

Candor at Work

When people work in a fast-paced, high-stress environments, their greatest interpersonal challenge is handling difficult conversations with clarity, ease, and effectiveness. They wonder how to say no to an unreasonable request, give constructive criticism, address inappropriate behavior, speak up in team meetings or confront relationship problems. Though the situations may vary, in every case the key to successful resolution is candor.

The Business Case for Candor

No recent book about business success is complete without a clarion call for workforce candor. Jack Welch, the renowned former leader of General Electric, argues in *Winning* (Welch & Welch, 2005) that candor is critical to success, especially in today's turbulent business climate. In *Good to Great* (Collins, 2001), Jim Collins encourages executives to "confront the brutal facts" in leading their organizations. And Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan discuss the importance of "robust dialogue" in *Execution* (Bossidy and Charan, 2002). Everyone seems to be talking about candor, but what is it, and are there real payoffs for you and your business?

Welch emphasizes that candor creates an idea- and commitment-rich culture; as more people get involved in a conversation, "more ideas get surfaced, discussed, pulled apart, and improved." Noting that candor speeds implementation, Welch adds, "When ideas are in everyone's face, they can be debated rapidly, expanded and enhanced, and acted upon." Finally, Welch maintains that candor cuts costs by eliminating meaningless and redundant meetings, PowerPoint slides, and "mind-numbing" presentations. To Welch's list we would add another: reducing the number of situations that lead to anger,

undermining our effective functioning. What replaces these mainstays of many business environments is real conversation. That real conversation is candor.

Most of us think of candor as telling the truth; we assume that candor means "tell it like it is." Honesty may be the best policy, and candor is honesty with skill: a way of communicating that succeeds at solving problems in an efficient, respectful, even profound way. It's not a soapbox speech; it's dialogue. Candid dialogue creates the openness that allows people to explore different, even uncomfortable, perspectives. Truly candid conversations move beyond individual points of view to yield fresh insights about an obstacle or opportunity. Seen this way, candor becomes a source of actionable wisdom that—in ways both big and small—can yield the competitive advantages Welch describes.

The Personal Case for Candor

We benefit both personally and in our work when we engage with candor. The word *candor* comes from the Latin, meaning "to shine." The goal of candor is to allow both you and those around you to shine by being genuine. And it is the notion of being candid that is paramount here. Candor is not a switch to be turned

on and off; rather, it is an internal commitment that is expressed in who you are and how you work with other people. French author and critic Emile Zola was expressing his commitment to candor when he wrote, "If you asked me what I came into this world to do, I will tell you. I came to live out loud!" Other have expressed the importance of candor in who we become and how we reflect on our lives:

- "You shall not withhold yourself... Break through your shells, become direct!"
- *Martin Buber, philosopher*
- "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do."
- *Mark Twain, American satirist*
- "Life is a great big canvas, and you should throw all the paint on it you can."
- *Danny Kaye, actor*
- "Our business in life is not to get ahead of others, but to get ahead of ourselves—to break our own records, to outstrip our yesterday by our today."
- *Stewart B. Johnson, British artist*

- “If you want to see someone in real pain, watch someone who knows who he is and defaults on it on a regular basis.”
- Pat Murray, management consultant
- “When we are real with ourselves and others, the change occurs before the conversation is ended.”
- Susan Scott, executive coach

Are you being real with your employees, associates, manager, customers and clients, even yourself? Or, do you bail out of situations that threaten to become uncomfortable?

The Costs of Candor

As with most things that sound too good to be true, there is more to creating candor than wishing it so. While candor has the potential to improve your quality of life, and create a competitive advantage at work, candor is rare in organizational life. Many leaders would like to institutionalize candor but find it elusive. Candor occurs in conversation. The decision to practice candor is a personal one and is made one conversation and one relationship at a time. It cannot be mandated. Also, candor is an organic process, and a messy one at that, with unintended consequences. That makes it difficult for leaders to control and difficult for organizations to establish as a cultural norm. Finally, candor looks good in theory, but it seems less attractive when put in practice. People say they want more candor in their work relationships, but soon find they don't want the conflict, frustration, and additional work they experience in the learning curve of engaging in candid conversations. For many, committing to candor can feel like opening Pandora's box.

Though candor offers opportunities for improved organizational performance, stress management, and personal fulfillment, those gains can only be realized when an entire team understands that candor can be neither forced nor enforced. When those working together in small groups can develop an environment of openness and trust, only then can the messy, organic process of workplace candor begin. It is among these small groups that leaders realize most of the results they are hoping for.

Overcoming Fear of Candor

A prerequisite for candor is authenticity—being real. But when people are afraid, they speak defensively rather than authentically. Unfortunately, opportunities for candor are riddled with fear. We drive with one foot on the gas and one foot on the brake, never fully committing to candor. To protect ourselves or others from the sting of defensiveness, and the pain of conflict that results, we hold back, failing to be fully and publicly ourselves. We're not clear about how we might react when confronted with a candor moment. We're also afraid of the impact our own candor might have. So we shut down, failing to express of what we truly believe. To become more authentically direct, we need to first clarify our intention and transform it into a commitment. We need to align what Dean Barnlund in *Public and Private Self* (2005) calls our “public selves”—the parts of ourselves we share with the world—with our “private selves,” where our ideals and fears reside. Before doing that, we need to understand why going public with our private thoughts, wants, and needs feels so risky.

Risk is defined as “the possibility of suffering harm or loss” (*The American Heritage*

Dictionary, 2000) and it is a fear of risk that governs our willingness to be candid. The harm or loss that looms over us as we contemplate candor can be found in these distinct but overlapping categories:

1) Job Retribution. We worry that our words will be held against us. We might not be selected for a high-visibility project; we might alienate our managers; we might lose the influence and support we've worked so hard to gain. Given these worries, it seems safer to remain quiet than to speak up. However, many people realize, in hindsight, that in the end their lack of candor actually hurt their chances for advancement.

2) Social Retribution. Because the experience of work is inseparable from those we work with, we worry about the consequences of damaging those relationships: the pressure to conform often inhibits authenticity. Among our team there may be a fear that being candid might anger others, and that this perspective might spread among others without us knowing. We might resist being candid in order to avoid awkwardness with others in the group. Yet avoiding authenticity leads to festering problems that destroy team effectiveness and relationships.

3) Hurting Others' Feelings. We often censor ourselves because we don't want our feedback or disagreement to be hurtful to others. We try to protect people from feeling bad by not telling them the truth. While our concern for others may be genuine, it's also true that hurting others' feelings often results in more work for us, as we have to fix the relationship problem that we think candor created. This is a further incentive to keep quiet; we don't feel like we have time to deal with the

other person's reaction. In the end, our impulse to saving face does more harm than good, ultimately interfering with our own effectiveness and the effectiveness of the other person.

4) Self-Perception. We worry that if we speak up, we may look bad. And while the chances are remote, even the slightest potential for humiliation acts as a deterrent to candid discussion. Yet in the long term, not speaking up also damages our self-perception and others' perception of us.

5) Change. We fear the unknown consequences of speaking the truth. At work, we may choose not to share ideas that could improve our own or our team's performance if we see those changes as possible threats to our job security, social standing, or advancement. We may also keep problems to ourselves, anticipating a worst-case scenario: "What if I'm just wasting my time?" "What if I get on her bad side?" "What if the team thinks my idea is stupid?" When we visualize the worst consequences, our fear makes us quiet. We remain silent, hoping the problem will go away. Instead, we are better off asking the questions a different way: "What if my feedback helps her overcome a glaring weakness? What if my idea helps the team achieve a breakthrough?" When considering candor, we need to move beyond the worst-case scenario, considering the not-so-bad and best-case scenarios as well.

How Do You Show Up In Candor Moments?

The first challenge is to practice candor with yourself—to be honest with yourself about your typical decisions during these moments. Do you choose a positive mind-set, seizing opportunities to reap the personal and business benefits? Do you

speak your truth, and encourage others to do the same? Or do you allow fear to push you to the extreme ends of the candor continuum?

The Candor Continuum

Choices regarding candor can be identified on a continuum reflecting our possible responses to a situation or crisis requiring candor. On one end of the continuum is a tendency to bail, to simply avoid a potentially difficult conversation by not raising an issue or responding honestly. On the opposite end is a tendency to bruise, to be truthful in a way that is harsh or harmful. In the center is the ideal: constructive candor, saying what needs to be said in the most productive way possible and encouraging others to do the same.

Bail: The Passive End of the Continuum

We all have had times when we've bailed out of raising an issue, avoided telling someone the thing they needed to hear or the thing we needed to say. With a bad feeling in our stomachs, we decide not to speak up so as not to rock the boat, alienate a colleague, take a risk, or hurt someone's feelings. Those decisions to bail, driven by fear of the worst-case scenario, ultimately steal our vitality at work and sour the very relationships we think we're preserving. The more often we choose silence, the more difficult it becomes to speak up. We become marginal players who then spend time after the meeting complaining about the decisions that were made when we didn't speak up. The meetings after the meeting become a black hole of time and energy, sucking other people in to more and more dysfunctional conversations. We expend a considerable amount of energy defending our decision not to speak up, when being candid would have saved time and energy

for not only us, but our managers and colleagues whom we dragged in to those after-meeting meetings.

Bruise: The Combative End of the Continuum

Fear drives bailing, but it also drives us to the other end of the extreme, to an honesty that hurts. Harry Truman, famous for his brutal honesty, said, "I don't give 'em hell; I just tell them the truth and they think it's hell." As satisfying as it may be to lash out or act brazenly, that satisfaction is short-lived at best, and worse, can cause lasting damage to vital relationships. The bruises we inflict in the workplace may be metaphorical, but their impact can be all too real. To change our bruising behavior we need to be aware of our fear of candid dialogue. We bruise when we are afraid of being out of control, when it doesn't look like things are going our way. So we speak in a way that shuts other people down, from a defensive rather than an authentic posture. Ultimately that backfires on us in a couple of ways. People don't always support the decisions that were pushed on them. Also, they choose not to be forthcoming about problems we need to know about because they don't want to deal with our bruising reactions. Rather than defending our outspoken ways, and blaming others for not speaking up loudly enough, we need to become more aware of the impact this bruising behavior has have on the potential for candid conversation.

Candor's honesty involves understanding how to be appropriately honest: communicating with transparency, to the right people, without defensiveness, at a time and in a way that shows respect and good intentions. Be brief, objective, and specific in your speaking; use a neutral tone; and listen with empathy even when

you don't agree. In addition to creating an environment of openness and trust, these skills can defuse the raw emotions and defensiveness common to most difficult conversations, moving beyond bailing and bruising to addressing and resolving the real, underlying problems.

Candor: The Continuum's Ideal

Candor may not come easily, but through awareness and skillful dialogue, we can move toward the happy middle of the candor continuum. The results? A chance to shine by achieving mutual goals while reaping the personal rewards of job satisfaction, physical health, and peace of mind.