



Practicing Candor

BY DAVID ANTONIONI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If we are to nurture the leadership potential within us, we must accept the responsibility of initiating caring, candid conversations with our managers. While the prospect of leading upward in this way can create anxiety, the alternatives — muting the ideas that could contribute to our organization's success, putting our integrity on hold, or casting ourselves as victims — are far worse.

While many of us may think about having candid conversations with our managers about tough issues, most of us are unsure about how to conduct this type of discussion. We perceive it as risky to communicate upward about problems. One of the reasons people don't initiate difficult conversations is because it is simply easier not to. Plus, we may believe that the other person will get defensive, hurt, or angry — or get even.

It's true that people have had chilling experiences being candid with their managers. However, we do not need to let this experience stifle our potential for leadership. We need to learn how to be more confident having difficult conversations so that we

can take prudent risks to practice candor. Doing so acknowledges what we pretend not to know. It means that we don't just salute our management and mute values and ideas that could contribute to success of our businesses. Furthermore, practicing candor demonstrates our leadership capabilities. It shows that we can address tough organizational issues and assist in making sound decisions about difficult issues.

Based on experience, I believe that management could benefit from receiving candid comments from people reporting to them, hereafter referred to as direct contributors. When communication is candid, decisions are made that balance the perspectives of all stakeholders — customers, shareholders, employees, and the organization and its environmental resources. Some managers are open to input from their direct contributors; in fact, they may even encourage it. Other managers feel uncomfortable when challenged by active critical thinking from their direct contributors

conversations with my managers over the past 30 years. In addition, an ad hoc advisory group of executives from manufacturing and service industries provided me with advice and feedback. They shared their experiences speaking up with their management as well as ideas on how their direct contributors could approach them candidly.

When you care enough

The Webster dictionary defines caring as “close attention, watchful oversight, to be concerned and a desire to provide assistance.” When we care, we experience a burdened state of mind arising from a sense of responsibility. You might ask why direct contributors should care about their managers' potential decisions and intended actions. Some of the most effective direct contributors do not assume that their managers know more than they do; rather, they assume that their managers do not have enough information. In addition, most employees

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Caring is a choice we make. If we care too little, then we play it safe by avoiding being present in the moment. If we care too much and take ourselves too seriously, we can get caught up in our emotions and respond with nonproductive behaviors.

Being candid

To be candid means to be open, straightforward, and sincere in our expression, sharing what we think without evasion and without being rude. When we face disagreement, we usually have three choices: We can be kind and withhold our perceptions; we can go on the attack to force others to see things the way we see them; or we can be honest and invite our managers to have a candid conversation. The third choice is most accessible to us when we have already built mutual trust and respect into the work relationship and when we have the confidence and assertiveness to engage in difficult conversations.

The alternative to caring, candid conversation can be a drama triangle. Direct contributors often react to a manager's intended decisions by complaining to others as a way to avoid risks associated with direct communication. All too often, direct contributors create the illusion that they care when they complain to others about their manager. However, this behavior is a refusal of responsibility, and it creates a disruptive emotional triangle.

The drama triangle happens when the direct contributor who disagrees with his or her manager seeks support from a third person. Almost always, a drama triangle is built around an emotional story about feeling helpless. In some cases, these could be clever stories that suggest that the direct report became a victim or was forced to sell out. These stories may be used for self-justification when a person has acted consciously against his or her own sense of what is right. However, clever stories are usually incomplete because

Fairness is healthful

A sense of fair treatment in the workplace is associated with a reduced risk of coronary heart disease. According to a large, long-term study of British office workers published in October 2005, people feel a sense of justice at work when they believe their supervisor considers their viewpoint, shares information concerning decision making, and treats individuals fairly and in a truthful manner. An earlier study had shown that employees had lower blood pressure on days spent working with a supervisor they perceived as fair.

and thus convey a lack of support for candid communication.

While managers may be uncomfortable at first, an important step is for direct contributors to learn to feel relaxed about the process of having candid conversations with their managers.

My intent is to provide readers with a process for having candid conversations with their managers. This method is based on my own experience of having caring, candid

have a passion for their organization's stakeholders and are willing to take proactive responsibility by bringing up critical problems or issues that affect these stakeholders.

Caring means taking prudent risks and maintaining integrity by having a timely, candid conversation with the manager before a problem escalates out of control and has a negative impact on stakeholders. This is especially important when we disagree with a manager's probable choice.

they omit important information about the individual and his or her potential contribution to the conflict.

Here is an example of a drama triangle. John, a middle manager, experiences a disagreement with his executive manager, Bob. Bob wants a project to be completed on time even if it means that the quality of the delivered project will be compromised. Instead of John talking with his manager about the issue, he talks about his manager in a fault-finding manner to Judy, another middle manager. He tells stories and makes interpretations that demonstrate his manager's culpability. Furthermore, he justifies why he cannot or will not have a direct conversation with his manager. Judy completes the drama triangle by adding her own emotions to the conversation and confirming John's helpless victim mentality. By talking to Judy rather than his manager about this issue, John takes a reactive position that finds fault rather than solutions. He could avoid creating a drama triangle by taking a proactive approach and planning a conversation with Bob, and Judy could help by actively listening to John's plans. As a peer, Judy can help him increase the clarity of what he is going to say, improve how he is going to frame the conversation, and provide emotional support. John has a choice, although he may not like admitting it, because choosing to be responsible to have a candid conversation means real work on his part.

It is common for direct contributors to feel anxious about having candid conversations when they disagree with managers' decisions for two reasons: they think they will put the manager on the spot by being candid or they don't want to differentiate themselves from peers who are afraid to speak up. In general, direct contributors are worried about being perceived as troublemakers when they ask hard questions about the reality of problems. Thus, direct contributors choose to keep

their mouths shut for fear of chilling work relationships with their managers. They are concerned that managers might not like direct contributors to initiate difficult conversations and that doing so could have a negative impact on their work relationships, compensation, promotion potential, or even employment.

However, when we don't speak up about what we perceive to be the right thing to do in diagnosing and addressing problems, we violate our integrity. When we are not candid with our managers, we expend energy in drama triangles. We fall victim to our fears and anxieties. On the other hand, we have the possibility of conversing and engaging in active critical thinking with our managers so that the right decisions are made for all stakeholders. We can care about our integrity while caring about the stakeholders and simultaneously caring about the work relationships we would like to have with our managers.

One way to protect the work relationship is to determine whether your manager wants you merely to communicate concerns about an issue or to engage in conversation about the issue. In a candid conversation between a direct contributor and manager, the exchange of thoughts and feelings can lead to an invaluable diagnosis of a tough problem and then a resolution.

Framing and reframing

How an upward candid conversation is framed is critical in influencing managers. Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world; they affect our goals and actions. We learn what frames people rely on by listening to the words they use, which can tell us what they value and how they define their identities. Learn to pay attention to your manager's objections to your ideas because within each objection is information about your manager's mental model,

especially what he or she values. Once you get to know your manager's frames, you can begin to develop your reframes.

In John's case, the issue is a conflict between schedule and quality. When he approaches Bob, John should not simply assert that quality should be the top priority. Furthermore, he will not successfully convince Bob to adjust the schedule just by presenting the facts that are related to Bob's current frame. That's like trying to solve a problem using the same type of thinking that created it. It would be easy for John's manager to dismiss the facts.

To approach your manager successfully, you need to reframe the problem or issue based on a value or a desirable identity that supersedes your manager's self-interests. Reframing is a way to loosen a person's perceptual frame temporarily. It is about using language that reflects values that are hard for your manager to deny and expresses workplace identities you both desire. Your goal is to use words that connect with concepts embedded in your manager's brain.

There are two basic ways to reframe. One is to ask a context question: In what context would the manager's objection have value? The other is to ask a meaning question: Is there a larger or different frame within which the manager's decision would create positive value? The heart of reframing is re-conceptualizing, strengthening, and broadening a position so that it is clearly based on a particular value and identity perspective.

The issue of quality versus schedule needs to be reframed using one or both of the questions above. For example, Bob wants to prioritize meeting schedule dates because he has a solid reputation of meeting deadlines. However, in this case, that may not be good because John has information about the customer's experiences with quality. Reframing should tap into the meaning of customer satisfaction from

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a quality standpoint.

Broadening your manager's view through reframing does not force him or her to do something. If your reframe helps your manager make more sense of the issue, then it is more likely he or she will shift to a different view of the problem. After you have reframed, pay attention to your manager's nonverbal and verbal messages. If the reframe is accepted, you will likely observe signs of relaxation in his or her body posture and facial muscles. Listen also to learn whether your manager is using a new strategy for viewing the same issue. You will see that once your frame is accepted in the conversation, everything you say will sound like common sense.

The groundwork

Here are some recommendations for starting a caring, candid conversation with your manager.

- Assess your organization's culture (values, beliefs, and norms) regarding speaking up and having a difficult conversation with executives and managers. If the predominant norm is *I won't be candid with you so that you won't be candid with me*, then you may want to bring this to the attention of your manager and explain that this norm may be hurting the business. Jack Welch's book *Winning*, especially the chapter on the value of candor in business, clearly demonstrates the harm that a lack of candor can do. You might read Welch's book and then share it with your manager. If your manager agrees that candor between the two of you is good, then move on to the next step. If there is anything written into the organization's vision or values statement that encourages and supports direct contributors pushing back when they disagree, then clarify the process with your manager and determine whether he or she is fully supportive of the policy. If there is no supportive policy,

then go on to the next step.

- Meet with your manager to determine his or her expectations for having a candid conversation, especially for cases in which there is disagreement. Let your manager know that from time to time, you would like to have conversations about disagreements because you care about all of the organization's stakeholders, which include your manager. It is important to ask your manager whether he or she wants you to bring up objections that are difficult to hear. If the answer is yes, then get an agreement that you won't be punished for having a difficult conversation. Make sure to get an agreement on the ground rules for having difficult conversations by clarifying what, when, where, why, and how.
- Your manager will probably be concerned about what messages you are sending your peer group. Your manager could be supportive of you differentiating yourself from your peer group and see it as positive informal leadership or could feel threatened that you're using negative informal leadership to influence the group. It is wise to discuss this concern with your manager. If it is the latter, then reach an agreement on how the two of you are going to manage this concern. This meeting should provide you with an assessment of your manager's values, beliefs, and convictions regarding the workplace and your interactions there. You might also want to check whether your manager and your manager's manager have positive reputations regarding direct contributors speaking up on issues.
- Catch yourself every time you start to create or support a drama triangle and stop it. It is common for us to complain about someone with whom we disagree, and it is common for us to listen to others complain. Furthermore, our organiza-

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tions unconsciously support drama triangles. When direct contributors feel anxious about how to handle a significant disagreement with their manager, they often default to a drama triangle and may find fault with their manager. If you are doing this, then stop it. Your challenge is to differentiate yourself from the organization's norm and begin practicing candor. It helps to have one other person support your efforts not to triangulate. You may need to get a coach to help you learn the practice of candor with your management.

- Identify the key people included in your manager's network. First, this will help you have some idea of whether these individuals are supportive, neutral, or against what you are saying in your conversation with your manager. It is advisable, but not always possible, to have at least one ally who is willing to support your principles. It is critical when you talk with the ally that you do not get into a drama triangle. Second, it is valuable to know if any of the individuals in the network are part of the problem you are addressing in your candid conversation. If they are and they have a lot of power in the organization, you may be suggesting a greater risk than your manager is willing to support. If you feel strongly about the issue, you may want to indicate that you are willing to resign. In cases where you feel this strongly, it is a good idea to have another job lined up because this gives you more freedom and power to use the option of resigning.
- It goes without saying that you need to have facts to support your position in the conversation. It is important to gather as much factual data as you can before you begin the conversation. However, it is important to remember that facts alone will not change your manager's view

of the problem you are discussing. The facts are getting through because of how you are framing your message. It is essential that you frame your candid message in a way that captures your manager's attention by speaking directly to your manager's identity and values. It helps to have a clear current reality story to tell about the issue that captures the essence of your frame. Then ask rhetorical questions like "Wouldn't it be better if...?" This helps focus your conversation on values, using frames to build your desired scenario.

Conducting the conversation

In the opening of your conversation, it is critical to clarify that your motivation for discussing issues with your manager is not to find fault but to make sound decisions. Make sure to verify your manager's understanding of your intent by asking if he or she accepts it. Remember to state your purpose in the beginning and end of your conversation. Restate that you are speaking up because you care about your manager's role and the stakeholders of the organization. Clarify that you initiated the conversation because you believe that neither of you want the current issue to become a problem. Finally, clearly state what you would like to happen from the conversation and what you don't want to happen.

As you begin to discuss the problem itself, clearly and concisely state your purpose for speaking up, your definition of the issue, and your assessment of the stakeholders and the stakes involved. Then explain your ideas for dealing with the issue. An important part of candid conversations is learning how to diagnose problems with your manager by looking at the data and the interpretations you are both making of the data. Through your conversation, you should identify the assumptions each

of you is making about the decision's impact on stakeholders, and together you can evaluate the validity of those assumptions. The goal is to expose and discuss the assumptions, especially those that are implicit or generally considered untouchable.

Pay attention to how you are feeling,

how your manager is feeling, and how the two of you are managing emotions during the conversation. Feelings of anxiety must be managed because they can cause us to shut down, withdraw, or get aggressive. Expect some emotions stemming from defensiveness to be triggered, and learn to empathize

The latest office gossip

Most workers don't expect much candor from their supervisors: 63 percent of U.S. employees say rumors are the usual method by which they get information about important business matters.

Source: ISR survey, Chicago



with your manager's emotions; however, don't let your empathy become an excuse for backing off. For your manager to hear your candid message, he or she needs to feel safe in the conversation. It is essential that your manager trust your motives. Search for your manager's perceptions by inquiring about what he or she sees as true. Both of you must be willing to share delicate information as you learn to have mutual trust and respect for each other's perceptions.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the reality that having a difficult conversation can make both of you uncomfortable; however, while the two of you may feel anxious, it is better to have had a somewhat uncomfortable candid conversation than not to have had a conversation at all.

Actively listen by summarizing in your own words, without a judgmental tone, what you are hearing your manager say, especially when your manager is having difficulty expressing something. Your listening goal is to capture the unexpressed messages, and your willingness to acknowledge what your manager is saying will help your manager feel understood. This practice is critical to the conversation, and it may encourage your manager to reciprocate with active listening. It is important to note that acknowledging your manager's messages does not mean you agree. Active listening shows respect and builds a relationship that can withstand difficult conversations.

In closing the conversation, assess whether your manager is willing to commit to some type of action. If so, then it is important for the two of you to ask four questions: Who knows what you are talking about? Who cares? Who agrees? Who disagrees? Who should be involved in making some difficult decisions? If your manager is not willing to explore possible actions with you, then conclude the conversation by checking to see if

the conversation was helpful to your manager. If appropriate, compliment your manager for being willing to have a candid conversation with you.

I recommend following up on a candid conversation you had with your manager. My experience is that having difficult conversations can chill the relationship, at least initially. If you want to keep the relationship up, then it is important to continue to be present in the moment. If there is a chill, then acknowledge the chill and check on whether the heat from the candid conversation helped shed light on the problem. Most managers are not used to direct contributors speaking with candor, even when they say they have an open-door policy.

My goal in my own organization is to develop a relationship with my manager in which caring, candid conversations help both of us become clearer about our integrity so that we can experience mutual trust and respect in the relationship. It's a great way to go home from work and look forward to the next day.

Why care?

Why should we care about having candid conversation with our managers? Why should we subject ourselves and our management to the stress of being candid? I believe it is because we have valuable input that will help our managers make the best decisions for all stakeholders. Jack Welch claims that increasing candor involves more people in a conversation that is rich with ideas that may even cut costs. In addition, I believe humans want to feel free to be honest in conversations.

At the same time, we can optimize the positive energy from the stress of practicing candor with our managers and concurrently prevent or solve critical problems for our stakeholders. Furthermore, we can develop fulfilling work relationships with

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our managers as we learn to deal with tough problems and issues. We grow psychologically and perhaps spiritually when we are real with ourselves and our managers, and because candid conversations take planning, this growth occurs in us before the conversations with our managers even begin.

There are risks in having caring, candid conversations with your manager. However, I hope that I have given you ideas and a process to manage those risks. I believe we need to manage the risk of damaging our psychological health by becoming cynical and falling into the helpless victim syndrome. It is important to acknowledge and give life to the leadership potential within us, which is simply an authentic self-expression that creates value for others. I emphasize upward leadership by having caring, candid conversations with our managers because there are times when our managers need to hear and discuss our input in order to make decisions that will result in the best long-term outcomes for all of our stakeholders. Sometimes we need to invite our managers into practicing authentic leadership. Authenticity and courage go hand in hand. We need courage to be our honest selves with our managers; and as we practice being candid, we will find that our courage and dignity grow stronger. ❖

For further reading

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