

Media Coaching the Boss: Three Tough Questions

by James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, CCEP

This article is an excerpt from the IABC web-based teleseminar “Media Coaching for Media Coaches: Insights on Shaping the Spokesperson’s Character, Content and Charisma,” to be presented by Jim Lukaszewski on Wednesday, 26 March 2008, from 12–1:30 p.m. EST. Please visit www.krm.com/IABC to find out more about the program and to register.

Every time I conduct a seminar on media training for media trainers, the most difficult, but predictable questions are about the boss. Most of these questions deal with how we convince bosses to take advantage of the coaching we offer, either to polish their skills and gain confidence, or as a method for keeping them on the script.

If you have been in public relations for more than a year or two, you have probably run across these questions in your own practice or in the practice of someone you know. While approaches may be somewhat different and success can be achieved in different ways, these challenging boss-related questions continue to surface. Here are three examples:

1. My boss thinks she’s a great communicator already, and she is pretty good in many settings. How can I get her into coaching or training?

First, let me ask you a question. How many midlevel to senior/top managers have you met in your career who have said they needed help with communications? All managers and executives above the title of first-line supervisor think they are good communicators. In fact, the higher managers go in an organization, the better they think they perform as communicators. Hearing, “I just don’t think I need this kind of training,” is a great stopping argument. However, even the greatest communicators can use some coaching and help. My advice is to attend some of your executive’s meetings and presentations, ones where you can informally audiotape or, preferably, videotape her performances. You would, of course, ask her permission and tell her why you’re doing it.

Once you have a tape or two in hand, the idea is to listen or view them to find one or two circumstances you can comment on constructively. Always find something that is truly excellent to comment on first, and then find something that is somewhat less than devastating, but on which you can make a constructive suggestion. You might also consider finding a second positive behavior and using it as part of the sandwich for the negative you are working on.

Be satisfied with commenting on one, two, or at the most, three things. If one is a negative, you’ll need to find three positives that will overcome the damage done by commenting on the one negative. Once you have selected those things you would like to comment on, offer to spend 15 minutes with her to review the program you recorded. Mention that you really

liked a couple of things and show them. Then, mention that you have one suggestion that would improve her performance.

Keep the encounter brief, to just a few minutes. Resist the urge to enter into some robust conversation; what makes this work is its brevity and focus.

Many executives I work with are receptive to this approach because it conserves time, seems to be balanced and useful, and avoids embarrassing them, which often happens during more formal coaching sessions.

It is possible that an executive may become addicted to this approach and refuse to do much of anything beyond the short critiques you are providing. In my view, this is a good sign. By the time this happens, the executive will be inviting you to provide useful commentary on many important presentations, as well as other issues.

- 2. My boss should do more interviews on a wider variety of subjects. His preference is to shove them off onto other people in the company. He does let me coach and train these spokespeople, but how can I get him to pick up this responsibility more frequently and do what is really expected of him?**

The first approach is to find someone of authority, maybe a member of the board of directors, another CEO or even the chairman—someone who is more than a peer, who can talk with him about the necessity, with some specificity, of spending more time preparing for, and being visible on behalf of the company or organization. It is one thing to look horizontally to peers, and an entirely different matter to look higher and be counseled by someone with greater authority or greater credibility.

In my experience, there are only a few ways to change this kind of behavior and you should consider each of them. Peer pressure is the second approach. Find out which other CEOs he respects, admires or follows. Talk to one of these individuals and explain your concerns. Ask their advice, or ask them to talk with your boss about being more visible, more accessible, and perhaps more credible. When you are talking about CEOs, peer pressure is extraordinarily important. CEOs have very few people with whom they can speak comfortably, even though everyday their office may be filled with advisers, consultants and advice givers of all kinds.

Now, I know this advice may seem a little hurtful in that someone other than you will be giving the advice. Deal with it. Your job as an adviser is to get the job done. If it takes someone else to get it done, then that is the direction you should take. Some of the most powerful and useful advisers I know routinely bring in others from the outside who can highlight, focus or be intense enough to move the boss to where he or she needs to be.

- 3. My boss is really bad. He makes mistakes, mumbles and refuses to practice. He criticizes everyone else, while his own performance is the worst of all. What can I do to help him, short of getting fired?**

Sometimes you have to wonder why so many top people are such lousy communicators, but let me share with you one of my favorite stories on this topic.

A colleague of mine was once retained by a very large national organization to coach the chairman and CEO of the company. The CEO was about to undergo a couple days of interviews for a special program to be aired on public television about his life—as an individual and as an outstanding corporate executive.

This was a Fortune 100 company. All the executives were sound business leaders, although their communications skills varied widely. However, the communication staff was seriously concerned about the CEO's ability to do this interview well. In fact, they obsessed about it.

My colleague made an appointment to visit with the chairman for three hours, after which they would have a couple more coaching sessions, if necessary. This meeting was arranged to take place at corporate headquarters on the East Coast. But, the CEO didn't show up for his coaching session.

This sometimes happens, so the meeting was rescheduled. This time the meeting was to take place on the West Coast. Again, the CEO didn't show. The following week, a three-hour session was scheduled in Texas at the company's southern headquarters. Again, the CEO missed his appointment. It was now just one week before the videotaping. Another session was scheduled, this time on the East Coast, for the Friday just before the Monday taping was to begin.

This time the CEO did arrive, but two hours and 45 minutes late. My colleague and the CEO had met before, so they were not exactly strangers. The CEO walked over to my colleague, grabbed his hand warmly and said, "I suppose you noticed that I've been ducking these appointments." "Yes," the consultant replied, "Was it something I said?" The CEO went on to tell him that he had told his wife about these training sessions that had been scheduled in preparation of the public television taping. Her response was, "I've been married to you for 45 years, and I haven't been able to train you to do anything in a half century. What can some guy you hardly even know do in three hours?" The CEO agreed that this was a pretty good question, and it was one of the principal reasons why he had missed the previously scheduled appointments. The consultant replied, "Gee, George, what I had in mind was to do a little coaching for these broadcasts." George's response was interesting. "Ah," he sighed. "A little coaching. I can always use a little coaching. So they worked together for the 15 minutes they had and George went on his way.

Here's the punch line and the lesson. After the broadcast aired, George's internal communication advisors sent the videotapes to my colleague so that he could provide a written critique of the CEO's performance. As he began watching the first of five tapes, it was clearly evident why this CEO was a powerhouse, why Wall Street loved him, and why, even though he wore cowboy boots most of the time (he is from Texas), he was able to deliver 15 to 20 percent growth levels year in and year out. He was a very savvy, personable and believable person. Rather than write a report, my colleague had a brief telephone conversation with the head of the communication staff in which he suggested that the

department use the tapes to better understand how executives can be successful in their communication, and that not everyone has to sound like someone who came from New York City to be wise, witty and appreciated on Wall Street and on television.

Despite their styles, sometimes executives are naturally good communicators. We have to adjust our own thinking to these styles and to what the executive has already accomplished. The lesson is, sometimes executives need help in other areas more than they need help where we think they do. Focus on what really matters first, and let most of the rest go.