

Is Your Workplace Ready For A 'Front-Stabbing' Culture?

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By Ron Schmidt

In a recent piece in the *Wall Street Journal* Rachel Feintzeig reported that companies are “pushing workers to drop the polite workplace veneer and speak frankly to each other no matter what.” She refers to this practice as “radical candor, a mokita or front stabbing.”

She goes on to say that “leaders have placed a new focus on candor because they thought workers weren’t having honest conversations.” As an example of “radical candor” she cites Sheryl Sandberg, who while at Google took a co-worker aside and “told her she made herself sound unintelligent by saying ‘um’ too much.”

Leveling the Playing Field

In looking at our modern workplace it’s important we understand the playing field. There are 79-million Baby Boomers and 80-million Millennials in the workplace and their differences should be put into context. For Boomers, their parents were part of the Greatest Generation, having witnessed the Great Depression and the deadliest war ever, and when it came to parenting, words were likely never minced. Many Boomers were the first generation to go to college and when it came to descriptions of arrogance and narcissism, they never heard of those words growing up.

A Different Worldview

But the worldview of these 80-million Millennials is vastly different from the worldview of their parents’ generation. To paraphrase several blogs, Millennials love to work with earphones, they feel entitled, they’re not used to working face-to-face, they crave instant gratification and they always got those “participation” trophies.



The piece in the *Wall Street Journal* was titled "When 'Nice' Is a Four-Letter Word."

And I think the title raises an important question: Can we be, or should we be, candid without being offensive? I don't think we want to go back to the Stone Age when most managers didn't know what "emotional intelligence" was. And I don't think we want to turn our back on being nice, like you can't be a nice guy and hold folks accountable. Robert Sutton's book, *The No Asshole Rule*, pretty much said they're out there, just pray you don't work for one.

Candor or Looking in the Mirror?

This begs the question, do we only need more candor or are we in need of folks to step in like Sheryl Sandberg and without fanfare saying you need to get "business ready" and start by looking in the mirror and listening to how you speak? How does this fit in the workplace today?

John Wooden, the noted Coach of the Century (20th) and winner of 10 NCAA basketball championships at UCLA, referred to himself not only as a coach but also a teacher. And in our leader roles I think we need to think about ourselves not just as teachers but coaches also. Wooden had built an understanding of trust amongst his players that eliminated condescension and abuse. Whether it's Sandberg intervening as a mentor or coach Wooden using psychology, I think we need to be smart about it.

There's a famous story told about coach Wooden and Bill Walton, his star center and NBA Hall of Famer. The story takes place in coach Wooden's office in the early '70s. Coach tells Walton that facial hair is unacceptable (try that today) and that if he wanted to be on the team he would need to shave. Walton resisted and stormed out of the office but was back later with a shaven face. Without swagger he pretty much just laid it out there like Sandberg. So we have candor, but at the heart is leadership and focus on the team while dealing with individuals as the need arises.

In his recent Corner Office column, Adam Bryant of the *New York Times* quoted Ann Cairns of MasterCard. In this article titled "The Art and Science of Team Chemistry," Ms. Cairns points out, "I've had people work for me who are very creative or can be very disruptive, and sometimes they're the same person. I've seen other people take them off their teams because it's just too hard to manage them. But my view is that if you can get the best out of people...it's worth putting them on your team...And then you constantly reinforce what the good is, and you build mutual respect so that you don't create a team of mediocre people who are all happy with each other. You want people who can challenge each other without creating this peer problem of, 'I don't like you because you said such-and-such at the last meeting.'"

As Ms. Cairns concludes, "The other thing that is really important about building a team is that your team has got to respect you and they've got to feel safe. So you create that safe environment, and they've got to feel that you're always acting in their interests."

More than Xs and Os

The secret for Wooden was not only his knowledge of the game but how smartly he dealt with people. A noted author in this field, Dr. Thomas Gordon wrote extensively about the "how side" of communications when he coined the "I messages." In his stellar work *Leadership Effectiveness Training*, he delineates the "I" and the "You" of communication. In other words he says you shouldn't be a jerk getting your point across. "I" messages build teams, "You" messages tear teams apart.

The day after the Eagles fired Chip Kelly as their coach, chief executive Jeff Lurie shared what he wanted to see in a new coach with the *New York Times*: "You've got to open your heart to players and everybody you want to achieve peak performance. I would call it a style of leadership that values information and all of the resources that are provided and at the same time values emotional intelligence. I think in today's world, a combination of all those factors creates the best chance to succeed."

In today's world how do we foster communication between the boomers and the Millennials? The candor young people are looking for requires leaders to be leaders and not sit on the sidelines. Cairns, Wooden and Sandberg are good examples to follow. What part will you play in effective communication?

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