Performance Frontiers

Radical Candour for Executives

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MidJourney

The author of Radical Candour, Kim Scott, tells the powerful story about a time when Cheryl Sandberg gave her feedback after she made a presentation. Sandberg said it went well but gently pressed her on the fact that she said “um” a lot while speaking. Scott brushed this comment to the side and kept talking about other elements of the presentation. After trying to give the feedback again without success, Sandberg then said to her, “When you say ‘um’ every third word, you sound stupid.” While this might seem a bit brutal, Scott says it was one of the most important pieces of feedback she received and really meant the difference for her in progressing further at the

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upper leadership levels (ultimately, she engaged a speaking coach). Part of the art of this piece of feedback was Sandberg knew exactly what needed to be done in the moment to get the message through. But, in addition to that, Scott knew it was coming from the right place.

Radical Candour

A common challenge of leadership — maybe even human relationships — asks when do we say something and when do we bite our tongue? And if we do say something, how do we pitch it in that often-elusive zone that sits between honest and kind? Depending on personality and cultural norms, it's easy to come down too hard one side or the other.

We all know people who are a bit too ready to launch into heavy handed critiques. While others might be reticent to say anything until it's really 'too late'. Kim Scott's Radical Candour model provides a helpful piece of guidance for finding that balance and mastering how to offer feedback in a way that is both impactful and kind. For Scott, radical candour means to care personally and challenge directly at the same time. She recommends that radical candour is best implemented in the following way:

Kim Scott's Radical Candour Model

Moreover, any critiques should be balanced with giving praise. Scott says that, as a general rule, you want to give more praise than criticism. This is part of establishing a relationship that is trusting, based on goodwill, and caring.

Candour In the C-Suite

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While the general principles of radical candour are relevant at any level, at the executive level there are some unique challenges to giving and receiving feedback. We know that as

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leaders become more senior, they receive less and less feedback. Their subordinates often don't feel confident offering it to them, and their own leaders can be some of the busiest people in the organisation. This absence of feedback can hinder the development of the leader — or even lead to regression. No matter how high you are up the chain, strong feedback loops are essential for effective leadership.

How do I encourage radical candour as an executive?

Focus: Invite critique through role-modelling

So, firstly, how do we overcome the fact that people are often afraid to provide feedback at this level (whether this be team members or other leaders)? There is a real fear for people that speaking with radical candour to an executive might provoke an aggressive response or even have repercussions for their job. This is because it could be interpreted as a challenge to the status of the executive. This fear might even exist within an executive leadership group itself — some members feel more comfortable giving feedback than others, depending on perceived status, tenure, and personality.

Most importantly, leaders need to remember that when someone offers you critical feedback, they are taking a risk — and you need to reward that risk. Ask yourself: how will I remain open and non-defensive in the face of feedback? One of the ways to encourage radical candour from your team as an executive is to invite it. Another is to be honest about your own mistakes and where things could have been done better. By being vulnerable, people will feel that you are self-reflective and open to constructive feedback.

How do I give radical candour as an executive?

Focus: Start with the relationship

On the other hand, giving radical candour as an executive involves the challenges of any leader — building trusting and

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caring relationships, where direct feedback can be given compassionately and meaningfully. For executives who are being stretched across multiple priorities, finding that type of present and deep time with our team or colleagues can be challenging. It requires us to be very mindful of demonstrating support at key moments, while also creating a culture of open and frank feedback.

It might also require us to examine our motivations for giving feedback — is it for the right reasons? Do we genuinely want the best for this person through giving this feedback? By both giving and receiving feedback in this manner, you will role model for your team what is expected around continuous improvement. Together, this only strengthens the team.

The radical candour model for feedback is a powerful tool at every level of an organisation and can be the shift you need to embed a feedback culture that really works. In the C-Suite, it can take a bit more to get these conversations going but it is unquestionably worth it.

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