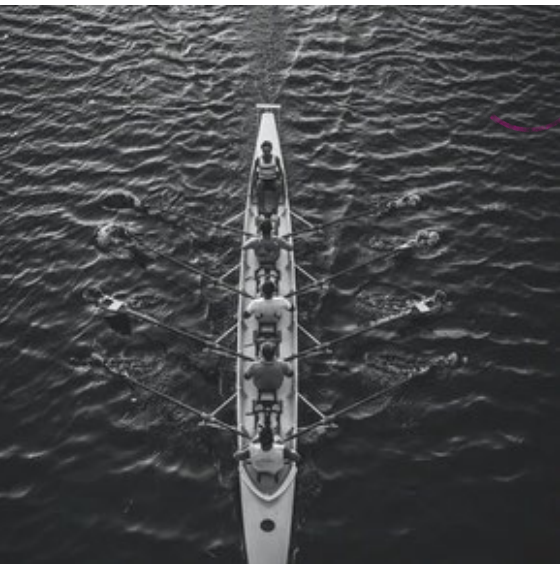


This would be a tremendous surprise for the 100+ Olympic coaches we have worked with – all of whom spend a large portion of their time instructing, demonstrating and providing athletes with a high volume of competent, relevant feedback. When you follow a basketball coach around a practice you’ll hear a lot of questions, but you’ll also hear a lot of things like this: “you need to push your elbow up before you release the ball,” “you’re giving him too much separation when he’s driving the lane,” “you’re not switching fast enough – you need to break earlier.”

**“59% of managers told us that they don’t get adequate levels of feedback.”**

This regular feedback is the lifeblood of coaching people up learning curves – that is, coaching for competence. In a survey we conducted with over 600 managers in organizations across North America, 59% of them told us that they don’t get adequate levels of feedback. The key is to make giving feedback a normal part of the day-to-day routine – exactly as it is in a basketball practice. None of the players are bristling at the coach’s corrective feedback – it’s just expected.

And finally, great coaches don’t shy away from confronting poor behaviour. This goes right back to the developmental bias. It is profoundly un-caring to let people continue to perform in ways that are limiting them without giving them the chance to adjust. The great coaches believe that they owe it to people to give them the information they need to succeed – even if it’s uncomfortable for the coach. The key to confronting effectively again comes back to the developmental bias: my goal is to resolve the situation in a way that strengthens the performer and our relationship.



## ALL TOGETHER NOW

When people have clarity around what's expected and why, support in building the competence to meet those expectations, and are recognized and valued when they make progress – engagement and performance flourish.

On the other hand, when people are struggling or seem unwilling to make a change, it's typically because they either aren't holding a clear picture of what's needed and why it matters, don't have the skill or confidence to do it, or don't really believe it's worth it. As a coach, this makes the 3 plays a powerful diagnostic tool – they can help us figure out where to start.

Once I've identified my starting point – whether it's clarity, competence or recognition – I pick the communication skill that's best suited to the situation. If it's a clarity block, I might start by asking some focusing questions like “what do you think it would look like if we were being truly customer centric?” If it's a competence block, I might work along-side the coachee so I have the opportunity to give targeted feedback based on my observations to help them up a learning curve.

There is no one size fits all approach to coaching but knowing the 3 places to start and having a set of 4 skills to fit the situation will stand you in incredibly good stead and give you a powerful way to deploy your expertise for maximum impact.

Dane Jensen is the CEO of Third Factor. He can be reached at [dane.jensen@thirdfactor.com](mailto:dane.jensen@thirdfactor.com)

Peggy Baumgartner is the Chief Learning Officer at Third Factor. She can be reached at [peggy.baumgartner@thirdfactor.com](mailto:peggy.baumgartner@thirdfactor.com)

Copyright © 2020-2022 Third Factor All rights reserved.