



FORBES

How To Use Radical Candor To Drive Great Results

Ron Carruci

March 14th 2017



Kim Scott – Author of Radical Candour Photo Credit: First Round

“If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all” is a rule we’re all conditioned with from an early age. While the principle has an element of social etiquette, its dark side has made for too many superficial relationships where pleasantries replace truth. I spoke with [Kim Scott](#), whose book *Radical Candor: Be a Kickass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity* is just out, about why greater candor makes for greater bosses. Scott, whose impressive career includes management roles at Google and Apple, says, “I was raised in the South to not say what I thought. But I knew that pulling my punches wasn’t helping those I saw about to fail at something.”

Interestingly, the “boss” relationship is relatively new in human history. We went from slavery to bureaucracy, and on into the modern day understanding of capitalism and a supervisor. The boss relationship hasn’t gotten due attention across philosophy,



literature, movies, and all of the other ways we explore relationships that govern our lives. Says Scott, “I knew that being a great boss had to mean saying what you really think in a way that still let people know you care.”

In my own [research](#), I have found one of the ways the most successful leaders distinguish themselves is by building great relationships with colleagues. They have unwavering reputations for being genuine, caring, and reliably honest. Unfortunately, global [research](#) from Edelman’s Trust barometer reveals that despite integrity being the most desired leadership quality, only about 25% of people think their bosses actually have it. Scott says, “Relationships are the core building block of doing work you love . If you can’t love the people you work with or for, it’s unlikely you’ll love the work very long. Honest feedback is the atomic building block of good management. There is nothing more damaging to human relationships than an imbalance of power. Candor is the honest broker of truth that neutralizes the imbalance.”

The workplace is yearning for candid bosses, yet bosses continue falling short. To turn the tide, Scott defines two fundamental dimensions of radical candor. They are “challenging directly” and “caring personally.” One without the other creates counterfeit behaviors that too many bosses deceive themselves into thinking are actually good. These are ruinous empathy, manipulative insincerity, and obnoxious aggression. Too many bosses settle for radical candor’s cheap knock offs. We’re all guilty of sliding into these categories from time to time, so pay attention to the ones you know you’re susceptible to.

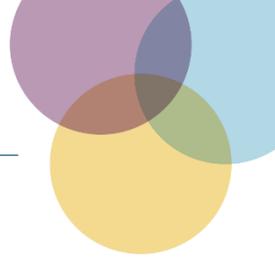
Ruinous empathy...when you care too much. Says Scott, “We’re conditioned from an early age to avoid hurting people’s feelings. It’s not a bad impulse to protect people’s feelings, but it’s a short-lived protection. You need to rise above your empathy and realize that it’s your own feelings you are protecting, not theirs.” To get past ruinous empathy, leaders must recognize that indulging near-term empathy ignores long term implications. You could be setting people up for bigger failure, and more hurt feelings, later. Convincing yourself that “it will all work out” absent your



intervention is simply denial. Think about how they will feel when their shortfalls prove fatal and you have to fire them. I recently had a client who'd felt uneasy in their new role for about a year finally ask their boss for feedback. Since "results were good," he'd assumed he'd hear good news. To his shock, his boss unloaded a laundry list of unmet expectations, which he'd never been told about.. Now devastated, he asked his boss, "Why didn't you tell me any of these things sooner?" the boss lamely replied, "That's a fair question. I just figured it was a new job so you'd eventually get the hang of things."

Obnoxious aggression...the art of a blunt instrument. Scott says, "Often, leaders go here because they are so focused on the work, they've forgotten there's a human being doing the work." Sadly, in its extreme form, bosses that publicly degrade people, or give them the cold shoulder, also fall into this category. But the vast majority of obnoxious aggression is just results-orientation run amuck. Many such leaders actually do care on some basic level, but have failed to learn to show it. Scott says, "I regret to say that if you can't be radically candid, being obnoxiously aggressive is the second best thing you can do. At least then people know where you stand, so your team can achieve results. This explains the advantage that assholes seem to have in the world." People would rather work for a competent jerk and know where they stand than work for a nice, but incompetent boss, whose niceness prevents honesty.

Manipulative insincerity...when you care too much about yourself. By and large, these are the cowards. They are so obsessed with being liked, pleasing others, and maintaining follower's loyalty, that they won't dare risk disrupting any of it with the truth. Scott says, "Manipulatively insincere people think they can gain some sort of political advantage by being fake, or do so when they are just too tired to care. These leaders never say what they actually think. They just attempt to push people's emotional buttons in return for some personal gain." This is the boss who thinks, *"I'm just going to tell him the report was fine because I don't have the time to explain why it was so bad. Next time, I'll just have someone else do it."*



Now let's look at the two sides of radical candor that great bosses use.

Radical candor. Says Scott, “To have good relationships, you have to care about others as human beings. It’s not just business; *it is personal.*” Caring personally means to embrace the full humanity of those we lead, and allowing them to embrace ours. Using phrases like “Keep it professional” or “don’t take this personally” are insulting. They deny the truth that we are human beings with feelings, and our work is a *personal* expression of our identity. Says Scott, “It’s about acknowledging that we have lives and aspirations that extend beyond those related to our shared work. It’s about finding time for real conversations and getting to know one another at a human level. Only when you actually care about the whole person with your whole self can you have a relationship.”

The second part of radical candor, challenging directly, involves telling people in caring, non-judgmental language when their work is falling short. For many bosses, the fear of [defensive, angry reactions](#), or estrangement from those we lead causes them to avoid the truth people are hungry for. But Scott says, “It’s true, challenging people generally pisses them off. But challenging people is the way you can help them improve, and when you’re the boss, it’s one of the best ways to show you care.” Great bosses get past their angst about delivering [tough messages](#). Because when it comes to [relationships](#) of enduring regard, you can’t fake it. If your feedback is in their best interest, they will know it. Even if hearing it pinches, they will still “get” your caring intent. If there’s a hint of judgment or superiority, or any reason to wonder about your motive, the message will fail the credibility test, and you with it. Avoid long wind-ups. Don’t sandwich the hard message between cheesy compliments to soften it. And don’t dodge the conversation. Bad news doesn’t get better with age. Allowing people to fail when everyone else is watching isn’t kind; it’s cruel. One of the [greatest gifts](#) you can give those you lead is the truth about where their contributions can improve.

The kinds of relationships and results that can be achieved by radical candor are not trivial. It’s the difference between people punching a clock and people striving to



realize their own, and your organization's, dreams. As a boss, or an aspiring professional, choose radical candor over its forgeries. Says Scott, "Deep and meaningful relationships are the way out of the mess we've made of the workplace, and the world. Being willing to disagree because you care is the greatest sign of respect you can show others . Ignoring others by ignoring the truth is not."