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Radical Candor: Giving—and Receiving— Feedback in Real Time

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“Feedback is the breakfast of champions.”

—Ken Blanchard, American author and management expert

Kim Scott is the co-founder of Candor Inc. and a former Silicon Valley executive. Early in her career, she mishandled a situation with an employee. This employee was well-liked in the office and got along well with everyone. The only problem was that he was terrible at his job. As a newer boss, Scott helped to set a culture in which the employee’s co-workers picked up the slack for him, and did not communicate to him what he should be doing differently. As a result, she ended up firing him during a one-on-one, over a cup of coffee. His response was, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

This set Scott on a decades-long journey to develop her own personal style of giving feedback in real time, as she climbed up the executive ladder at companies such as YouTube, Google and Apple. She wrote a book called *Radical Candor*¹ on the method that she developed, and created a podcast by the same name. It’s an excellent resource for anyone interested in the topic of giving or asking for feedback in real time.

According to Scott, many of us grow up learning not to say to each other what we really think. An example of this is the phrase we’ve probably all heard, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” The problem is, when it comes to giving feedback, this can be disastrous. The motto that we really should be abiding by is, “If you see something, say something.”

Take, for example, a basketball coach. Imagine that you’re coaching a game and you have a player who is getting beat to the basket every single possession. You wouldn’t wait until halftime, or the end of the game, to pull the player aside. And you wouldn’t say, “You’re killing us out there! Next game, we



need to work on how to stop your opponent from scoring on you every single play!”

Instead, you would pull the player out of the game as soon as you notice a problem, tell him or her what to do differently, and then put the player back in, with a chance to adjust. Yet, because of the formal mid-year and year-end review processes that many of us have at our companies, we do exactly that. We wait for these discussions to give or ask for important feedback.

The purpose of giving and receiving feedback is to help each other define what success looks like. We need to tell each other what we should keep doing to continue being successful, and what we should be doing differently to be more successful. When we wait for these formal review discussions, it is often too late for the recipient, including us, to effectively make any changes.

Here are some ways that you can focus on giving and receiving feedback in real time.

INFORMAL, IN-THE-MOMENT FEEDBACK IS OFTEN MOST EFFECTIVE

Scott tells a story in which she received some of her best feedback in a brief discussion after a meeting, while walking to the elevator. Some of the most effective feedback that you hear, or can deliver, occurs in similar situations.

The most important thing is to state the situation, the behavior, and the impact the behavior had on the situation. For example, you may pull someone aside after a meeting and say, “That meeting was going off the rails. You held up the agenda.

It got everyone focused, and we got through everything on time. Good thinking.” Or, someone may say to you, “There was a lot of content to cover during that meeting. You went with a 40-slide presentation. It was overwhelming. Next time, try going with fewer slides, and deliver more of your message verbally. It will be easier for your audience to understand.”

Informal, in-the-moment feedback like this is often unfiltered, and it occurs close to the event, so that it is likely to stick with the recipient.

AVOID USING THE WORD “HOW” WHEN ASKING FOR FEEDBACK

We are accustomed to addressing questions that begin with “how” with a specific set of responses. If you ask someone “How did that go?” or “How did I do?” they are likely to tell you that it was “fine” or “good.” However, if you ask, “What is one thing I should keep on doing, and one thing that I should do differently?” they are much more likely to answer one or both of those questions for you specifically. Choose your language carefully, and you will get much more honest, and useful, feedback about your performance.

DON’T SUGARCOAT CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

When it comes to telling someone that they need to do something differently, or offering constructive criticism, it’s best to avoid something that Kim Scott calls a “feedback sandwich.” This is when we say something positive at the beginning and end of a feedback loop, to make the other person feel better.

It is fine to work in positive feedback along with constructive criticism, where necessary. Generally, we want to be communicating positive feedback more often than constructive criticism. However, when it comes to offering constructive criticism, your message can get lost in a feedback sandwich. An example of this is, “Great job in that meeting! I noticed that at critical points in the presentation, you significantly misrepresented our team’s work product. But your energy was super great, so keep it up!” If you offer feedback like that to someone, he or she will probably walk away from the interaction remembering, “great job, good energy, and keep it up.”

Instead, you need to be as clear as possible. What you should say is, “During the part of the presentation when we talked about our key conclusions, you said some things that were not consistent with our findings. That misled the audience, and they probably drew the wrong conclusions. Before the next meeting, we need to practice what you’re going to say, before we go in there.” When you don’t deliver constructive criticism in a feedback sandwich, it is much less likely that the recipient will misinterpret your feedback.

DON’T GIVE, OR RECEIVE, ANY FEEDBACK AT YOUR NEXT REVIEW

Set a goal not to give, or receive, any new feedback at your next mid-year or year-end review. If you are finding yourself waiting to ask your manager for important feedback, to give it to your employees, or to offer it to your peers, find a way to do so much earlier and much more consistently throughout the year. The purpose of these discussions should be to recap the major accomplishments since the last review, and to focus on the development items and objectives for the upcoming period. These reviews should not be used to offer or ask for important feedback for the first time.

We can’t retroactively make changes if we’re only learning something now that we should have been doing earlier. The same is true when we are telling someone important feedback: They can’t go back in time and make changes based on feedback that we never communicated to them.

When speaking about receiving feedback, Steve Jobs said, “I don’t mind being wrong, and I’ll admit that I’m wrong a lot. It doesn’t really matter to me too much. What matters to me is that we do the right thing.”²

If we give each other informal, in-the-moment feedback, choose our language carefully when asking for feedback, stay away from feedback sandwiches when it comes to constructive criticism, and make sure to give, and receive, feedback consistently throughout the year, we can help each other define what success looks like. This will help us to do the right thing. After all, if we want to be successful, in keeping with the spirit of what Ken Blanchard says, we need to have feedback for breakfast, lunch and dinner. ■



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Scott, Kim Malone. 2017. *Radical Candor: Be a Kick-ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- 2 Carey, Ryan. 2013 The Eight Greatest Quotes From Steve Jobs: The Lost Interview. Paste. March 6, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/blogs/lists/2013/03/the-eight-most-important-passages-from-steve-jobs-the-lost-interview.html> (accessed May 18, 2018).