



## Leadership Candor: Simon vs. Oprah

### Are You Too Critical?

*By Connie Dieken*

“What a disgrace it is to me that I should remember your name!” Simon Cowell? No, it’s another wizard of the withering insult, William Shakespeare, in whose time people behaved like American Idol fans and relished nothing more than a rousing public execution. There are few things quite so delicious as clever repartee, but depending on the tone and intention of your criticism, it can improve your organization’s performance or undermine your leadership.



Candor is au courant and this hot topic has two high profile examples whose styles are, like fancy bath towels, his and hers. Simon Cowell and Oprah Winfrey are both advocating honesty but there’s a distinct line between biting criticism and business candor. By grasping the distinction, you ward off mutiny and instead elevate your leadership and become idea rich.

Simon Cowell is a case of candor gone wild. He has managed to alter our sense of boundaries and propriety in the workplace, despite the fact that American Idol is intended to be entertainment. Of course the hopelessly untalented have always been victims of the one-liner, but as the quest for ratings forces Simon’s derision to become ever more personal, his verbal pummeling is dulling our senses, lowering our standards and seeping into our business culture.

Simon-speak may be hip and fun but in most forms of business communication, it is demoralizing and absolutely damaging. Excessive criticism and biting comments leave people deflated and lead to anger, distrust of your authority, guarded conversations and diminished performance. Striving to coax high quality work from employees and peers is crucial to your success, but using ridicule and fear to do it causes people to lock up and withhold information. It results in vague, uncomfortable meetings, cover-your-backside reports tailored to shift blame, and it prevents great ideas from getting on the table. Honest conversations shift from meeting rooms to whispered hallway chatter.

So does that mean candor should be squashed in the business arena? Au contraire. Candor is critical to effective leadership. The trick is the tone. Don’t attempt candor by grandstanding with ruthless attacks. Talk about the approach, not the people. Be very specific in your feedback. Produce a fertile ground by letting ideas breathe. Spread your vision that the goal is to reach the best possible answer, not to fire missiles. A candid culture gets more people in the game and generates speed. More ideas will surface and then get discussed, pulled apart and improved.

Look to Oprah Winfrey for an example of candor done right. Oprah is a natural leader and a master communicator. She recently modeled effective candor by retracting her public endorsement of James Frey's overly embellished book *A Million Little Pieces*. Oprah admitted she made a mistake by backing an autobiography that chronicles in harrowing, graphic, seedy detail, events in Frey's life that never happened. Unlike so many leaders who act untouchable and are afraid to look vulnerable, Oprah apologized for supporting a liar.

By candidly taking responsibility, Oprah communicated the message that no one should be afraid to make and admit a mistake. A good leader stays open to all sides, invites conversation, and establishes respect. Take a page from Oprah. Don't pretend you're bullet proof. Capitalize on errors—articulate the lesson learned, internalize it, share the outcome—and move forward.

The tone that Oprah chose in her second broadcast with Frey was also a successful use of candor. She confronted Frey by accepting her dual responsibility in the matter. "I feel duped," Oprah stated. She did not grandstand with an accusatory "You duped me." Statements such as "you never" or "you always" t back people into corners and trigger defensiveness, not further contributions. Oprah gave Frey an opportunity to explain himself. The fact that he withered under fire was his responsibility, not Oprah's.

The true purpose of business candor is to improve performance--both your performance as a leader and the function of your organization as a whole. Used judiciously, candor encourages contributions and won't contaminate the culture. So create candid leadership. Invite it. Model it. Reward it. Just don't call anyone a muddy rascal. That's so Shakespeare.

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