



The Candor Quick-Start Guide

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CANDOR DEFINED

Candor is the practice of **stating your perspective openly and respectfully in real time—and inviting others to do the same**. When leaders and teams model candor in their interactions, they not only make better decisions, they model higher standards of trust, collaboration, and inclusion. Candor enriches the felt sense of psychological safety among members of a team or organization, which according to research is a key driver of high performance and employee engagement. No wonder: by establishing an open and respectful “container” for even difficult conversations, candor enables more people to engage skillfully, surfacing more ideas and welcoming diverse points of view and driving higher quality decisions more quickly.

STATING YOUR PERSPECTIVE OPENLY means that your words are aligned with your thinking; you speak up and say what you mean. People sometimes think of straight talk as blunt or harsh, but at its best this kind of candor is objective, honest, and advances the conversation.

STATING YOUR PERSPECTIVE RESPECTFULLY requires you to be authentic yet skillful. There are many different ways to say what’s on your mind. You may think “that’s a dumb idea,” but saying it that way may have consequences you don’t intend. State your point of view in a way that others can hear it and you’re proud to have your words represent you, now and in the future.

COMMUNICATING IN REAL TIME is about contributing your ideas, thoughts, reactions, and feedback in the moments when they most count. Your contributions can enrich the conversation and outcome if offered in the moment. If you withhold or wait, the group misses out on your perspective.

INVITING OTHERS TO DO THE SAME means to actively welcome others into the conversation and encouraging sincere (dissenting) reactions to your ideas, opinions, and proposals. Listen openly to others’ perspectives and confirm they feel respected and understood *before* responding with your point of view.

BENEFITS OF CANDOR

To You

- Your ideas get heard and inform the decisions your team/colleagues make.
- You worry less about the things you *wish* you had said.
- You learn by being open to others' ideas.
- Open communication fosters productive, high-trust work relationships.
- Research (from Gallup) shows that candor contributes to higher levels of job satisfaction.

To The Teams You're On

- Everyone's best thinking is included in the discussion and decisions your team makes.
- Full and candid participation in the team's process results in richer commitment during implementation.
- Candor promotes inclusion and openness, two criteria of high-performing teams.
- Candor prevents false consensus and potentially bad decisions that might result from conflict avoidance.
- Meetings are more effective because teams engage in and invite constructive dissent. Open and authentic discussions in these meetings accelerate problem resolution and improve the quality of decision-making.

To The Organization

Candor drives organizational excellence in the following ways:

- It helps you model courage, curiosity, and collaboration by listening non-defensively and speaking up when it counts.
- It enhances respect by creating an environment where people listen to and learn from diverse points of view.
- It promotes fast decisions by getting to the root cause of work problems so you solve them the first time. It helps teams be flexible by being open to multiple points of view and adapting as necessary.

CANDOR CHECKLIST FOR INDIVIDUALS

SPEAK UP

- Be transparent. Speak clearly and neutrally about the issues.
- Give specific examples that support your point of view.
- Be concise. Get to the point quickly.

SPEAK PROFESSIONALLY AND RESPECTFULLY

- Control the emotionality of your words, gestures, and tone of voice.
- When responding, refrain from criticizing or telling the other person that they are wrong.
- Search for others' real needs and issues that are underneath their emotional statements.

INVITE AND EXPLORE OTHERS' POINTS OF VIEW

- Build trust by listening to the other's point of view, even when you disagree with it or it upsets you.
- Ask clarifying questions to understand different perspectives and the rationale behind them.
- Work to understand feedback you're given, even when it's poorly delivered or, in your estimation, incorrect.
- Seek constructive conflict. Be open to diverse ideas by encouraging reactions to what you've said.

COMMUNICATE YOUR THOUGHTS AND REACTIONS IN REAL TIME

- Challenge proposals and offer dissenting perspectives before decisions are made.
- If you feel internal conflict, speak up so that the group can grapple with the issue at a deeper level.
- Preface your comments to prepare others for what's to come (e.g., "I have a different point of view...").

PERSONAL CANDOR ASSESSMENT

The purpose of this assessment is to help you think about how your behavior aligns with standards for candor. Ask yourself the questions below immediately after a meeting. Notice patterns and trends of your participation over time. If you speak up “some of the time” when you disagree with others, make it a goal to improve to “most of the time.” Based on your responses, you might want to consult the skill suggestions on the following pages.

In your last meeting did you:

	No/ Not Really	Some of the time	All/Most of the time
Speak up when you had something to contribute that you thought others might disagree with?			
Speak up when you disagreed with others?			
Speak respectfully and professionally when expressing dissent?			
Listen openly to ideas different from your own?			

For tips to help you **speak up** when you have something to contribute or when you disagree with others, see pages 5-6.

For tips to help you **speak more respectfully and professionally**, see pages 7-9.

For tips to help you **listen openly to others**, see pages 10-11.

DECIDING TO SPEAK UP

If you're nervous that what you have to say won't be well received (or if you get anxious when speaking up to begin with) it is hard to get the words to come out of your mouth. People often imagine the worst-case scenario will happen once they do: they'll be shot down, embarrassed, offend someone, be perceived as incompetent or as a troublemaker, etc. Rather than risk these outcomes (which feel real), they withhold their ideas and opinions. They play it safe, but in so doing they deprive their colleagues of their talent.

Those who have a hard time speaking up often want to feel confident that their words will be well received *before* they speak. That rarely happens in challenging conversations. Things always seem worse the moment before you speak up. But once you do, how often does the worst-case scenarios happen? Probably rarely if ever. The consequences we imagine are far worse than the actual consequences we experience.

The real challenge is to overcome the internal obstacles that prevent words from flowing. Here are some tips to help do that:

- **Disconnect “feeling comfortable” with speaking up.** People unconsciously connect feelings and actions in their minds. People who are significantly overweight are often coached to disconnect the feeling of hunger from the act of eating; they train themselves to eat at prescribed portions at prescribed times. They learn to be hungry and not eat. Similarly, try training yourself to speak up even if you're uncomfortable when you do so.
- **Consider the “best case” scenarios to balance the worst-case scenario.** We automatically think of the bad things that might happen to us if we speak up. But what about the good? Maybe your idea will take the team in a new direction. Maybe what you say represents the feelings of others in the group and they appreciate your candor. Then there's the “likely scenario.” Maybe your idea isn't the best or worst but one of many that gets considered along the way to a team's decision. Creating this balance can defuse some of the stress you feel before you speak.
- **Find other ways to hear your voice in the team.** The more you participate in the team, the easier it becomes to speak up. Find a way to contribute that feels lower risk to you. Ask questions of others. Summarize areas of agreement and disagreement. Offer your relevant experience (versus your opinion) in support of a team member's point of view. The more you and your team hears your voice in the conversation, the easier it becomes to speak up when it feels hard and uncomfortable to do so.

- **Ask someone you trust on your team to give you feedback.** Let that person know that you are trying to find ways of contributing constructively and that you'd like to know how your efforts are impacting the group. Let them know as specifically as you can what you're working on. After the meeting, ask for their impressions—what you did well and what you could do differently in the future. If you ask for their feedback, **DO NOT ARGUE OR GET DEFENSIVE WHEN THEY GIVE IT TO YOU.** Take notes, say thank you, and work on those behaviors at the next meeting. Change takes time, but having a coach will help speed your development.
- **Don't take responsibility for other people's reactions.** We often stop ourselves from speaking because we're worried about how others will react. This actually does a great disservice to others as well as ourselves. We don't say hard things that may help them be better because we don't want to hurt their feelings. And so they don't get better. Manage your half of the relationship and let others manage theirs. Say what you need to say *respectfully*. Then allow people to have their reactions, and use your listening skills to hear, honor, and learn from their reactions.
- **It's not making a mess but cleaning it up that counts.** People often think that once they say what's on their mind, the consequences will be lasting. If, for instance, you offend someone, it's easy to think that you've eroded trust or damaged that relationship permanently. But communication is a process that unfolds over multiple interactions. If you say something that didn't come out as you intended or if it is misunderstood, you have options. You can clarify what you meant. You can apologize. You can try stating your message a different way. Your speaking isn't the end of the conversation. It's your beginning. So if it doesn't come out right or has unintended consequences, you have multiple opportunities to clean things up.

HOW TO SAY WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY PROFESSIONALLY AND RESPECTFULLY

Some people have no problem with the choice to speak up; their issue is how to speak in ways that are respectful as well as authentic. People who fall into this category may think it's best to "call 'em like they see 'em;" to do otherwise is to censor themselves. Others may speak before they've thought how to express their ideas professionally. Either way, the goal of candor isn't to censor these contributors, but it is to help them edit their remarks before they speak so that the value of their ideas can be heard and discussed.

There are two different ways you speak in meetings. You may be *leading* a discussion or you may be *responding* to what others say. Here are some tips to help you foster candor in both scenarios.

When You're Leading

When you're leading the conversation you have the benefit of planning the key points of what you want to say. When it comes to candor, this is a great advantage: you have time to prepare your thoughts and think through options for interaction. Keep in mind the following tips:

- **State your thoughts and ideas as proposals.** People are often taught to speak forcefully when advocating their point of view. If it is overdone, however, your colleagues may feel you're pushing too hard. When pushed, they may push back. By stating your idea as a recommendation, suggestion or proposal for their consideration, you're creating openness for others to react, build on, support, critique, or otherwise participate in a discussion about it.
- **Pause or check in early and often.** Speak in "bite-sized pieces" and then ask for reactions. The benefit of speaking this way is that it keeps the speaker from turning his/her proposal into a monologue that people tune out. It also allows the team to discuss your proposal in manageable pieces, gaining full understanding before moving on.
- **Invite reactions and dissent.** A great way to foster candor is to ask for other people's reactions and opinions. While many people don't want to invite dissenting views, your colleagues have them whether you ask for them or not. It's better to get them on the table where you can deal with them directly, in the present, not as problems that arise in the future.

You might preface your comments by letting people you want people to test your thinking/ideas after you've presented it. You can also wait until the end and then ask for questions of clarity, followed by reactions and dissenting points of view.

When You're Responding

The challenge in responding to what others have said is to be able to disagree without being disagreeable. Here are some ways to help you do that:

- **First, be curious about their reasoning.** When we disagree with someone or don't like what that person has said, we automatically become judgmental. That blocks curiosity which results in a polarized and unproductive conversation.

As an alternative, inquire into others' thinking first. Inquiring *before* you react not only gives you insight into their thinking, it requires them to justify their position(s). You may find common ground in this discussion, and you will get more clarity that can inform your response. And if you have a strong reaction, it can buy you time so your words are more thoughtful and less loaded when you do respond.

- **Disclose versus criticize.** There are different ways of speaking your truth. It's easy to overstate it; "that will never work" may be what you're thinking, but it isn't a constructive way to voice your dissent. Neither is the understated version of the same concern: "are you sure that's a good idea?" By couching your words this way, others may not even hear the point of view that is the heart of your question.

To express your disagreement with candor, make your dissent a disclosure. Disclosures are statements about you. They promote openness because you're making your internal reactions public to the other person or the group. And by talking about yourself, there isn't the same edge that can trigger defensiveness in others. People may still have defensive reactions, but the emotions will be lower and easier to manage. See "the first words out of your mouth" for examples of how to disclose your disagreement with candor.

- **Invite other reactions and perspectives.** Another way to promote constructive dissent is to ask others to comment on what's being said. If you're having a reaction, it's likely that others may have different opinions as well. Inviting a broader conversation about team members' reactions can help the group surface the range of reactions on the team. One way of phrasing this is: "It would help me to hear what others think about this proposal before moving on. Can we do a quick check in to see where we are at as a group?"

The First Words Out of Your Mouth

When voicing your dissent with candor, the first words out of your mouth can be the most important: if you start off with candor, it's easier to stay on a constructive track. If your words trigger defensiveness in others, it takes more time for you, the other person, and the team to get back on track.

To start well, consider the following “sentence starters:”

- “I’ve got an alternative to [Jim’s] approach I’d like to propose...”
- “A concern I have is...”
- “What I like about the plan we’re discussing is...A challenge I foresee is...”

Notice that in all these examples the sentences begin with “I.” As noted above, prefacing your comments with a disclosure sets the tone for candor and invites “I” reactions from others.

LISTENING OPENLY WHEN OTHERS HAVE A STRONG NEED TO TALK

Listening when emotions and stakes are high can be especially difficult. It's also when listening is most important. In these circumstances listening can help:

- Clarify differing points of view
- De-escalate non-constructive emotions people are experiencing
- Help others speak with candor
- Maintain/restore constructive team dynamics.

Listening is defined as *demonstrating you understand the thoughts and feelings a speaker is communicating from his/her frame of reference*. That's easier said than done. Listening this way requires discipline, curiosity, and skill.

- You need to be **disciplined** so you can remain engaged in the conversation rather than react. When we get hijacked by our emotions we listen to our own self-talk (usually critical comments about the other person or his/her position) instead of the speaker.
- You need to be **curious** about the other person's goals and their feelings about what's at stake when they decide to speak up. Ask yourself, "what's the real issue and why does it matter?" to that person.
- You need **skill** to restate or "reflect" the speaker's issue in a genuine and respectful way.

The First Words Out of Your Mouth When You're Listening

As when speaking with candor, you'll be more effective if you start well. The difference is that when you're speaking you start with "I." When listening to someone else's point of view, start with "you" so you stay in that person's frame of reference.

To reflect a person's *thoughts*, try these sentence-starters:

"You think..."

"As you see it..."

If emotions are high, you can use the following formula to include both thoughts and feelings:

"You feel...because..."

"Sounds like you're...about..."

Here are a few examples of what listening sounds like when emotions are high:

- “You’re frustrated with our decision-making process. From your point of view, the window of opportunity is closing while we try to figure out what to do.”
- “You’re irritated because the project “specs” keep changing but our deadline doesn’t change with it.”
- “You’re angry because you think I’m opposing your idea for personal reasons.”

Once the other person has confirmed that this represents his/her point of view, you can respond with your own point of view—with candor.

Listening in this way is hard to do, but the pay-offs are huge—for you, your colleagues, and your team.