

“Radical Candor”

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Back in the early 2000s, my mother and I used to watch the reality show singing competition *American Idol*. If you're not familiar, the idea is to find untapped musical talent, enter them into a singing competition with their peers, and eventually find the winner, the American Idol, who will receive a recording contract and the chance to become a pop star. Contestants were judged by three to four judges, most of whom were either famous singers or record producers. Over its fifteen-year run, *American Idol* introduced the world to some of the hottest new pop stars of the 2000s, including Kelly Clarkson and Carrie Underwood.

In the early seasons, one of the appeals of the show was the blunt, but usually right, British judge Simon Cowell, who, in no uncertain terms, would tell contestants exactly what he thought of their performances. Though his critiques sometimes ventured into the not helpful, people tuned in for a bit of cruel fun, especially during the first few episodes of every season when auditions would be featured. But they didn't only show the good auditions; they also broadcast to the world bad auditions, and even the downright awful where contestants seemed to be oblivious to their lack of singing talent or ability.

Yes, it's *schadenfreude*, but it kept the show going for fifteen years. I'm not here to debate the ethics of the auditions, though.

No, I want to talk about a man named Keith Beukelaer. In season two of *American Idol*, Keith's audition performance of Madonna's song "Like a Virgin" left Simon Cowell declaring him to be, possibly, the worst singer in the world. And it was terrible. What was striking, though, was how shocked Keith appeared to be by Simon's assessment.

“I don’t think I’m the best singer in the world, but I think I’m a good singer,” Keith declared.

“Are you serious?” Simon asked. “You have to hear yourself to believe it!”

When interviewed immediately after, Keith was shocked and declared that Simon Cowell was just a jerk. Keith’s attitude is not uncommon for poor performances on the show, so it might not even have made a blip on my radar when I started rewatching old episodes had I not seen a follow-up interview with him. Five years later, in 2008, Keith said in an interview that no one had ever told him before that he couldn’t sing. Though he sang many times in front of different people, none of them ever told him the truth. Simon Cowell was the first person to ever give him a dose of reality about his ability.

Keith would later redeem himself on one of Simon Cowell’s other shows, *The X-Factor*, as a rapper. It strikes me, though, that Keith’s friends and family did him no favors by not telling him the truth. They probably thought they were sparing him pain and humiliation, but their silence led to an even worse fate as he was humiliated on national television in a performance that continues to follow him to this day via YouTube compilations of the worst *American Idol* auditions.

This happens all the time. So often, people refrain from giving clear, honest feedback because they are scared of hurting the other person’s feelings. It’s the classic dilemma of not being able to tell your loved one the dress doesn’t really look good on them, or, in the case of our reading this morning, being too afraid to give candid feedback to a coworker or direct report because we’re afraid that we’ll hurt their feelings. It harkens back to an old phrase you probably heard as a kid: “If you don’t have anything good to say, you shouldn’t say anything at all.”

I don't know about you, but I internalized that phrase so much that it made me afraid to be assertive about anything. In my early twenties, I found myself frozen with fear, desperate to please everyone at all times. And it doesn't work. As Keith's story and the stories in our reading this morning reveal, not challenging one another often leads to worse consequences than simply hurt feelings. It often leads to humiliation, job loss, low self-esteem, and bitter feelings as we wonder why no one ever told us the truth to begin with.

To understand why this is so, I want to venture into the business world for a moment. Kim Scott, a former executive for Google, Apple, and Twitter, made waves earlier this year when she released a book called *Radical Candor: How to be a Kickass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity*. Scott believes there are two components to being a good boss: caring personally and challenging directly. So many people do a much better job caring personally for each other than they do challenging directly. This is because we've come to believe that challenging directly is uncaring and even rude. Will I look like I don't care if I challenge someone?

But, in today's world, Scott believes, we need to be challenged. I need courageous people willing to tell me the truth, even when it hurts, in order to help me grow.



Scott calls this “ruinous empathy,” where a person cares personally about another but does not challenge directly, as illustrated in the top left corner of this diagram. She believes one can engage in ruinous empathy through both lack of criticism and insincere praise, such as the person who tells someone they’re doing a great job when they really don’t mean it.

The temptation might be to just start challenging at every opportunity. Scott believes that this has a corollary danger, one she calls “obnoxious aggression,” where a person challenges directly while showing no evidence that they care personally. Many of us have had obnoxious aggressive bosses in our lifetime, who definitely challenged us but showed no evidence they are coming from a place of caring, perhaps buying into the old belief that bosses have to be jerks in order to succeed.

And, of course, there’s the possibility of being “manipulatively insincere,” or not caring personally or challenging directly. An example of this is people who say one thing to your face, such as, “I love your work!” while going behind your back and tearing you apart to everyone else they see. These actions typically have very selfish motivations, such as sparing the feelings of the person being manipulatively insincere, rather than benefiting the person receiving the insincere praise or criticism.

All of this might lead a person to wonder whether criticism can be given in a caring way. I believe it can. United Church of Christ minister Molly Baskette quotes one of her seminary professors, who once said, "Criticism is a gift. Offered with real love and gentleness, it gives the recipient an opportunity to change."

Criticism, offered in a spirit of good faith, actually shows that we care personally because we want to help the other person. It does not mean I have to accept every critique that comes my way, but it means we care enough about each other to hold one another accountable.

No, there is a fourth way for Scott: “radical candor,” or challenging people while also caring personally. When I act with radical candor, Scott says, I show others that I care personally by challenging directly. Radical candor is all about relationships, and I can accept even criticism I disagree with in a positive light because I know the other person has my best interests at heart, because I know the other person cares about me and my success in the world.

Radically candor doesn't happen overnight, though. They're about building relationship. The caring personally part has to come before the challenge directly. There's no shortcut around this without veering into obnoxious aggression. If I want to be radically candid, in other words, if I want to both care about a person while challenging them directly, they have to believe I care about them. Scott goes so far as to say this is one of the necessary functions of management, and advises managers who don't want to take the time to care personally about those who report to them to find another job.

Now this isn't a magic formula. I may care very deeply about someone else and, due to cultural or personal issues, the other person could still fail to see it. Scott also says that no one operates within radical candor one hundred percent of the time; if we did, we'd all be enlightened saints. I know I mess up. A lot. I've even messed up while I've been in Houghton and not always been as radically candid as I could. We all venture between these four quadrants all the time, spending various amounts of time in each. We'll never be perfect, but, with practice, she believes every person can spend more time in the radical candor quadrant as we learn to both care more and challenge.

One of the biggest surprises for Scott has been how much her philosophy of radical candor has spread far beyond her original intended audience: managers and executives. Schools, nonprofits, and, yes, even churches and synagogues, are talking about radical candor as a new

paradigm for how to be in community. United Church of Christ minister Baskette, from whom I originally discovered Kim Scott's work on radical candor, believes that ruinous empathy is especially prevalent in church life. So often, churches buy into the belief that, if we challenge directly, we don't care personally, and they so often enable behavior that would not be tolerated in any other setting, or, worse, engender a sense of helplessness in those whom we seek to offer hope.

I want to go further: what if radical candor could become a way of life in all of our relations, not just in organizations and businesses. What if Keith's family and friends had challenged him that he wasn't ready to go on *American Idol*? It might have stung at first, but at least he would have had the opportunity to avoid a national embarrassment.

What if we created a world where it was not only normal but expected that caring personally meant we challenged our partner's bad habits, or let our coworkers know how we really feel about our work? Would the world be radically different if we each had the courage to be radically candid?

Now there are problems with radical candor, and I bet some of you have already thought of some. The most glaringly obvious is that power dynamics mean a person can't always be radically candid without consequences, such as losing their job or being kicked out. Scott even acknowledges one must be attentive to power dynamics, and admits she felt terrible when someone tweeted, "Tried radical candor with my boss today. Got fired."

No, the world is probably not ready for complete radical candor yet.

However, even the man who got fired after trying radical candor on his boss admits he's happier not working for a person who couldn't accept any sort of challenge. Scott even says that radically candid bosses receive the highest evaluations by their direct reports of any of the

quadrants. I believe, with time and practice, we will begin to seek out those people with whom we can be radically candid, and minimize less healthy relationships when possible. Like our man who got fired, I am much happier when I can have caring relationships that challenge me to be a better person. I need relationships where people show me they care by challenging me to be the best person I can be.

We are so far from a world where most people are radically candid that it's hard to even imagine what such a world might be like. Maybe we'll never be there. I hold it out as hope, though, because I believe this sort of world would be drastically better for everyone. Maybe, just maybe, if a few of us make radical candor our life's philosophy, then maybe, one day, showing we care by challenging those we love will be so common we forget it was ever any different.

May it be so.