

RADICAL CANDOR:

Be a Kick-Ass Boss without Losing Your Humanity

BY KIM SCOTT

SUMMARY BY CAROLINE FOOTE

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Being a manager or leader is hard work; the most “difficult but necessary part of being a boss... is telling people clearly and directly when their work [isn't] good enough.” As a leader, you owe it to your staff, volunteers, colleagues, and organization to give direct, honest feedback both good and bad. A lack of feedback (both praise and criticism) can wreak havoc on your team, board, or staff by creating dysfunction, lack of trust, and poor results.

The good news is that there is a way to go about the “difficult but rewarding work of being a boss,” and it lies in *Radical Candor*, a new management philosophy developed by Kim Scott and shared in her new book of the same title. While Scott's experience lies in her years of management at tech companies like Apple and Google, she presents an approach that can translate into all management relationships in our lives, including those we develop as non-profit leaders.

The first section of the book explains the core theory of *Radical Candor*, while the second half serves as a how-to handbook, with step by step guidance on how to effectively implement *Radical Candor* in your organization.

What is Radical Candor?

Radical Candor is about “providing guidance, which involves a mix of praise and criticism” delivered honestly and directly, but humanely. According to Scott, “it lies in the approach of Caring Personally, while Challenging Directly.”

Scott's philosophy is rooted in the idea that as managers and leaders, we need to bring our “whole selves” to our work. It's our responsibility as bosses and leaders to guide, build and manage teams, and generate results. To be successful, managers need to really listen to their staff and build trust with each. This requires going beyond “just professional” to being a whole person at work and developing relationships based on trust with each person who reports to you. It also requires open and direct dialogue--mainly in the form of “radically candid” feedback.

Why Radical?

- Most of us are conditioned to avoid saying what we really think
- As humans, it's socially advantageous to avoid conflict and embarrassment.

This philosophy is radical because in some ways, it goes against what we've learned our whole lives about fitting in and getting along. However, as bosses and leaders, it's part of our job to be honest and direct.

Why Candor?

- You must communicate clearly and openly so there is no room for interpretation. If you sugarcoat or avoid difficult subjects, you can confuse or “lead on” employees or volunteers and they may not know where they stand.
- By being candid, you give them the feedback they need in order to know your expectations and how their behavior or performance isn’t measuring up.

The key to giving radically candid feedback? You must care personally about the recipient while challenging them directly.

- Caring personally entails truly getting to know and care about your staff and volunteers and understanding what motivates them and the role that work or volunteering plays in their lives. Part of the reason many managers have failed at caring personally for their reports is the idea that “it’s just business.” However, as Scott explains, “only when you actually care about the whole person with your whole self can you build a relationship” with your reports and colleagues. This personal care leads to connection and trust, which sets the stage for an honest relationship.
- Only when you have a trusting relationship can you be effective at Challenging Directly, the second dimension of Radical Candor. As Scott explains, “Challenging others and encouraging them to challenge you helps build trusting relationships because it shows 1) you care enough to point out both the things that aren’t going well and those that are, and that 2) you are willing to admit when you’re wrong and that you are committed to fixing mistakes.”

This approach embraces conflict rather than avoiding it.

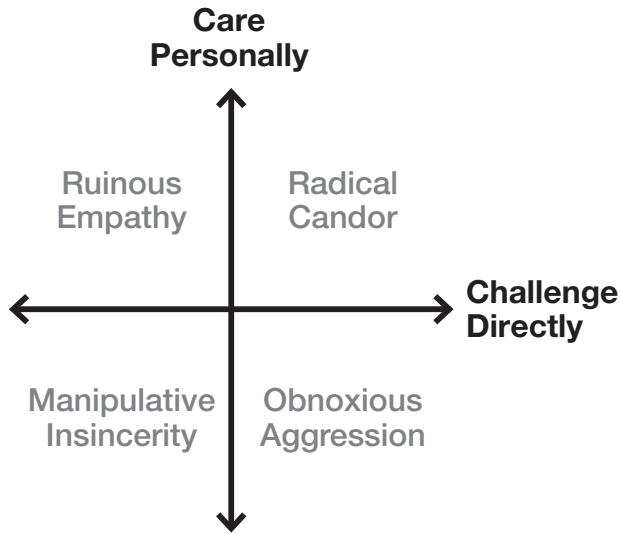
Creating a culture of Radical Candor builds trust with your team because people are much more likely to:

1. Accept and act on your praise and criticism
2. Tell you what they really think about what you as the leader are doing well and not so well
3. Engage in radically candid behavior with one another at a peer level
4. Focus on getting results

What It Isn’t

Radical Candor doesn’t mean being a jerk and berating your colleagues and staff, or personalizing feedback and characterizing employees as bad. It means creating honest communication with humanity and actually caring about those who work for and with you, and caring enough to provide them direct feedback in a humane way. This creates a culture of open communication that fosters high-performing, highly functional teams and results.

It also isn’t hierarchical: it should be practiced up, down and laterally in an organization. The goal is for radical candor to be practiced not only from manager to employee, but between colleagues and from employees up to managers.



To explain her philosophy, Scott shares a framework that positions Radical Candor against three other dimensions that can arise when you fail at caring personally and challenging directly.

1. Radical Candor

- a. Feedback that is specific, shows the impact of behavior, and is given in a sincere way.

2. Obnoxious Aggression

- a. Feedback that is direct and clear but not given with humanity or care. This typically takes the form of belittling, embarrassing publicly, “freezing out,” or humiliating.

3. Manipulative Insincerity

- a. Feedback that is disingenuous, fake, or coming from a place of vanity.
- b. This occurs when bosses are too concerned with being liked, are seeking approval, or don’t care enough anymore to be honest. Scott counsels to “let go of vanity and care personally” by not focusing on yourself and how you are perceived, but giving necessary but sometimes difficult feedback.

4. Ruinous Empathy

- a. Feedback that isn’t given because “being nice is prioritized at the expense of critiquing and therefore improving performance.”
- b. This occurs when bosses or leaders are too concerned with everyone getting along and don’t want to deal with the unpleasantness of conflict.
- c. However, this leads to people not knowing where they stand and who aren’t given a chance to learn and improve. It also leads to bosses not knowing employees are unhappy until they quit.

How to Master Conflict and Difficult Conversations

Because radical candor can mean conflict and difficult conversations, it's important to recognize that emotions will arise. This includes your own emotions and emotional state; whether you like it or not, everyone on the team "notices the mood the boss is in." Own up to and be honest about your own mood so employees don't misunderstand and feel it's their fault.

It's also critical to master your reaction to others' emotional responses. A few guidelines that can help in these potentially uncomfortable situations:

- Don't try to manage others' emotions. Each person is responsible for their own emotions.
- Acknowledge emotions, don't pretend they aren't happening. Say, "I can see you are [upset/frustrated/angry]."
- Ask questions to understand the real issue and listen carefully.
- Focus on the other person, not yourself.
- Don't tell the person how to feel, e.g., "Don't be mad..."
- Walk, don't sit, during difficult conversations. It can release tension, and it's better than having a stare down.

Feedback: Giving, Getting and Encouraging Feedback Between Staff is the Core of Radical Candor

Scott provides some helpful tips about how to give radically candid feedback (praise and criticism).

DO:

- Be humble, helpful, and sincere
- Offer guidance in person (whenever possible) and immediately (don't wait!)
- Praise in public

DON'T:

- Personalize it. It's about behavior, not personality ("You performed badly," not "You are bad")
- Criticize in public

DO:

Radically Candid criticism:

- Be clear and specific
- Articulate the impact
- Provide suggestions for how they can get back on track

While many of us find it difficult to give criticism, Scott recommends not putting it off. It's easier for both you and the recipient if you "just do it!" Do it as soon as you see an issue or situation where you need to coach your staff member or volunteer.

How to Get Feedback From Your Team

It's very difficult to get feedback from your staff, because people REALLY don't want to criticize "the boss." You have to work hard to earn the trust of the team and create an environment that fosters open communication and criticism; even of leadership.

- You have to show consistently that you are open to feedback.
- Listen to understand, not to respond, and ask questions to clarify.
- If you sense someone is holding back (by body language, etc.) say "tell me what you are really thinking."
- Openly ask for feedback by having a go-to question such as "Is there anything I could do or stop doing that would make it easier to work with me?"
- Reward feedback by praising and thanking the employee for their courage and openness.

How to Give Impromptu Feedback

When giving feedback to staff, it is essential that you do it as immediately as possible.

- Say it right away. Guidance has a short half-life. You need to give people the time to correct or change.
- Don't wait or procrastinate even if it's uncomfortable.
- Don't nitpick.
- Don't "save up" for one-on-one meetings or annual reviews.

Look for opportunities (even five minutes between meetings) to give feedback (privately, if criticism). To do this:

- Be humble and approach the situation with care.
- Focus on 3 things:
 - The situation you saw
 - The behavior (good or bad)
 - The impact observed
- Be helpful by finding ways to clarify the issue:
 - State your intention to be helpful, not to "bust chops"
 - Explicitly describe the situation and get specific, good and bad
 - Point them in the right direction, you don't necessarily have to "fix" the issue for the person. For example, recommend a class or resource.
- Guidance is a gift, not a carrot or a whip.

How to Encourage Radical Candor Between Colleagues

To foster honest communication between team members:

- Never let one person on the team talk about another behind their back
- Insist they talk directly without you
- If that doesn't work, have a three-way meeting with them
- Create a solution they both understand and can live with

Getting to Know Staff and Teams

Scott spends a good portion of the book also talking about how to get to know your staff, team, or board better.

To understand what motivates your staff or volunteers, you need to get to know them personally and discover how each person's job or commitment fits into their life goals.

Understanding the growth goals and motivations of each team member enables you to better get to know them as a whole person and make decisions that fit where they are currently and their ambitions.

Scott encourages managers to develop an "annual growth management plan" for each team member and to look at the team in its entirety in order to line up individuals with the collective needs of the team. She provides a helpful chart allowing you to evaluate and map each team member based on where they are based on current performance and potential.

Interested by These Ideas?

Here's how to get started implementing Radical Candor with your team or staff:

1. Explain the philosophy and process to your team. Tell your own stories and share examples to show vulnerability and that you're human.
2. Prove you can take it before dishing it out by getting feedback (especially criticism) from team
3. Begin the career conversations
4. Perfect your one-on-ones and giving feedback
5. Take a deep breath and assess after a few months

Overall, this book provides a clear rationale for why providing direct feedback and creating a culture of open communication is so critical. The practical guidance on how to give feedback and get to know your staff or colleagues better is easy to understand and seems highly actionable. Even if you only pick up a few of the tips here, you will be on your way to improving your relationships and fostering greater trust and stronger collaboration on your team or board.

You can find more tools, tips, a blog, and even a podcast from Kim Scott and her team at www.radicalcandor.com.