

# Realizing the Power of Candid Conversations

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**T**here is little doubt that the ability to communicate effectively is one of the most critical skills for leaders. And yet, as playwright George Bernard Shaw once stated, “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” The way that conversations are conducted matters a great deal, not only in the workplace but also in the community and in the home. Bringing candor to conversations is not always easy. Conversations are often affected by ego, limited by the level of trust, and guarded for fear of being hurt or of hurting others. As a result people often speak to others in ways that are evasive and cautious—the opposite of candid. This shortcoming can have especially dire consequences for leaders. Conversations can flow, however, when people create space—both internal and intrapersonal and external and interpersonal—for candor. Candid conversations are a precursor to collective action. But they require active listening and thoughtful, kind feedback.

A story we have heard is a parable for the power and value of candor in conversations:

*At a monastery, the abbot and monks were dismayed that fewer and fewer people were visiting. The monks not only wanted to share their bless-*

*ings but also relied on the patronage of visitors to help keep up the property. Each month the abbot would have dinner with a local rabbi. At one such dinner the abbot asked the rabbi for advice on how to address the monastery’s problem. The rabbi said he was having similar challenges at his temple but could offer no obvious solutions. Getting up to leave, the rabbi paused, turned, and looked directly at the abbot. The rabbi said, “One of you is the messiah.” Then he said goodbye and walked away.*

*The next morning the monks were eager to hear what wisdom the rabbi had to offer. The abbot related that the rabbi had given no specific advice but had said cryptically, “One of you is the messiah.”*

*The statement haunted the monks as they went about their chores and it jump-started their curiosity. They began thinking about one another differently, and their actions reflected this. They became more positive in their affirmations of themselves, avoided gossip, and spoke directly, with honesty and love, to one another, not knowing which one of them was the messiah. Before long the energy in the monastery seemed to build, and more and more people started visiting. Soon the monastery began to thrive again as visitors came from near and far, drawn by its renewed vitality and the joy that radiated from the monks.*

So how does candor fit into this story of leadership and change? The

rabbi made a candid statement to the abbot, and when the monks heard it, they knew it could be true. Their values and beliefs were made more lucid, and they were impelled to react.

This story is about love, empathy, and the power of the word and living one’s values. And it is about candor. It shows that the way people conduct conversations can be profound in its impact.

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, Holocaust survivor, and founder of logotherapy—a form of existential analysis—taught that people’s lives must have meaning and that when they act from a place in their lives that has meaning there are no barriers to keep them from reaching their highest good. Unknowingly perhaps, each monk was seeing himself as a leader and change agent and was living what he believed. The results were a world that came back into order.

## ENABLING CANDOR

The story of the monks brings to mind an adage: “I don’t care how much you know until I know how much you care.” Candor requires trust and safety. People may be less inclined to be open in sharing information that they perceive can be used against them or misinterpreted. In many organizations there are embedded layers, grounded in hierarchy and relationships, that determine who has access to which informa-

tion. Transparency exists when one has trust in oneself and in others and a safe space for the exchange. The space must exist both internally, within oneself, and externally, in the context of one's interactions with others.

We asked a few friends, colleagues, and clients a question: *What enables candor?*

An artist friend said she uses candor when she is "either trusting the one I am speaking to or speaking with someone I will never see again."

A client responded that he had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and would sometimes display little self-control and blurt out whatever came to mind. Yet he concluded that being politically correct can often get in the way of candor.

A colleague stated that candor is when "I am at my best, stripping away fear, not being in a self-protection mode, using gentleness toward others, and I really want the conversation to happen. I am softly stripping away ego and believing in my own clarity. I am not there to hurt and am remembering that I can help myself when I get hurt and stand on my own strength."

## LEARNING ORIENTATION

Buddhist and mindfulness practitioners say that individuals must transform their minds from *doing* to *being* by disciplining the mind's perspective to the bigger picture of hope and peace. When the monks heard the rabbi's comments they moved from *small mind* to *big mind* and enhanced their whole way of thinking. The English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said, "The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous." The monks already knew about mindfulness and the divine connection, and yet, being human, they had forgotten.

Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology*

*of Success* (Random House, 2006), speaks of the difference between a *growth* mind-set and a *fixed* mind-set. A growth mind-set sees challenge as the basis for growth and opinions that differ from one's own as opportunities to learn. By approaching others with a growth mind-set, individuals bring a learning orientation rather than a judging orientation. This enables them to engage others not with a belief that they themselves have the full and final answer but rather with a desire to learn about the

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perspectives of those they are engaging. This frees people from the need to feel that they must be right and from defensiveness about their own point of view. This openness creates a space for constructive conversation.

## CREATING A SPACE

When people engage others in a way that seeks to learn about those others' perspectives and needs, they create a comfortable space in which others can feel more willing to share what they truly think. In this type of engagement, openness is often met with candor and disclosure. In a fruitful conversation, perspectives are exchanged, shared meaning is constructed, and leadership itself is forged. Wilfred H. Drath, a former CCL senior enterprise associate and senior fellow, and Charles J. Palus,

a senior enterprise associate at CCL, have written that leadership is a social meaning-making process that occurs in groups. Through collective engagement emerge shared direction, alignment, and commitment. Creating this shared meaning hinges on the way the conversations people have with one another are conducted.

Don Miguel Ruiz, in his book *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom (A Toltec Wisdom Book)* (Amber-Allen, 2001), encourages people to not make assumptions and to find the courage to ask questions and express what they really want. He urges communicating with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness, and drama. With just this one agreement, he writes, "you can completely transform your life."

And David Cooperrider, a professor of organizational behavior at Case Western Reserve University who developed the organizational renewal process known as appreciative inquiry (AI), has stated that "the most important insight we have learned with AI to date is that human systems grow toward what they persistently ask questions about. By asking positive questions, organizations and people have the opportunity to grow in new directions and tap innovative sources of knowledge, vitality, and energy."

## LISTEN UP

To create a safe and collaborative relationship, begin by listening. People need time to open up. They often wade through name, rank, and serial number before they are ready to share what lies deeper. Mutual revelations of private or sensitive information, when met with attention and respect, create a virtuous cycle of candor. These revelations build relationships because there is an offering of trust.

In *Active Listening: Improve Your Ability to Listen and Lead*, a CCL

Ideas into Action Guidebook, author Michael Hoppe writes, “At its core, active listening is a state of mind that involves paying full and careful attention to the other person, avoiding premature judgment, reflecting understanding, clarifying information, summarizing, and sharing.” A key point is to show empathy and to understand the other person’s point of view. When people are empathetic, they are more understanding, patient, and kind.

In an inspiring conversation, there is a rich sharing of perspectives, ideas, and interests to arrive at a deeper and broader understanding. CCL’s Visual Explorer—a tool for making sense of complex challenges—uses a model to ensure that leaders have a broad perspective. In this model, an individual chooses a VE image and then offers a perspective on an issue to the group. Then the group members take turns offering their perspectives, grounding these perspectives in their own selves. For instance, a person might say, “From my perspective, I see . . .” or, “In my experience, I have found . . .” or, “If this was my challenge, I would . . .” The initiator of the dialogue hears the perspectives and has the opportunity to deepen or broaden his or her own views. The focus on sharing perspectives as opposed to seeking agreement or consensus removes the burden of needing to influence others or accept another point of view. The process is designed to eliminate competition and envy in order to encourage creativity. Although each individual holds his or her own realities, which are different from those of others, everyone can learn from the perspectives and experiences of others. Ultimately, the offering and the listening represent co-creation, and all parties come away with a greater understanding than they had when they arrived. Conversation—the being—works in tandem with collaboration—the doing. The co-creation informs, guides, and allows each individual to

have his or her own ideas, interests, values, purpose, choice, and power.

This exercise encourages people to hold multiple realities—to not compare and contrast. The mind often limits possibilities through linear thinking and through the use of the word *but*. People often act as though there is only so much love, money, time, or space. And yet they do not test these assumptions enough. The Visual Explorer model forces people to slow down, listen, and weave together the truths.

## FRANK FEEDBACK

A candid conversation can also be about offering input about how others’ behaviors are perceived and the impact these behaviors have on others or on oneself. CCL has developed a feedback model called situation-behavior-impact, or SBI, that helps leaders have breakthrough, candid conversations. In this approach, a situation is identified, an observable behavior is noted, and an impact is assigned. Roger Pearman, founder of blended-learning company Qualifying.org and an adjunct trainer and coach at CCL, offers an example of candor using SBI: “As I observed your smile during this interaction, I wondered if you took the comment seriously.” If you heard this SBI statement, how would you respond?

The SBI model enables people to hear how their behaviors are perceived. They are forced to face the fact that they do not live in a bubble or a silo. They are seen and heard and have to be responsible for their behavior; they also have the profound opportunity to treat each moment as important. This interaction also informs people about the needs of others and their listening styles and sensitivities. SBI gives individuals an opportunity to consider their own behavior and to clarify the impact they wish to have on others. Because the model offers a concrete connection between behavior, perceptions,

and impact, people can choose to change their behaviors to create the impact they wish to have. Used appropriately, feedback is a gift because it helps people to be more effective in their dealings with others and to eliminate their own blind spots regarding the impact of their actions on others, which in turn builds stronger interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.

In working with clients to enhance their coaching skills, we encourage them to be direct and to not dance around issues. We have always wondered why, as people appear to rush through things and squeeze in as much activity as they can, they waste some of their precious time avoiding the truth. Being a mirror for a colleague, friend, or family member can be a gift both to you and to the one to whom you are presenting the reflection.

## LOWER THE BARRIERS

Candid conversations are about showing openness, honesty, and consideration for others. They reduce the individual’s need to be right. People instead seek to leverage their collective knowledge, wisdom, and ability to lead together. In this manner, people are able to lower the barriers of misunderstanding and conflict that keep them apart and sap them of energy. They can be their authentic selves and engage more fully and openly with others.

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