

Direct Leaders Are Faster, Smarter and Better

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Care and candor are two necessary traits of a successful leader – care for employees within and beyond the boundaries of office walls and candor to deliver important messages with honesty. When used in tandem, leaders can communicate efficiently and effectively with the highest degree of consideration for their people.

Consider two organizations. In Company A, people are incredibly kind and caring. So much so that people hold back sharing things that would cause dissent or make people uncomfortable. There is a great sense of unity and

harmony but also a real danger of groupthink and not learning from mistakes. Company B is at the opposite end of this spectrum. People speak their mind and share the unvarnished truth without considering the impact on others. They pride themselves on “telling it like it is,” even when it might seem cruel. People feel afraid to take risks and feel at risk of being publicly shamed. Which company would you want to work for? Probably neither.

With either extreme of too much care and too much candor, an organization will not be successful. This is why as leaders we need to find the middle ground where we balance care and candor to create a kind and straight-talking culture. This is caring candor.

Our mantra for caring candor is “direct is faster.” Being candid is about being direct and straightforward, and it is always the faster path. With caring candor, you deliver the message kindly but directly so the person receiving the feedback doesn’t have to worry or wait, and you can get straight to working on a solution.

Caring Candor, Not Brutal Honesty

Candor on its own can easily be perceived as brutal honesty. With this delivery, we show little care for the other person and simply state our unfiltered opinions. Although these opinions can often be valid, they’re shared thoughtlessly, causing division and distress. Caring candor is about showing our people and team the opportunities for improvement in a thoughtful and respectful way.

This is an important distinction because, although the value of candor in the workplace is clear, severe candor without compassion can create hostile environments where people feel under threat, stress levels are high, and people leave or fail to perform at their best. This is a situation no leader wants to find themselves in.

Below we’ll explore the merits of caring candor, why it’s so important in leadership, and how you can start to develop more caring candor in your everyday interactions.

Faster, Smarter, Better

One of the main benefits of caring candor is simple: it’s faster. When we beat around the bush and don’t get to the point, we are wasting everyone’s time. When we are direct, we get to the heart of the matter and allow people to

engage in the important conversations about what comes next. Many leaders have a hard time being candid because they feel it comes across as harsh. That can certainly be the case, but only if the candor is lacking care. If there is care in candor, most of us appreciate getting the input and feedback delivered directly.

When we are candid with each other, issues that need to be addressed are surfaced and discussed. In our conversation with Narayana Murthy, founder and former CEO of Infosys, he shared one of the values he instilled in the company which is to “let the good news take the stairs, but ensure bad news always takes the elevator.” In other words, good news can be delivered in a way that is convenient, but bad news needs to be fast-tracked, and people need to be encouraged to share it and share it now.

Candor is Kindness

Candor is at the core of development and growth. In this way, being direct with people is one of the kindest things we can do for another. Only by being candid will people get the feedback and input they need to develop, grow, and become better. Consider the tough feedback you have received throughout your career. Where would you be today without the people who were kind and courageous enough to candidly share their perspectives on your performance? As Jill Ader, Chairwoman of Egon Zehnder, affirmed, “A good leader calls out the hero in everyone. Good leadership is to see people’s potential and be direct in challenging them with care.”

Candor Sends the Right Message

When we are not direct in dealing with a situation, we are letting others down in two ways. First, the issue is not being addressed which can be detrimental to the team. Second, it sends a message to others that “bad” behavior is tolerated. Questions will increase over time like, “How come so-in-so is able to act in that way? Why are they able to get away with stuff?” This fosters an environment which can undermine motivation and performance.

One of the things we’ve heard from the leaders we’ve interviewed is the risk of making someone’s performance issue a personal reflection on us. We don’t want to face the issues in their performance because we are afraid it will reflect badly on our leadership. This can be particularly true for senior leaders because the people they appoint are in high profile, complex, strategic positions. It can be more difficult to admit that this person you promoted or hired into this extremely important role is not up to the task. In reality, when

we are direct in dealing with situations, we address issues faster and send the right message to the organization regarding what is expected.

Don't Wrap a Hand Grenade

When we have a difficult message to deliver, the most natural thing to do is to try and soften it. But when we conceal hard messages, it is equivalent to wrapping a hand grenade. It may make us feel better because we are softening something difficult, but it can leave the receiver confused and uneasy. Instead, when we have tough messages to deliver, we need to have the courage to be direct. We need to relay our message as simply and plainly as possible. If you deliver the equivalent of an emotional hand grenade, have the kindness and respect to ensure that the recipient sees it for what it is. Though it may feel harsh, it is, in fact, the kind thing to do. Then, at least, they know what they have just received.

Minding the Landmines

When we deliver tough feedback, we need to be prepared to deal with the emotional landmines. We are emotional beings, and the reason why hard things are hard is because they trigger our emotions. To trigger as few emotional landmines as possible, caring candor requires us to be mindful of what we say, how we say it, and when we say it. We also need to ensure we are prepared to respond constructively to negative emotions if and when they arise.

Being mindful of emotional landmines requires concise and thoughtful communication. When delivering tough messages, it is critical to choose your words carefully. As leaders, we sometimes underestimate the power of our words. One simple, flippant comment can create ripples of confusion or frustration. Caring candor is about paying close attention to what we communicate so that we don't do unintentional harm.

Strategies for Developing Caring Candor

Bringing care and candor into your leadership is a discipline that takes practice. There is a fine line between being perceived as a leader who is from Company A and seen as nice but ineffective versus from Company B and seen as brutally honest verging on being cruel. When we are caring and candid, we are able to be direct, but in a way that respects the person in front of us. The following are practical strategies for bringing more caring candor into your leadership.

1.) Be Mindful of the Setting and Context.

Candid messages can be hard to for the receiver to hear. Being mindful of the setting and context means that you consider when, where and how you are going to share a candid message. When you see something that needs to be shared, pause before saying what is on your mind to ensure the setting and context are conducive to your message being received.

2.) Say It Now and Do It Quickly.

When we need to do hard things, it is human nature to find ways to put them off. But procrastination does not serve anyone. Remember that waiting will only make it harder. Rather than putting hard things off, make a habit of quick action to tackle issues that need to be addressed. The more you act swiftly, the more you will get used to it. It will become more natural for you and for the people you work with.

3.) Be Firm and Decisive.

When delivering a difficult message to someone, be firm and decisive. If you are firing someone, be clear in your language and say, “It is my decision to ...,” rather than vaguely saying, “I think it is better if” When firing someone, you are not opening up a negotiation – you are taking a decisive action. It is compassionate to make that clear from the beginning, so the other person can focus on next steps instead of trying to debate or negotiate. Being firm and decisive creates clear parameters for the other person to navigate the new situation.

When we have a culture of candor, we create the space for more transparency in which relevant information is more freely shared. And making candor part of your culture enhances clarity and provides the basis for greater trust and psychological safety for everyone in your workplace.