Creating a Culture of Candor in the Leadership Classroom

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Abstract

A culture of candor can bring numerous benefits to any organization. Yet, candor is rare in most organizations. Despite the scarcity of its practice there is a need to develop leaders who value and use candor by demonstrating and practicing candor in the leadership classroom. A description of seven key actions that enable leadership instructors to build a culture of candor in the classroom is provided. Each of these actions is supported with prescriptive guidelines for implementing these practices in the classroom. The influence of the seven actions on the candid behavior of leadership students as well as leadership instructors is also discussed.

Why Candor is Important to Companies

There are many synonyms for candor such as frankness, openness, honesty, forthrightness, and straightforwardness. Candor is good for business. For example, Welch (2005) describes the lack of candor as "the biggest dirty little secret in business" (p. 25). Welch argues that the pervasive lack of candor in business stifles good ideas, slows decisions down, costs money, and ultimately damages firm performance. In contrast, the presence of candor increases the flow of useful ideas. This results in faster decision-making, lower costs, and higher productivity. Candor is present in companies that have made the transition from good to great. According to Collins (2001), these organizations have developed the ability to candidly confront the brutal facts. This ability reflects what Bossidy

and Charan (2002) call "robust dialogue." They believe it is necessary in order to effectively execute strategy.

Candor in an organization also creates greater transparency which establishes the basis of trust on which effective leadership depends (Bennis, Goleman, & O'Toole, 2008). In their discussion of how to rebuild the trust in organizations that has been lost during the recent economic crisis, O'Toole & Bennis (2009) state that, "we won't be able to rebuild trust in institutions until leaders learn how to communicate honestly – and create organizations where that's the norm" (p. 54).

Given these benefits, it would seem that candor would be pervasive throughout organizations. So, why is this not the case? Candor makes people uncomfortable and many people fear that speaking candidly may alienate others. Welch (2005) attributes the prevalent lack of candor in businesses to people being socialized from childhood to "soften bad news and make nice about awkward subjects" (p. 28). Galpin (1996) contends that people possess limiting beliefs about offering open and honest comments to others. These limiting beliefs include fear that people become upset or defensive or demoralized. Often people are hesitant to provide candid and constructive feedback because they believe others "should know by themselves what is needed, and they may think I'm being too critical" (pp. 102-103). Moreover, Bolton (2006) states, "Most managers have an 'approach-avoid' attitude toward candor. While they say they want it, most don't want the conflict, frustration, and additional work they've experienced as by-products of candor" (p. 343). This lack of candor amounts to a cordial hypocrisy in which we are aware of problems, but refuse to discuss them in a meaningful and constructive way.

Why Candor is Important in the Leadership Classroom

Beyond candor in companies, candor is also good for the leadership classroom. Stech (2008) contends that leadership development, in addition to leadership training and education, is essential. Stech argues that leadership development occurs when participants are able to gain insights into their own beliefs and behaviors as well as understand the effect they have on others. According to Stech, while various methods of leadership instruction exist (e.g., lecture, case study, textbook review, experiential exercises, and group discussions) it is the more active methods such as experiential exercises and group discussions that promote the leadership development.

In order for active leadership development methods to be optimally effective in achieving their intended outcomes, establishing a culture of candor in the classroom is essential. For example, Ramsey and Fitzgibbons (2005) propose that

classroom experiences can provide rich learning opportunities if they are allowed to emerge because every student brings personal work experiences and are members of other organizations that can serve as sources for discussion. Moreover, Kolb and Kolb (2005) suggest that in order to facilitate group learning and reflection, an appropriate space must be created in order to encourage the ongoing discussion which is relevant to the issues being addressed. However, simply providing time in the classroom is not enough; facilitators must be intentional about creating an environment that is psychologically safe by fostering trust and mutual respect (Roberts, 2008). When a leadership classroom is optimally functioning, participants enter a zone of understanding wherein the instructor and students speak with candor and actively listen (Avery & Steingard, 2008).

Considering the scarcity of candor in business and the myriad benefits that a culture of candor can bring to both an organization and to the leadership classroom, we propose that there is a need to develop leaders who value and use candor by demonstrating and practicing candor in the leadership classroom.

Implementing Candor in the Leadership Classroom

We have found through numerous leadership courses which include active learning techniques such as facilitated discussions, experiential activities, and other self-awareness exercises, that candid participation can be established if leadership instructors conscientiously implement a set of seven actions. Implementing these actions not only promotes the candid involvement of participants in leadership courses, but these items also directly shape the role and candid behavior of leadership instructors. Finally, it should be noted that the seven actions are interconnected. Implementing one or two of them will help promote candor among participants, but implementing all seven as a comprehensive set builds a broader and more effective culture of classroom candor.

Preparing for Candid Participation

Establish participation ground rules. Agreeing upon ground rules early in a course supports open dialogue (Roberts, 2008). Taking this into consideration during the first class session, the instructor engages the course participants in generating a list of participation ground rules. The list should consist of clear bullet points, and be no more than ten items long. The items are recorded on a flip-chart sheet and the list is posted during every class session where it is clearly visible to everyone. Course ground rules may include stay on topic, do not over participate, agree to disagree, listen, respect others' ideas, and be brief. The value of establishing a clear set of participation ground rules to encourage candor

cannot be overstated. The items on the list invariably help the instructor regulate the participation of individuals in the course, by enabling instructors to control overly dominant participants and encourage more reluctant individuals to participate. The responsibility for monitoring and maintaining adherence to the ground rules should be shared by the instructor and the participants. Setting these ground rules during the first class session sets an expectation of participation, open dialogue, and candor.

The Instructor's Role

Hold back. In classrooms where candor is prevalent, course instructors listen first and tell second. Participants shut down and do not offer their own views when instructors provide their comments and opinions first. The traditional lecture and textbook review methods which persist across both domestic and international educational institutions have conditioned students to expect to be told the answer. Consequently, the instructor is perceived by students as the only authority in the room. In order to overcome this conditioning and draw out candid original thought and insight, instructors should be the last to comment on a topic. Instructors need to allow for the discomfort – their own and the students – of breaking with these traditional classroom roles. However, as Roberts (2008) states, "this more organic style of learning may be prove to be challenging for some instructors if they are more comfortable with higher degrees of structure, used to providing answers, or compelled to move the group in the 'right direction'" (p. 121).

Ask the right questions. Holding back does not mean the instructor abdicates involvement in the class. Rather, the instructor's role takes a new form. In order to stimulate participant input, instructors should avoid the trap of projecting too much of themselves or their beliefs onto the group (Wardale, 2008). Instead, instructors should constantly pose questions such as: What is your experience with that? Do you have an example? What are the ramifications of your idea? What do others think about that comment/idea? Does anyone have a contrary view?

Asking these second level questions allows both students and the instructor to get at deeper insights about a particular topic. This type of questioning stretches the thinking of the class and encourages higher levels of participation. This type of questioning is crucial to the establishment of candor in the classroom.

Shut "over participants" down. One of the most difficult issues for instructors to contend with when trying to establish a culture of candor among a group is how to manage overly dominant participants. Invariably, overbearing participants stifle group candor by simply dominating the discussion time. The more hesitant

participants will hold back and the free flow of ideas and opinions across the group is brought to a veritable stand still. Because of this, it is imperative that instructors are forthright in their approach to shutting dominant people down. This is aided to a great extent by establishing clear participation ground rules as described in item number one above. However, once ground rules are established and the expectations of enforcing them throughout the course are set, when sensing that someone is over participating then instructors can respectfully and candidly say to the person – "Thanks for the comments, we have heard a lot from you, so I am shutting you down for a little while." We have never seen an overly dominant participant become surprised or offended by such action taken. At least for a period of time they always comply with the instructor's comment, but some enthusiastic individuals may need to be reminded of their shut down status. Once the instructor deems that the individual who has been shut down should join back in the exchange, it is simple to invite the person to participate again.

Be comfortable with silence. For candor to truly take hold, *everyone* should participate at some point. Silence is an excellent tool to encourage candor and open participation from even the most reluctant participants. Instructors who pose questions to a group about leadership techniques they want the group to discuss or aspects of a learning exercise they have just lead participants through can often be met with silence, especially if they have just "shut down" (see discussion above) overly active participants. However, the natural tendency is for an instructor to break the silence by answering their own question or by asking the question again in a different way just to fill the dead air time. A better way to break the silence is to let the silence linger. It does not take long for participants, even very reluctant participants, to become uncomfortable with the silence of the group, thereby compelling them to offer a response to the question that was asked.

Accept all input. During leadership courses poor ideas and substandard input to discussions are a reality. But, instructors should not allow that to stop the candid flow of input. Instructors can address obviously substandard input by looking for some merit in those comments or ideas (e.g., the goal of the suggestion rather than the content, or a similar idea that might have worked in another environment than the one being discussed). Instructors can also ask participants to think through ways flawed suggestions might be implemented in order to draw out potentially ill fated ramifications of those ideas. Instructors should remember that candor opens up the free flow of ideas and comments – both good and bad.

Engaging Participants in Facilitating Each Other's Learning

The Feedback Mill: Implementing regular feedback and coaching. The benefits of feedback and coaching are numerous. Regular feedback has been found to increase individual performance, productivity, and job satisfaction (Yu,

2007). Feedback facilitates the implementation of organizational change (Rock & Donde, 2008) because feedback helps set behavioral expectations. Feedback and coaching are intentional leader behaviors that aid individual development and team building. Feedback also facilitates the creation of a shared organizational vision, strategy and values (Catton, 2008).

The benefits of regular feedback and coaching can also be brought into the leadership classroom, with a simple and very effective exercise we refer to as The Feedback Mill. This process of feedback and coaching is most effectively introduced into a leadership classroom several weeks into a term in order for the group to have some time to observe each others' class participation behaviors. The format for the feedback exercise is as follows.

First, including the instructor, have course participants get up from their seats and divide into pairs of their own choosing. Second, once all participants are paired up, inform the group that they will be conducting a <u>private discussion</u> with their partner only to exchange feedback between each other about their course participation and adherence to the ground rules. Be sure to let everyone know that they will <u>not be asked</u> to share their discussion with the larger group. Third, provide participants with a balanced format for their feedback exchange by requiring that they use the lead in phrases: "You are effective because…" and "You would be even more effective if…" At this point these phrases should be written on the board or projected in the front of the room. These are key lead in phrases as they require participants to balance their observations about each other, providing both positive and negative constructive comments. Fourth, ask participants to focus the content of their feedback exchanges on how their classmates are performing in the course activities and discussions (e.g., they can use the ground rules that have been set for the course as a basis for their comments) and have them begin. Fifth, once the pairs have had a chance to exchange feedback with each other for about three to four minutes then ask the participants to find another partner and repeat the exchange with their new partner. Have the participants move through about four or five pairings in about 20 minutes.

Implementing The Feedback Mill technique in a classroom inevitably creates a great deal of discomfort. Because of this initial level of discomfort, it is important for the instructor to debrief the first session. Once the participants have moved through four or five pairings, the instructor should have everyone return to their seats and ask them a series of questions about the exercise. For example: Were the discussions with your partners useful and, if so, why? Which of the two constructive comments (the positive or negative) were easier for you to make to your partners as the provider of feedback? Which of the two comments were you most interested in hearing from your partners as the receiver of feedback?

Conducting this exercise periodically throughout the course (e.g., three to four times during a term) establishes regular points for candid one to one exchange between participants. Course participants will often seem uncomfortable when the exercise is first introduced because they are staring candor directly in the face. But, invariably people are hungry for more feedback after the first exchange. Participants who are paired with the instructor are typically even more uncomfortable, so instructors need to reassure each person with whom they exchange feedback that there will be no retribution for offering open and honest comments about the instructor's course participation and performance.

Conclusion

Just as bringing candor into a company requires candid leadership, brining candor into the leadership classroom requires candid instruction. Leadership instructors who expect candid participation from their students must be willing to incorporate candor into how they conduct their courses. Course leaders can build candor into their instruction by encouraging and facilitating open and honest discussion among all participants. Leadership instructors should also establish on-going performance feedback exchanges between participants in their courses. Moreover, instructors should themselves actively participate in discussions and feedback exchanges with course participants. Doing so will model the candid behavior instructors expect from their participants. As Welch (2005) points out, "to get candor you reward it, praise it, and talk about it…most of all you yourself demonstrate it" (p. 32).

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Biographies

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J. Lee Whittington is a Professor at the University of Dallas' Graduate School of Management. J. Lee's industry experience includes over twenty-five years in manufacturing and distribution. He has held management positions in marketing, logistics, and general management. His consulting experience includes engagements with Nokia, FedEx-Kinko's, RadioShack, Reynolds Metals, Ball Container, Camp Fire Boys and Girls, US Army Corps of Engineers, and Siemens ElectroCom. His research has been published in the *Leadership Quarterly, Journal of Management, Academy of Management Review, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, Journal of Management Spirituality and Religion, and Journal of Managerial Issues.*