

'Nice' Is a Four-Letter Word at Companies Practicing Radical Candor

More workplaces endorse the practice of blunt, direct criticism—aka front-stabbing—to improve performance and communication



SOME COMPANIES ARE PUSHING WORKERS TO DROP THE POLITE WORKPLACE VENER AND SPEAK FRANKLY TO EACH OTHER NO MATTER WHAT. THE PRACTICE IS REFERRED TO AS 'RADICAL CANDOR,' A 'MOKITA' OR 'FRONT-STABBING.' *Illustration: Rob Shepperson*

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Has the office become too nice? Some bosses think so.

Companies from advertising firm Deutsch Inc. to hedge fund Bridgewater Associates are pushing workers to drop the polite workplace veneer and speak frankly to each other no matter what. The practice is referred to at some companies as "radical candor," a "mokita" or "front-stabbing."

Not surprisingly, though, some people aren't as comfortable with brutal candor as others.

Kendall Hawkins, senior manager of talent at Kalypso, a Beachwood, Ohio, consulting firm, says the company's recently launched "culture of candor" campaign helped employees stop trying to be nice all the time and start speaking up about sub-par work or work-life balance issues. The phrase "culture of candor" has become "a safe word," Ms. Hawkins says, that employees can invoke to make their criticism land more softly, yet some remain scared to be vocal and truthful, she says. "It's still a challenge."

Should "nice" be a four-letter word in the office? WSJ's Rachel Feintzeig joins Lunch Break and explains how some companies are encouraging more honest communications between workers. Photo: Getty

At the Canadian offices of staffing firm [Randstad Holding](#) NV, leaders placed a new focus on candor because they thought workers weren't having honest conversations. Wendy Finlason Seymour, a Randstad talent-management executive, says more employees are speaking their mind, but one manager reported the unvarnished feedback "cut me to the bone." Still, Ms. Finlason Seymour says, the open dialogue was a "gift." "It's not there to destroy," she says but acknowledges, "Sometimes the truth can hurt."

Bruised egos are better than the alternative—stalled projects, low performers, resentment that festers, proponents of extreme candor say. Yet as annual performance reviews fall by the wayside and [more companies advise managers to cut back on negative feedback](#), candor in the office is hard to come by.

At the New York office of advertising company Deutsch, the roughly 400 employees practice what they call front-stabbing, giving a co-worker a direct, sometimes painful critique of ideas or behavior. People are expected to confront someone they feel is taking a client's strategy in the wrong direction or even copying too many people on emails.

"You have to have a thick skin to work here," says Val DiFebo, chief executive of Deutsch's New York office. That could be an understatement: The company once distributed T-shirts showing a giant scar with stitches over the heart.

Recipients of the critiques are expected to defend themselves or make changes, Ms. DiFebo says. "I think it's actually more big-hearted and caring to be confrontational in that way than going behind someone's back," she says.

Kim Scott, an executive coach and former Google Inc. executive in online sales and operations, is writing a book about radical candor, which she defines as giving criticism while showing genuine concern.

She still remembers the radical candor she experienced at Google, when [Sheryl Sandberg](#), then a Google executive and now [Facebook](#)'s chief operating officer, took her aside and told her she made herself sound unintelligent by saying "um" too much. Ms. Scott says she remains grateful for the feedback.

At the office, Ms. Scott recommends taking a walk with someone when sharing honest feedback, so you are both moving in the same direction. Sitting across from each other at a table can seem more confrontational. She also recommends keeping a few bottles of water in your office. Opening the bottle and taking a sip can give both individuals a chance to pause and calm their emotions.

Even outside the office, she says, people should make sure honest feedback is delivered with loving and intimate gestures that suit the relationship. For example, honest feedback to a child might be

accompanied by a long embrace; criticism of a partner could be capped by a kiss. It's often harder to be candid in personal relationships, Ms. Scott says, because a person tends to feel more empathy toward a partner, parent or child than to a colleague.

But both settings call for honesty, she says. "It's just as important...to hold up a mirror for the people you love as it is for your colleagues at work," she says.

Bridgewater hedge fund founder Ray Dalio wrote a [manifesto](#) and posted it on the firm's website saying his employees have to "evaluate people accurately, not 'kindly,' " if they want to make progress.

Conflict is good for relationships, Mr. Dalio writes. He urges workers not to "depersonalize mistakes." "A common error is to say, 'We didn't handle this well' rather than 'Harry didn't handle this well,'" he writes.

Managers at Randstad's Canada offices learn about "mokitas," or the truths that workers are afraid to say aloud. Employees are encouraged to speak up and share mokitas, and the leader is supposed to listen, or sometimes explain or clarify.

Susan Scott, whose Seattle training company Fierce Inc. worked with Randstad, says the word derives from an expression used in Papua New Guinea to describe "that which everyone knows and no one speaks of." Fierce encourages companies to hold "mokita amnesty days," where people can share fears and gripes without fear of retribution.

Ms. Finlason Seymour introduced mokita training at Randstad after noting that bosses seemed reluctant to have unpleasant conversations with employees for fear of upsetting them. Employees who were late or unproductive weren't often admonished, and rainmakers who weren't working well with others weren't criticized, she said.

Employees exchanged feedback in meetings, and prodded people who were silent to share their views—sometimes using one of the beach balls placed strategically around the office. Someone might pass the beach ball to a person and say, "I'd love to hear about your stripe on the beach ball." Employees who didn't change their behavior after getting feedback were dismissed or left, she said.

The focus on open communication helped new employees ramp up faster and spurred veteran workers to raise their efforts, Ms. Finlason Seymour says. "Mokita Mojito" happy hours are planned for next year. "Let's have drinks. Bring a mokita to the table and we'll give you a mojito, and let's be real," Ms. Finlason Seymour says.