

The Candor Gap

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The leadership required to give candid feedback and coach others to be more successful is missing in many organizations. The absence of direct feedback and coaching is among the top three reasons good people leave organizations, according to “The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave,” a study by the Saratoga Institute and Pricewaterhouse-Coopers HR Services.

In addition to retaining valuable employees, providing honest and timely feedback, and coaching others to be more successful, pay enormous dividends; people work more effectively, increasing the organization’s ability to succeed. What prevents so many leaders, with so much to gain, from developing working environments where candor and coaching are high priorities?

The ability to coach others takes a significant investment in time and energy to do well. An effective leader will coach only their highest potential, highest performing people. They will seek to understand what motivates them, taking into consideration their talents and blind spots, their beliefs, attitudes, heart, and, significantly, how they learn. In reaching an understanding of the other person, a Leader must ask questions, and discuss and reflect on the answers given. Many leaders in the frenzied world of commerce today are disinclined to make such a significant investment of their time, despite the fact that the return on investment is high indeed.

Fear is another factor that prevents many from providing honest feedback in the work setting. Fear of conflict, embarrassment, taking an unpopular stance, being wrong, or appearing rude are common reasons people get in the habit of being less than candid with each other.

As you will see in the next two examples, fear of providing candid feedback at the senior levels can lead to disruption, as thorny issues are simply avoided:

Consider the situation of the medium-sized and successful software company Chief Executive Officer, who I’ll call Jack. He hired a former colleague, Bill, to join the firm recently as Chief Operating Officer. Since coming on board, Bill has been a bull in a china shop. He has alienated many of his staff, and colleagues on the leadership team, by being arrogant, demanding, withholding of

information, claiming credit for the work of others, or being rude and confrontational in meetings.

While one would think Jack, the CEO, would have given Bill candid feedback and encouraged others to do so by now – he hasn’t. Instead, Jack decided to delegate responsibility for the “Bill Issue” to his head of Human Resources. The head of Human Resources was surprised to be given what he thought should be Jack’s responsibility. After all, Bill being Bill, he was hardly likely to embrace his issues and address them without some direction from his boss.

In the course of our coaching work I was able to ask Jack: “What would have to happen for you to work with Bill directly, and to give him candid, constructive feedback yourself?”

It took time and careful listening to understand the source of Jack’s absence of managerial courage regarding Bill, and his attempt to delegate it to HR. High among them was a pattern we identified as Jack’s inclination to avoid conflict. Additionally, Jack’s previous professional relationship with Bill that began at the firm where they both worked in the past made a candid confrontation uncomfortable and potentially embarrassing for Jack. With coaching, Jack faced his fears and was able to take responsibility for Bill’s issues. He began to deal with Bill directly, but only after much time had passed, and much damage control had been required.

While this example reflects significant issues, a day-to-day lack of directness is present in many interactions among colleagues, bosses, and those we lead. In many situations, it is stoked by the belief that it’s easier to be agreeable than direct. Certainly there are many situations that require diplomacy. However, avoidance is a poor substitute for the tough conversation that needs to happen *whenever the problem is persistent.*

At a recent coaching roundtable in a corporate setting, the burning question presented by the client, a leader in the organization, was how to give her high-level executive feedback on his shoddy wardrobe and poor personal hygiene. As executive coaches we were asked: what should she do? To me this was a case in point for the prevailing problem of conflict-avoidance. Taking a page from the candor playbook, one of the coaches said to her: “It’s up to you to tell him directly.”

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While hygiene and attire are hardly life-or-death issues, this discussion shows the great extent to which leaders are avoiding simple and direct communication because they fear it. An attempt to avoid a consistent problem in an effort not to appear rude is more time-consuming and costly than simple candor.

Another reason leaders fear their own candor is the need to be right – or at least, not to be wrong. This fear is a particular waste of time. I would suggest that one of the best things that can be done with a manager or leader in need of feedback is what I call a transformational negative statement. It is a simple, direct statement that describes what is perceived to be the root cause of their most significant deficit. For example: “Your people aren’t delivering great results because you undermine them by taking credit for their work.” Even if the observation is wrong, it inevitably leads to growth, because the discussions that follow will illuminate the actual problem.

As we have seen, leaders perceive many obstacles when facing the prospect of being direct and honest. A candid dialogue isn’t possible without some degree of courage. How can we help someone address a situation where managerial courage is lacking? Certainly there are questions we can ask the person avoiding the candor challenge:

- “What would it take for you to be willing to address this issue directly with the person?”
- “What are the most significant things holding you back from being direct with this person?”
- “How would you feel if you could get the issue on the table, out in the open, and were able to work on it with the person?”
- “What would make you more likely to address it rather than wait?”
- “Will you have to deal with it eventually, even if you delegate it or avoid it in the short term?”
- “By illuminating the issue for the person, what can you do to get them to help fix their own problem?”

One important caveat: asking *why* a leader is avoiding the direct approach is unproductive. Asking “why” invites others to explain or justify the past. The “what” and “how” questions lead to a more effective focus on the present and future. As Neurolinguists Joseph O’Connor and John Seymour point out, “How questions will get you an understanding of the structure of a problem. Why questions are likely to get you justifications and reasons without changing anything.”

Providing direct and honest feedback, and coaching others, are unmistakable competitive advantages in the workplace. The practice of being candid seems relatively simple, yet as we have seen fear, personal pride, and time constraints prevent its implementation in many organizations.

Investing the time to educate leaders in the principles of courage and candor is a great way to retain great employees. Coaches are finding that executive clients are benefiting from getting the support they need to face facts about their people. Once they do this, they are taking bold new steps to be direct. These executive leaders find that modest investments in honesty and managerial courage—putting their own skin in the game despite their fear—pays enormous dividends. Their people understand how they are perceived, how to do what they do better, and are, ultimately, more successful.

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