The 3C Leadership Model

Why do some capable people fail as leaders, while others earn deep trust? After the global financial crisis of 2008, a team at Ivey Business School in Canada, including Mary Crossan, Gerard Seijts and Jeffrey Gandz, discussed this question with more than 300 senior leaders. Their conclusion became known as the 3C leadership model: good leadership stands on three pillars, competence, commitment and character. When one pillar is weak, it can undo the strengths of the other two. It gives us a simple way to look at any leader, including ourselves.

1. Competence

The first C is competence. Competence is the knowledge, skills and judgement a leader needs to do the job well. It includes technical skills, but also people skills such as listening, planning and deciding. A leader without competence may be kind and hard-working, yet the team soon loses confidence in their choices. Competence is never finished, because roles, tools and markets keep changing. Good leaders keep learning and are honest about their gaps.

Example: a friendly driving instructor who cannot explain the rules will not help anyone pass the test.

At work: Hassan, a skilled technician, is promoted to lead a customer support team. He knows the product well, but he also takes a short course on coaching and planning, so that he can lead people, not only solve problems.

2. Commitment

The second C is commitment. It means being willing to do the hard work of leadership, not only enjoying the title. Committed leaders give time and energy to their people, stay engaged when things get difficult, and keep learning. The Ivey researchers link commitment with a clear vision and the readiness to make sacrifices for it. A capable but uncommitted leader often avoids hard conversations and leaves problems for others. Teams quickly notice whether their leader is truly engaged.

Example: a football coach who comes to every training session, even in bad weather, shows that the goal matters.

At work: when the support team faces a busy season, Hassan stays close to his people. He joins the calls at peak hours, handles difficult complaints himself, and keeps time every week to coach new staff.

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3. Character

The third C is character, and the Ivey team sees it as the foundation of the other two. Character shows in virtues such as integrity, courage, humility, fairness and compassion. Competence shows what a leader can do, but character shows what a leader will actually do, especially under pressure. A leader with weak character may use strong skills in the wrong way, such as hiding mistakes or blaming others. Character is not fixed at birth; it can be developed through reflection, feedback and daily practice.

Example: a shop owner who returns extra change, even when nobody would notice, shows character.

At work: a report shows that Hassan's team missed its response-time target. Instead of blaming the new staff, he tells his manager that the planning was his responsibility and presents a plan to fix it.

4. Keeping the Three in Balance

The model works best when the three Cs grow together. Competence without character can be dangerous, and character without competence can be weak. Commitment without the other two may produce a lot of effort in the wrong direction. The researchers warn that a weakness in one pillar can cancel out the strengths of the others. A useful habit is to look at each C honestly and ask trusted colleagues for feedback.

Example: a three-legged stool stands firmly only when all three legs are strong.

At work: before his yearly review, Hassan asks his manager and two team members to rate him on the three Cs. The feedback shows that his planning skills need work, so he makes that his next goal.

Conclusion

In summary, the 3C leadership model reminds us that good leadership stands on three pillars. Competence is the knowledge and skill to do the job well. Commitment is the will to do the hard work of leading. Character is the foundation that guides how we use both. When all three are strong and balanced, people trust their leader and follow willingly. We can start today by choosing one C to strengthen this month.

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