



Radical Candor¹

Introduction

In this document, we discuss a shortcoming that results in lots of time and energy being wasted. One that ends up hampering the growth and happiness of those involved. One that causes them to miss out on the opportunity to develop truly rewarding relationships.

Failing to be radically candid.

For an example of *failing to be radically candid*, consider the following: When Anita asks John to share his opinion about Tariq's contribution, John doesn't hesitate to express it accurately. Yet, when John provides his feedback to Tariq directly, he amplifies the good and downplays the bad. Therefore, Tariq ends up with an inaccurate impression of John's opinion. As we explain below, unless John corrects his approach, in the long term it's likely to have profound negative consequences for himself, Tariq, and their organization.

Such a scenario must be avoided at Bending Spoons. It's understandable if a Spooner finds being consistently radically candid uncomfortable. That's a common reaction—after all, radical candor is rarely encouraged in society.

But in a world-class team environment, radical candor is embraced as a necessary component of increasing trust, cohesion, and—ultimately—overall performance.² Put simply, **mastering radical candor is like acquiring a superpower. That's what we're aiming for at Bending Spoons.**

We hope this document will prompt more Spooners to be radically candid, *including when it feels uncomfortable*. We also hope it will prompt more Spooners to demand that others be radically candid more often—both with them and with other colleagues.

What it means for a Spooner to be radically candid

Assuming they've formed their opinion rationally and thoughtfully, then **a Spooner needs to accurately portray what they *really* think—with empathy, respect, and supportiveness, but without sugarcoating**

¹ We borrowed the title from Kim Scott's *Radical Candor*, which is worth reading.

² Ray Dalio's *Principles* discusses the topic particularly well, and is recommended.



it—and trust the recipient to be emotionally mature and resilient enough to take this input in the constructive spirit that it's intended.

Furthermore, **radical candor necessitates offering feedback as soon as possible after concluding that doing so is necessary.** A Spooner shouldn't defer the issue by waiting until a formal feedback session or the yearly impactfulness assessment comes around.

Additionally, **a Spooner must promote the importance of radical candor within the company:** When they recognize that a colleague is reluctant to share potentially valuable feedback, the Spooner has a responsibility to implore them to take the bull by the horns and speak up.

It's rarely easy to be radically candid. A Spooner may dread the prospect of confronting a dear colleague (and friend) about their weaknesses, particularly when the Spooner knows just how hard the colleague is trying. And it's perhaps most challenging of all when the recipient is an unusually difficult colleague to deal with. One who, when offered constructive feedback, gets palpably frustrated and holds a grudge. Or one whose immediate concern upon receiving the feedback is to go on the defensive, trying to justify their prior actions and deflect the points made rather than taking the feedback on with gratitude.

But in the wise words of Mae West, the famous actress: "Those who get offended easily should be offended more often." The target of radical candor isn't to offend anyone, but the underlying sentiment of this quote holds true: **A Spooner mustn't hold back from telling it like they see it just because of somebody's sensibilities.** They mustn't let one person's immaturity or fragility dictate the interaction.

And **if the recipient's response is defensive or destructively emotional, then it's also the Spooner's duty to tell them that they're being uninspiring, unhelpful, and draining to deal with.**

What it means to take feedback constructively

Taking feedback constructively doesn't mean necessarily agreeing with all of it—or even any of it. However, **too often a Spooner's unconscious bias is to protect their ego.** As such, they direct the majority of their efforts toward deftly undermining the feedback rather than embracing the underlying points being raised.

The instinct to protect the ego shouldn't be underestimated. **Even when a Spooner feels that being open to criticism is one of their strengths, they're probably still far from ideal in this regard.**

Taking feedback constructively means the following:



- **Providing the feedback-giver with the best possible experience, while being genuine.** As established, it can be nerve-wracking for a Spooner to be radically candid with a colleague. Therefore, if we're to truly foster an environment where each Spooner's first instinct is to be radically candid, then providing the feedback-giver with the best possible experience, while being genuine, is paramount. To do so, the recipient should abide by the following guidelines:
 - They should listen carefully, taking notes if relevant (note-taking also suppresses the instinct to jump in with counterpoints).
 - They should ask clarifying, non-leading questions.
 - They should express their gratitude and invite the feedback-giver to continue providing them with input—including tough input—in the future.
 - If they agree with the input, they should go on to formulate a resolution of improvement and share it with the feedback-giver. It doesn't have to be long and complex—a few thoughtful bullet points will typically suffice.
 - They should avoid going dark and leaving the feedback-giver guessing what they're thinking. Simply saying, "I appreciate you giving me this feedback. I want to take a bit of time to process it. Can I send you a calendar invitation for next week to talk it through together?" goes a long way toward keeping things amicable and collaborative, and it provides some peace of mind to the feedback-giver.
 - If relevant, they should feel free to share with the feedback-giver that they're experiencing some negative emotions, such as disappointment, frustration, or sadness—but only in a constructive, non-accusatory way. For example, expressing frustration by acting passive-aggressively is a big no-go. Instead, explaining that they perceive frustration is mounting and discussing together why that's the case can be a healing, relationship-building exercise for both parties.
 - They should be careful not to guilt-trip the feedback-giver with an excessive display of dismay, along the lines of, "You're right. I suck at this job. I keep messing everything up—everyone must hate working with me." In such a case, the feedback-giver will feel immense pressure to soften or recant the feedback, which is unhelpful.



- **Truly internalizing the feedback, assuming to be unconsciously biased against it.** The following guidelines can aid the recipient in this regard:
 - They should postpone forming an opinion on the validity of the feedback until after they're done collecting information on it (such as through the aforementioned clarifying, non-leading questions).
 - They should postpone forming an opinion on the feedback while they're feeling emotionally heightened about it.
 - When they do feel calm enough to analyze it, they should assume that their ego will put up its defenses—a giveaway is when the recipient finds themselves looking for examples that undermine the feedback rather than ones that validate it. Hence, they should always assume by default that there's a degree of truth to the feedback, and analyze it through that lens.
 - Even if—after following this process—they end up disagreeing with most of the feedback, they should still acknowledge that the feedback-giver believed it to be accurate, which might warrant some corrective action nonetheless.

Regardless of whether a Spooner has yet to master the art of taking feedback constructively, **they should ask their colleagues to share radically candid feedback with them continually.** The more a Spooner is exposed to radical candor, the quicker they'll become accustomed to receiving feedback without resistance.

The benefits of radical candor

Being radically candid is a matter of respect toward one another. It's the antidote to gossip—and we despise gossip at our company. More generally, it's part of living the Bending Spoons values fully. Therefore, a Spooner should be determined to embrace it regardless of its other benefits.

Furthermore, **the additional, long-term benefits of being radically candid are often enormous, so the case in favor is even more compelling.** To clarify these benefits, let's assess the consequences of radical candor in two alternative scenarios, as follows:

- **The recipient takes the feedback constructively.** Then, the more accurate the feedback is, the more helpful it is to the recipient as they strive to learn from it. Moreover, experiencing and dealing



with their fragility and negative emotions is the best way to grow a thicker skin and a more serene, rational mind. Lastly—and perhaps most importantly—thanks to the demonstration of the feedback-giver’s honesty and the recipient’s openness to tough input, the level of mutual trust and admiration increases, paving the way for a much more valuable relationship. Indeed, once the feedback-giver has demonstrated they’ll speak up even when it’s uncomfortable to do so, the recipient will know that the feedback-giver won’t withhold their honest opinion or, worse still, talk behind their back. They’ll also know that a compliment coming from the feedback-giver is sincere. And after seeing that the recipient can take criticism with humility and grace, the feedback-giver will feel more at ease being authentic with them going forward. Bending Spoons benefits too, as collaboration improves alongside individual effectiveness.

- **The recipient doesn’t take the feedback constructively.** Then, it's best to discover this early. Even if the feedback doesn’t directly trigger growth, the increased awareness still helps the recipient form reasonable expectations and make the best decisions for themselves. If they reject the input and persevere in acting immaturely or defensively, then it’s unlikely that they’ll ever be successful in an environment that’s increasingly rich in radical candor, as is the case at Bending Spoons. For both the feedback-giver as an individual and Bending Spoons as a company, investing in a relationship with a closed-minded, high-maintenance colleague is probably not worth it.

This isn’t an attempt to point fingers or shame anyone. **Most of us struggle to take feedback constructively at some point—yet, we must do all we can to overcome this weakness.** When recalling a situation from the earlier days of Bending Spoons, [Luca Ferrari](#) writes:

*Thankfully, [Luca Querella](#) had the courage to throw a metaphorical glass of cold water in my face when I needed it: He was brutally honest when he told me that my resistance to the input of others was making me a real chore to work with. He said that a compromise wasn’t the solution: **I was 100% of the problem and I needed to fix it right away.***

That day, thanks to his willingness to initiate a difficult conversation, my trust in and admiration for LQ skyrocketed. Many years later, it’s still probably the most painful piece of feedback I’ve ever received. And, as a direct consequence, it’s undoubtedly the most valuable.

The (flawed) case against radical candor

It’s easy to find a reason not to be radically candid with a colleague—but it’s much harder to find one that stands up to scrutiny. Indeed, **failing to be radically candid will almost always, in time, harm everyone involved.**



Consider the following reasons why a Spooner may avoid being radically candid, each of which has major flaws:

- **Avoiding an uncomfortable situation.** Telling an inconvenient truth tends to lead to a tough conversation and, occasionally, an awkward coexistence. However, undertaking such a challenge head-on is the best way to achieve higher levels of emotional maturity and resilience, such that similar situations will be less daunting in the future. Moreover, causing more friction in the short term typically results in much less friction in the long term—either the relationship improves or the colleague, having been unable to cope with the situation, leaves the company.
- **Hurting the recipient's feelings.** While the truth can sometimes sting, keeping someone in the dark is guaranteed to hinder their chances of unlocking maximum growth and happiness. If an individual isn't doing a good job at something but they're made fully aware of it, they can seek new ways of improving at that particular task or they can choose to redirect their efforts toward tasks for which they're better suited. Moreover, even if they're not told directly about their shortcomings, they'll eventually see they're not progressing as fast as expected. Then, having to be the one to piece together why that is, they'll feel let down by their closest colleagues' unwillingness to raise a flag, compounding the disappointment.
- **Doubting the recipient's willingness or capacity for growth.** The feedback-giver may suspect the recipient won't be interested in acting upon the input. However, it's not the feedback-giver's judgment to make—their duty is to provide the feedback, while it's the recipient's prerogative to reject it if they choose. The feedback-giver may also be of the belief that certain traits, such as ambition, diligence, or reasoning ability, are relatively fixed and unlikely to change. This belief is incorrect—the human capacity for growth, when combined with a strong will and relevant guidance, is truly remarkable. Finally, the rationale described at the previous point applies here too, providing additional reasons for choosing to be radically candid under this scenario.
- **Ruining the relationship.** If the recipient of a Spooner's honest, constructive feedback takes it personally and develops lasting hostility toward the Spooner, then that wasn't a relationship worth protecting in the first place. If—as is typically the case—the recipient appreciates the Spooner's courage in speaking candidly, they'll end up trusting and admiring the Spooner more than before, and the relationship will reach new heights. In any case, an issue that could have been nipped in the bud via radical candor tends to surface sooner or later, and the relationship suffers—sometimes irreparably—as a consequence of the trust lost through the Spooner's reluctance to address it candidly.



- **Keeping the recipient motivated in the short term.** At a time of high intensity, such as when facing an especially heavy workload or a looming deadline, a lead may prefer not to criticize a team member to prevent their motivation from dipping, which could jeopardize the team's short-term success. However, in light of the repercussions laid out above, such a decision almost always ends up being a net negative.
- **Not having a lot of evidence.** There's a widespread misconception that a Spooner should only provide feedback (particularly negative feedback) after they've collected extensive supportive evidence. This is understandable—in most scenarios at Bending Spoons, we prize rigor. However, to do so when it comes to feedback is impractical for the feedback-giver and detrimental to the recipient. First, it substantially increases the burden on the feedback-giver without a major upside for the recipient. Indeed, the recipient is often better positioned to take weakly substantiated feedback and look for situations where it may be applicable—drawing from a sample that's far greater than the one available to the feedback-giver. Second, it can delay, perhaps indefinitely, the delivery of valuable input when the recipient could be benefiting from it immediately. Therefore, a Spooner should provide their feedback as soon as they come up with it, even if it's not backed up by anything robust. Simply, when they deliver it, they should clarify the level of supporting evidence they have.
- **Fearing retaliation.** As they contemplate criticizing a colleague, a Spooner may fear that doing so will harm their own career somehow. For example, they may fear that they'll be perceived as judgmental or lacking loyalty to the team, and assessed less favorably at the next impactfulness assessment. However, history at Bending Spoons proves the feedback-giver's career is likely to *benefit*, rather than suffer, as they commit to being radically candid. Indeed, many of the most successful Spooners have also been paragons of radical candor—including toward their leads—since their earliest days at the company. Here, we tend to trust and admire an individual who, after forming an opinion rationally and thoughtfully, has the courage to share it with the right people in its unvarnished form, including when doing so feels uncomfortable. We appreciate the individual even more if they make their best effort to help improve the issues raised accordingly.
- **Doubting their feedback can be useful.** A Spooner might convince themselves that they're not “qualified” to offer challenging feedback—perhaps because they're new or inexperienced, or the recipient is in a more senior position. Such a Spooner should remember that determining the validity of feedback falls primarily on the recipient, who's generally better positioned to do so. By refraining from sharing their views, the Spooner is hindering the recipient's chances of improving. And even if the latter were to ultimately assess the feedback as invalid, their explanation of why that is would likely be educational to the feedback-giver—making the exchange value-adding overall.



- **Being consistent with previous messaging.** Say that a Spooner hasn't been radically candid with a colleague. Then, if they're to be radically candid with the colleague going forward, there's a point at which they'll have to deviate from what they've been saying all along. Changing position can feel embarrassing, largely because it may imply prior ignorance or deceit. However, it's never good to compound an error—adopting a flawed approach in the past is forgivable, but knowingly persisting with it to avoid embarrassment isn't.

Conclusion

At Bending Spoons, we must always form our opinions rationally and thoughtfully, and take care to be empathetic, respectful, and supportive of one another. But **we must also be radically candid, including—and perhaps especially—when that necessitates ruffling a few feathers.** Most of us will come out stronger and happier on the other side. And working together will be even more fulfilling as a result.