

The Candor Imperative

by James Bolton

Business literature (particularly in the US) is filled with calls for workforce candor. Jack Welch devoted an entire chapter to it in his best seller, *Winning* (Welch and Welch, 2005). Jim Collins encourages business leaders to “confront the brutal facts” to get from *Good to Great* (Collins, 2001). Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan talk about the importance of “robust dialogue” in *Execution* (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). And for good reason: as Welch points out, when more people get in the conversation, “more ideas get surfaced, discussed, pulled apart, and improved.” This in turn enhances innovation and decision making while simultaneously reducing costs (Welch and Welch, 2005, p. 27).

As with most things that sound too good to be true, there’s more to creating candor than meets the eye. While candor holds great promise as a source of competitive advantage, it’s a rarity in organizational life. Leaders who seek to institutionalize candor find it elusive for three primary reasons:

1. Candor lives between people, but the decision to practice candor is a personal one. It is a choice to make public some aspect of our private thoughts, feelings, or beliefs. Because the depth and breadth of these revelations can’t be fully known by others unless we tell them—even under duress—candor is an extension of our free will.
2. Candor in its purest sense is an organic, messy process. Candor bubbles up rather than cascades down which makes it difficult for leaders to mandate candor as a cultural norm in their organizations.
3. Most managers have an “approach-avoid” attitude toward candor. While they say they want it, most don’t want the conflict, frustration, and ad-

ditional work they’ve experienced as by-products of candor. While a skilled leader (or outside facilitator) is able to manage the dynamics for productive ends, for most leaders, inviting candor can feel like opening Pandora’s Box.

Thus while candor offers great potential for improved organizational performance, those gains will only be realized when leaders understand that they can’t force or enforce candor. Instead they must create an environment where there is sufficient trust for people to openly to say and hear the hard things. And, of course, the good.

The goal of this paper is to help managers and human resource professionals create environments that embrace this type of rigorous candor. First, I’ll offer a definition of rigorous candor, and review a model for understanding the dynamics impacting its practice. Second, I’ll highlight the challenges individuals face in choosing to be candid and a way to help them define a “Candor Commitment.” Third, I’ll introduce a framework for enhancing organizational candor, and identify strategies to help candor take hold and grow.

A definition of rigorous candor

Candor has a mysterious and fleeting quality to it: it comes and goes as the dynamics that create it shift imperceptibly. While most candor feels serendipitous, rigorous candor is different. I define it as:

An interpersonal process that promotes the authentic expression of different points of view in search of actionable wisdom.

Most people think of candor as “telling the truth.” But in meaning and in practice, candor is closer to “authenticity” than it is to “truth.” *The American Heritage® Dictionary* (2000) includes two definitions of candor: “frankness or sincerity of expression,” and “freedom from prejudice; impartiality.” Rigorous candor embraces both, creating the interpersonal openness that creates fertile ground where different perspectives can be explored. At their best, candid conversations transcend individual points of view and yield fresh insights about an organizational obstacle or opportunity. In this way, candor is a source of actionable organizational wisdom that, in

small ways and large, yield the competitive advantages that Welch describes.

A model for understanding the dynamics effecting candor in organizational life

When it comes to putting rigorous candor into practice in the twenty-first century, we can learn a lot from a leading behavioral scientists of last century: Kurt Lewin. As a social scientist and early organizational development pioneer, Lewin articulated a simple, useful formula for understanding human behavior:

$$b=f(P,E)$$

Behavior is a function of the Person in his/her Environment (Lewin, 1951, p. 25).

In essence, Lewin's "Field Theory" asserts that an individual's behavior is influenced by the social context in which it occurs and vice versa. Thus behavior change must be effected at the level of the Person *and* at the level of the Environment. While this sounds easy at a high level, the relationship between the individual and the organization is characterized by an uneasy tension, as Chris Argyris points out (Argyris, 1957). Building on the work of Erik H. Erikson and others, Argyris notes that individuals strive toward self-actualization—a state of psychological maturity and wholeness. Organizations, on the other hand, strive toward efficiency; in that pursuit they've instituted processes and controls that constrain an individual's developmental aims.

Rigorous candor has the potential to reduce this tension: it promotes authentic interactions between people (which are essential to the process of self-actualization), and it can make companies more effective, if not always more efficient. But for rigorous candor to become a standard operating procedure, we need to reconcile

the conflict inherent between the individual and the organization. To do that, we'll look at the dynamics effecting Lewin's "P" and "E" in closer detail

The personal dimension of candor

A prerequisite for candor is authenticity. Without it, communication can quickly become defensive and the potential for candor is lost. For this reason we drive with a foot on the brake: we hold back from being fully and publicly ourselves. In part we're not clear about how we want to "show up" when confronted with a "candor moment" and in part we're afraid of the impact we imagine our candor might have.

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 (Barnlund, 1975) calls our "public selves"—the parts of ourselves we share with the world—and our "private selves" where the our ideals and fears reside. To do that, it's important to understand why "going public" with our private thoughts, wants, and ideas feels so risky.

Candor-based fear

Risk is defined as "the possibility of suffering harm or loss" (*The American Heritage® Dictionary*, 2000) and it is fear of this possibility that governs our willingness to be candid. The harm or loss we're afraid will occur can be broadly categorized into five distinct yet interrelated 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 influence and support we've worked hard to gain. In light of these concerns, it's safer to be quiet than speak up.
- 2. Social retribution.** Because our experience of work is inseparable from the people we work with, we worry about the consequences of damaging those relationships. As in all groups, there is pressure to conform, and conformity often inhibits authenticity.
- 3. Hurting others' feelings.** We often censor ourselves because we don't want our feedback or disagreement to be hurtful to others. And while our concern for others is genuine, hurting others' feelings often results in more work for us: we often have to "clean up" the relationship issue candor created—a further incentive to keep quiet.
- 4. Losing face.** We worry if we speak up, we can look bad. And while the chances of losing face are rare, even the slightest potential for humiliation acts as a deterrent to candid discussion.
- 5. Change.** It's human nature to be apprehensive about the unknown, even when it's for the better. Many people choose to not share ideas that could improve their performance or their team's performance if they perceive those improvements are threats to their job security, social standing, or social network. They may also keep problems to themselves if those problems could result in "ownership" of the problem.

As is natural with fear, we generally leap to the worst-case scenario: "What if I lose the opportunity for that promotion?"; "What if I get on Chris's bad side?"; "What if the team thinks my idea is stupid?" When we frame the consequences this way, our fear limits the contributions we have to make. What if your feedback helps Chris overcome a glaring weakness?

What if your idea helps your team achieve a break-through? In that candor moment, it can be helpful to consider not just the worst-case scenario, but the “not so bad” and “best case” scenarios as well.

The candor commitment: reconciling the private and public self

Reconciling the desire for safety with the desire for candor means aligning the private self with the public self, in the four steps of creating a “Candor Commitment”:

1. Clarify your candor ideal the way you’d like your “best self” to show up in important conversations. It’s important to realize that the ideal is aspirational in nature; like a good vision statement, the concept of the best self is unattainable or at least unsustainable. The key questions here are: What personal value(s) do you want you want model in your interactions with others? What would that look like behaviorally?
2. Identify the internal conflict that blocks you from being that best self. There are two components to

the internal conflict. The first is our candor-based fear, described above. The second is a deeper underlying need, rooted in our self-interest—to be competent, to be liked, to be “right”—that gives rise to that fear. Understanding what you’re afraid of can point the way to the underlying need that will always interfere with the practice of your candor ideal. Questions that can help you pinpoint those blocks include:

- What keeps you from honoring your ideal? What are you afraid of?
 - What underlying need is interfering with your practice of candor?
3. Mine the paradox between the candor ideal and the internal conflict in a way that results in a Candor Commitment. It’s virtually impossible to “will away” the source of our internal conflict; those needs are too deeply rooted in our private selves. In order to practice candor and be authentic, we need to find a way to honor this need as well as our candor ideal. The Candor Commitment seeks to synthesize the two. This commitment will be

more of a goal at first, but one that is realistic to attain and ultimately sustain in your interactions with others. The question to ask here is: how can I honor both my ideals and my underlying needs in my interactions with others?

4. Choose a next action to move the Candor Commitment from the private into the public realm. The “next action” concept is borrowed from productivity expert David Allen (Allen, 2001). He defines the next action as “the next physical, visible activity that needs to be engaged in” (Allen, 2001, p.34). The questions to ask here are: What opportunities exist for you to put your Candor Commitment into practice? What, then, is your next action?

Table I presents an example of how this process can help individuals develop and actualize their Candor commitments. With your Candor Commitment and next action in hand, you’re ready to enter the public realm—where the principles of organizational dimension apply.

Table 1

Step	Example
Candor ideal What personal value(s) do you want you want to model in your interactions with others?	To be genuine and authentic in all my interactions.
Internal conflict: fear What keeps you from honoring that ideal? What are you afraid of?	Authenticity can be socially awkward; I’m afraid of hurting others’ feelings.
Internal conflict: underlying need What underlying need is interfering with the practice of your candor ideal?	I want conversations to feel safe and not awkward; I want to be and be perceived as being a gracious person.
Candor commitment How can I honor both my ideal and my underlying need in my interactions with others?	I want to be authentic with others in a socially graceful way.
Next Action What opportunities exist for you to put your Candor Commitment into practice? What, then, is our next action?	Disclose my Candor Commitment to my team and ask for feedback on my effectiveness and on the impact it has.

The organizational dimension of candor

Lewin’s concept of “environment” is broad; everything outside the boundaries of the private self is “E”. In applying Field Theory to organizational behavior an additional distinction needs to be made. People actually interact with two different levels of the Environment—one is the local work group environment, the network of relationships in which most interaction and work takes place. This group may range in size from 4–20 people; it’s defined as those who we work with most frequently and whose behaviors create the social context that informally governs our behavior.

The other “E” is the organizational environment, comprised of formal policies and procedures as well as informal norms

that create the corporate culture. While the organizational environment is rarely a focus of our work, it influences behavior at personal and group levels.

Add to this Elton Mayo’s widely accepted observation that each organization has both formal and informal structures (Mayo, 1933) and you can look at the environmental impacts effecting candor through the following Candor Matrix in Figure 1.

At the Informal Group level, candor is governed by trust between and among members. The degree of trust present in the group depends on a number of factors: respect, closeness, and history among members—to name a few. Acceptance is core to candor-based trust: it diminishes the perceived social risks associated with

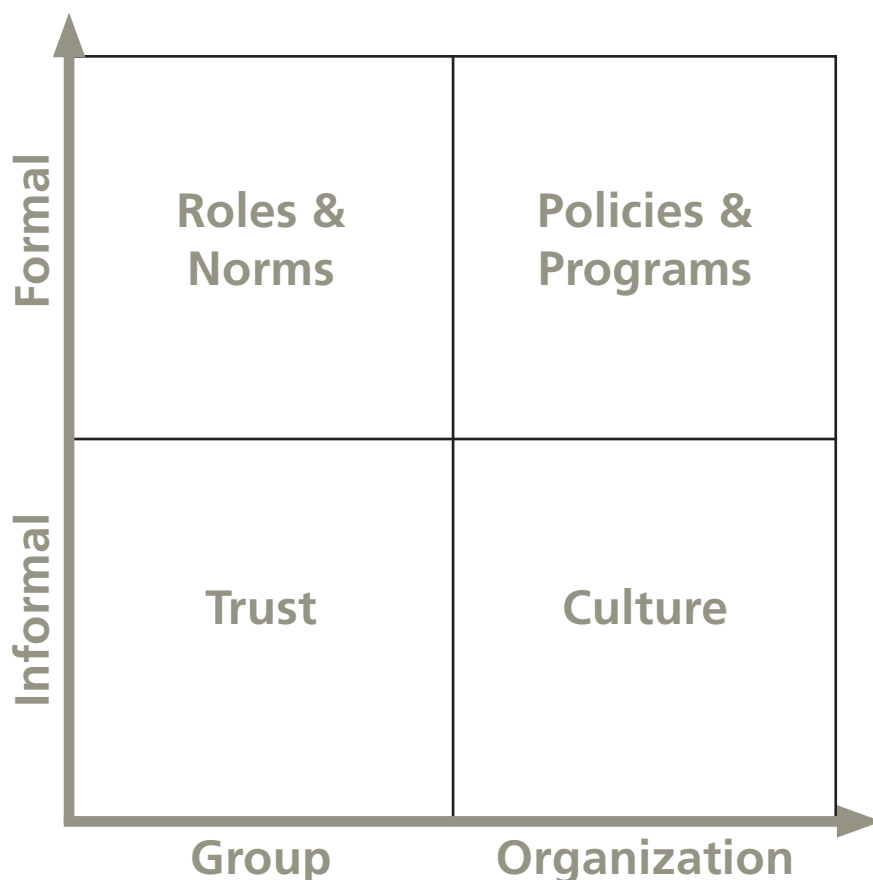
being direct. If members feel that there’s sufficient relational strength to “mess up” and still be accepted, they’re more likely to be authentically direct. But there is a “lowest common denominator” effect for group candor: the least trustworthy member or interaction sets the bar for how candid others will be.

At the Formal Group level, roles and norms impact the practice of candor. If roles are highly structured, they define many of the ways people relate. Group norms are also highly influential. Just as the purpose of the Candor Commitment is to align an individual’s private self and public behavior, norms can provide a touchstone for a group’s collective commitment to the task and to each other. But not all groups have clearly defined norms, and many stated norms are merely lists of platitudes. Groups may not intend for their norms to be empty commitments but they become relegated to that status when there isn’t sufficient rigor or trust to put the group’s hoped-for behavior into practice.

At the Formal Organization level, organizational structure, policies, procedures, and programs all influence candor. If these initiatives have any effect, they are usually negative, at least initially. They are generally used to drive change, and change creates ambiguity, which magnifies the perceived risk to individuals’ self-interest. Additionally, these motives are seen to benefit the organization versus the individual. For both reasons people will generally withhold; they will wait and watch until new patterns of conduct emerge.

The Informal Organization is defined by shared and socially transmitted assumptions, norms, beliefs, and behaviors that are collectively referred to as an organization’s culture. While it is usually beyond our conscious awareness, culture exerts

Figure 1 The Candor Matrix



powerful influences on candor-based behavior. If there is alignment between formal and informal organizational messages and practices, the organization itself is experienced as authentic and individuals are more likely to be more candid. If there isn't alignment, people are more likely to play it safe.

To promote the environment's tolerance of candor, it's useful to assess the current state of organizational candor. Managers and human resource professionals can use many techniques to do this, depending on the rigor they seek. Because candor is qualitative in nature and so ingrained in the informal systems within an organization, tools like Lewin's Force Field Analysis (Lewin, 1951) can shed light on the forces that support and restrain the practice of organizational candor. It has the added benefit of encouraging high degrees of participation that in itself increases candor.

Once the candor barriers and levers have been identified, it can be useful to place them in one of the four environmental quadrants. Depending on which quadrant represents the candor challenge, there are a number of methods available to encourage direct, open, and respectful communication.

Based on the personal, paradoxical, and organic nature of candor described above, and because the essence of candor lives in the relationships between individuals, my bias is that the small group and the cultures in which those groups operate are the loci of change. That's not to say change can't occur in the formal organization; General Electric's "Work Out" was a large-scale effort in candor-based change. Six Sigma efforts also seek to promote candor, as do so-called high reliability organizations that actively seek out failures in their quest to "disvalue the mis-specifica-

tion, mis-estimation, and misunderstanding of things (Schulman, 2004, p. 39).

To grow candor at the group level, groups need to improve their informal and formal effectiveness. At the Informal Group level, groups need strong communication and facilitation skills to create openness to diverse perspectives and make the interpersonal risk members feel a reasonable risk to take. Of these, the most critical is listening. While reflective listening has become common knowledge in most organizations, it is surprisingly rare in practice. This one change alone can dramatically enhance candor. While you can't force people to be candid, genuine listening can create an environment of openness where people are more likely to be candid. If the group consistently values, respects, and is accepting of an individual's perspectives—regardless of whether others agree with or like what they hear—then candor will become a standard and can deepen over time.

Skills alone aren't sufficient to create this consistency. Even highly skilled groups can benefit from formal group processes that provide structure for group communication. Reality-tested norms are important. But there are other kinds of discussion structures that can help as well; meeting processes like Edward DeBono's "Six Thinking Hats" (DeBono, 1999), "After Action Reviews," [1] and feedback models like Marshall Goldsmith's "feedforward" methodology (Goldsmith, 2003), all promote openness among groups that foster greater candor.

To enhance rigorous candor at the cultural level is a more challenging proposition. Change of this type is closer to Malcolm Gladwell's (2000) concept of a "social epidemic" than it is to traditional organizational change that can be designed and "managed."

One way to do this is to create a Candor Team (hereafter called a "C-Team")—a super group that exemplifies the practice of direct, actionable communication. Ascribing to the idea that some individuals exercise a disproportionate degree of influence on the behavior of others, the membership of this group would be comprised 8-10 respected opinion leaders who work on high impact, highly visible projects. Ideally these individuals—nominated for C-Team membership by the rank and file—would already be effective people leaders, and open to coaching from their peers. They would meet regularly to refine their Candor Commitments and hone their candor skills. Once they're able to consistently model the practice of personal and group candor, they would then become candor agents, "infecting" other teams they work on. When ready, *those* members would similarly carry the seeds of candor to other teams and so on until critical mass has been achieved and the practice of candor becomes "the way we do things around here."

C-Teams don't need to begin with an organization's superstars; candor can emerge and grow anywhere. But assigning those that others respect and admire with the responsibility for spreading candor makes an organization's commitment to candor both urgent and visible.

In summary, enhanced candor can come from any of the four environmental quadrants as Table II summarizes (see following page).

Conclusion

While the benefits of candor are becoming increasingly clear as the next source of competitive advantage, an understanding of how to establish candor in business performance has lagged behind the rhetoric. But Lewin's Field Theory offers managers and human resource professionals a

theoretical framework for enhancing the practice of candor. By helping individuals clarify their personal “Candor Commitments”; by instilling small groups with the skills and strategies to make candor core to their ongoing success; and by using those groups to propel a candor epidemic, leaders and human resource professionals can tap into the well of actionable wisdom that resides within the social networks of their organizations.

Table 2

<p>Formal/Group “Six Thinking Hats” “After Action Reviews” “Feedforward”</p>	<p>Formal/Organization “Work Out” Six sigma/total quality management “High Reliability Organizations”</p>
<p>Informal/Group Reflective listening Facilitation skills</p>	<p>Informal/Organization (Culture) “C-Teams”</p>

Note

1. A good summary can be found at: www.depts.ttu.edu/aged/leadership/leadaar.htm

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