

Making Difficult Conversations Easier: Radical Candor

One of the most important skills to master, as a manager or supervisor, is how to give direct reports constructive criticism, or other forms of “bad news,” *without creating more problems than you are trying to solve*. I often hear from clients who want help in how to do this.

I recently read a book by Kim Scott, Radical Candor, that offers some excellent advice on this subject, and I’d like to summarize it here. Scott’s “radical candor” is based, first and foremost, on the manager’s accepting two responsibilities: to establish strong and honest relationships with his or her direct reports, and to keep their best interests at heart.

Managers are responsible for getting the results that their teams create. In order to get results, managers must do two things. First, guide their teams with feedback that is timely, relevant and supportive. Second, create a culture that is based on no-nonsense, but also supportive, feedback.

Criticism, however blunt, that comes from someone who we feel knows and understands us is easier to see as intended to help us do better. It focuses on fixing the problem, not on fixing the blame.

Being Honest *and* Compassionate

Scott believes that a manager has a moral obligation to tell the unvarnished truth to his or her direct reports if their work is sub-par. Her main idea is that “radical candor” (that is, essential honesty) involves telling people clearly, directly, *but also compassionately*, when their work isn’t good enough. Challenge your direct reports with clear, specific feedback when it is necessary, and make hard calls about who should be doing what. Radical candor is not about schmoozing with meaningless compliments, nor is it about being a jerk.

Criticism That Is Constructive

Criticism needs to be clear and specific to be heard as constructive. General suggestions such as “you need to do better” should be avoided, as they give no direction as to what to do. When there are mistakes that need to be corrected, point them out clearly and explain specifically how they should be corrected. Instead of saying, “You missed six typos in this report. Are you stupid or just careless? (Fixing the blame).” Instead, say “There are six typos in that report that need to be corrected. Carelessness in our written material suggests that we are careless about everything we

do. Always double check to make sure that you've found and corrected all the mistakes."

Think back to a time when criticism from a boss was harsh and felt unwarranted. You probably reacted by thinking something like, "Wait a minute. I didn't do (whatever it was) on purpose. You don't understand. What I was trying to do was (your goal)." Remember how that felt when you give corrective feedback to a direct report; be specific about the problem and the solution, and then help them find a better way.

Having a good understanding of what motivates each person who reports to you can help you align his or her work more closely with what the person feels is important. This allows you to have "hard talks" that are less painful for both you and the person you are talking to.

You Have to Get in Order to Give

Engaging in "radical candor" starts at the top. You have to be willing to "go first." That is, you have to seek honest feedback from your direct reports before you can provide it to them. This can be daunting. In a one-on-one meeting, you should ask uncomfortable questions like, "What could I do, or stop doing, that would make it easier to work with me?" And then accept what you hear as constructive. Granted, this is easier said than done, but practice makes it easier.

Radical candor requires investing time in a regular series of one-on-one talks with each direct report. It requires learning new empathy and listening skills that enable you to tolerate your own awkwardness. And it definitely requires that you check your ego at the door when you are receiving feedback.

The Payoff

Scott acknowledges that giving truthful, compassionate feedback to a direct report who is under-performing is hard. But giving hard-to-take feedback without having established a trusting, as opposed to the more distant "professional," relationship is like tap-dancing in a mine field. The effort to embrace radical candor pays off by clarifying what your direct reports, and you, need to do to get better in a way that builds trust and honest relationships.

To see an 18-minute discussion of "radical candor" by Kim Scott, google "Radical Candor Kim Scott"