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SPEAK the UNSPOKEN TRUTH

*Speaking the truth in love . . .*¹

“I have a concern.”

My statement rang in the air for a moment, stopping the meeting.

For years, other board members had allowed the chairman to bully his way on every decision. I was new to the trade. It was my first real job on the East Coast and in this industry. I had never dealt with this type of particular board makeup, and I felt a little out of my league. Certainly, one of the longtime board members would stand up to the man, but they remained silent. It was down to the wire. We were approving the list of nominees for next year’s board members. His name was at the top of the list. He could easily slide back into his role as chairman of the board. In that influential position, he would delay any progress over the next three years.

“Out with it, young buck!” the chairman bellowed. He was a little perturbed that I was slowing the progress of the meeting. He had no idea that my concern was about him, and that I was about to bring up something that would disrupt the meeting and jeopardize his leadership.

Prior to the meeting, I had memorized a verse from the Bible in the book of Job: “I am young in years and you are old; therefore I was shy and afraid to tell you what I think. I thought age should speak, and increased years should teach wisdom. But it is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives them understanding. The abundant in years may not be wise.”² These words gave me confidence, along with the deep impression that it was up to me to help shed light on a dark situation. The emperor had no clothes, and I was the only one willing to speak up.

“Jim, my concern is with one of the names on the ballot.”

“Whose name?”

“Yours.”

It was a record-scratch moment bringing cosmic discomfort. Most of the other board members looked down at their notes and fidgeted while I stated my case. They knew that what I was bringing out into the open needed to be addressed, but everyone was scared of confrontation. This meekness and passivity led to a blatant disregard for procedure during the chairman’s tenure. For instance, the chairman and another board member would make decisions on some of the agenda items before the meeting in order to avoid unwanted discussion. But this was not my greatest frustration.

The way in which he dealt with board decisions outside of the boardroom caused division. If a decision did not go his way during a board meeting, his negative reaction to it in the public realm caused disunity across the wider organization, requiring the issue to be addressed again. It seemed he purposely wanted to stir up muck to make it tough on the other leaders. Interestingly, the chairman sat quietly and listened to all I had to say. It was actually another member of the board, his friend, who jumped to his feet during the discussion and made several unfounded accusations, uncannily against other members of the board, not I. Then he fled the twelve-story building. This rattled everyone and emotions were high. The chair-

man eventually stood up, stated that his intentions had always been honorable, and departed. The rest of us sat there looking at each other. Two were now gone and five were left. And those remaining at the table did not look very happy with me.

What had just happened? How had it come to this?

At first glance, it could appear that I not only ruined the meeting, but I nearly caused the board and the organization it represented to split. I was scolded in private by a third member of the board. He was trying to be a friend to me but explained that I could have gone about things a little more diplomatically. In my opinion, all of the issues I was concerned about were publicly displayed, so I felt they needed to be addressed publicly. But I questioned myself: perhaps there was a better option than the one I chose.

I didn't sleep well for days. I had no appetite. In fact, I had a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was the Christmas season, and I was not in a festive nor spiritually reflective mood.

My speaking up appeared to be a failure. It did not bring unity; it brought temporary disunity. We had to invite a third-party moderator from another organization to work with the board in order for there to be civil discourse and move forward. This was painfully humbling for me.

To make matters worse, the moderator found out it was my birthday, and he made everyone in the room sing "Happy Birthday" to me. Some grimaced through the forced rendition of the usually festive tune. That was a low point for me. Over time, however, I was able to see how speaking up changed not only the board makeup, but the organization and the customers we served.

After deliberating all the issues with the moderator, both the chairman and his friend voluntarily decided not to run again. This allowed us to bring in other well-qualified people to serve on the board and to have a new chairman. Soon, the health of the entire organization drastically improved.

There was a unity and peace among the board members that I had never experienced during the few years I had been serving. We held the first vision retreat for this organization in a decade. Underlying issues were openly brought up and discussed, no longer allowed to fester underneath the surface of conversations causing discord and frustration. The leaders actually looked forward to meetings instead of dreading them. We did not have to guess at what someone was really thinking.

Up until then, meetings had been held in the evenings and were supposed to max out at two hours. However, because of a lack of trust and poor management, the meetings sometimes took four or five hours and were exhausting. Under fresh leadership, the meetings ended much sooner. There was noticeably more agreement than disagreement. Members no longer feared retribution, so they spoke the truth and didn't waste time trying to decipher what people really meant. Candor and trust sped up the meeting process, and ending on time made entire families happier. Board members could now tuck their children into bed when they arrived home.

I also discovered that I had personally grown through the challenge. It was a groundbreaking, character-enhancing moment in my life. I had changed as a result of speaking up. Though for a few days I hated the feelings I experienced after the incident, I did not hate the results. If anything, I had waited too long to have candor. Not speaking up sooner was my sole regret with the entire experience. And, I did eventually visit the two board members at their homes in order to communicate my care and to restore trust.

CANDOR VS. CAMOUFLAGE

I've often thought about that meeting and wondered what might have been the result if I hadn't spoken up. I was battling intense emotions during the hour leading up to my statements about the chair-

man. I knew that certain issues needed to be addressed about his leadership, but I wasn't sure I was the right person to do it. It seemed entirely reasonable to me to wait it out, hoping that someone else would speak up. In fact, I *had* waited it out for several agonizing board meetings, but no one ever spoke up.

The opposite of candor is camouflage, a disguise to cover over the truth instead of exposing it. We use camouflage in the military so we can hide things from the enemy, diverting attention away from what is really there. We use camouflage netting to cover vehicles, anti-aircraft guns, and even generators. The goal is to disguise *everything*. Our tents are green in woodland and tropical environments to blend in with the forest and grass; our vehicles are painted, our uniforms are camouflage, and our face is painted when we run exercises. The goal is to be invisible.

As I sat through multiple meetings, stone silent instead of speaking up about issues, I was camouflaging my true thoughts and emotions. This happens when we don't trust others. Many of us are experts at being invisible. We share a reluctance to speak with candor and prefer camouflage, but candor is necessary. Candor may not only change meetings; it might change entire organizations.

So, what exactly does the word candor mean?

The Latin root of the English word candor is *candēre*, and it means brilliant whiteness, "to shine or glow."³ ("Candle" is derived from it.) The word candor describes something that sheds light on a situation. It means to demonstrate a straightforwardness, sincerity, openness, truthfulness, and frankness. In its simplest form, the two words best used to describe candor to others are forthright honesty. This is the opposite of camouflage.

While it may not be viewed this way today, candor is also defined as a form of kindness; to speak to someone with candor was to give them a gift.⁴ It was actually considered loving to speak the truth to others. Some have also taken it to mean bluntness, and others rude-

ness, but this takes its definition farther than is justified.

Another aspect of speaking with candor is being prepared to own the truths we are speaking. I'm responsible for the truth I am offering right now. I've got to own it. I was told long ago that there are very few "just kiddings," meaning that sometimes candor is passed off as a joke to ease the pain it might inflict on the recipient. We have to be responsible for the truths we share and not camouflage them with the words "just kidding."

As important as knowing what candor is, it is also important to know what candor is not.

THE MYTHS OF CANDOR

Candor does not involve being critical, attacking someone else, or demonizing a person to others. If communicated rightly, you won't offend the person you're talking to. In fact, if you do, you have probably not demonstrated true candor.

To understand what true candor is, let's look at what it isn't. Consider these five myths:

1. You have to be an extrovert to communicate candidly.

Actually, often introverts display true candor more than extroverts because they have internally processed items and deliberately speak truth when the time calls for it. Appropriately speaking up is a sign of emotional maturity, not extroversion.

2. Candor is being brash or rude.

Candor can be delivered in a loving manner.

3. You risk your career when you speak with candor.

In some situations, this may be accurate, such as in toxic environments fueled by narcissistic leaders (see chapters 7 and 8). In many organizations—at least healthy ones—supervisors increase respect for employees when they see they are not too afraid to contrib-

ute constructively. General George C. Marshall courageously used candor in World War I with General John J. Pershing, and again in World War II with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, both times with great results for him and for the country.

4. Candor is all about criticism and being negative.

Although it may sometimes express disagreement, it is most helpful when it brings something positive to the discussion.

5. Candor should only be used rarely.

On the contrary, the more candor the better. It infuses honesty into conversations, so it should flow freely. Speak the unspoken truth and reap the results.

Now that we have looked at what is not factual, we can look at what is actually true about candor.

THE ESSENCE OF CANDOR

What is the essence of true candor? Candor is a gift to others. It means having the courage to speak up when it is necessary. It is about being authentic and honest with others about your true feelings and appropriately disclosing information about yourself or others for the good of those who hear. Having candor allows you to help navigate discussions for a directed outcome.

For supervisors, it is about having an open ear to those you lead and encouraging feedback for the good of the organization. Also, it is about having respect for those around you, and valuing others enough to give them honest feedback. A culture of candor fights against organizational silence and helps teams develop and increase mission effectiveness.

Candor is not gossip. It is not lying. It is not slander. Speaking with candor has a purpose. It means to speak earnestly, honestly, and faithfully, and we can do this only as an outpouring of our internal

character. An aid here is to ask these questions before speaking: is this necessary, is this loving, and is this truthful? Another helpful aid is to remember this acrostic:

Courageous words: *Having the courage to speak up and not giving in to fears about what others might think of you.*

Authenticity: *Telling others what you truly think, not simply what you think they want to hear.*

Navigating discussions: *Being an active participant in the flow of a conversation with candor helps to steer the conversation in a positive direction to obtain certain goals.*

Disclosing self: *Using courageous words and being authentic by allowing others to know what makes you tick.*

Openness to other ideas: *Exchanging ideas in an unintimidating way, especially for the leader who seeks to hear from all sides.*

Respect: *For leaders: soliciting and receiving candor well. For others: providing candor as a way of respecting leadership.*

Some might read the definition of candor above and decide they cannot be a person of candor if it requires those six items because they do not feel very brave or good at navigating discussions, while other people imbue these qualities naturally. Having candor does not require you to change who you are; it simply requires you to understand more about who you actually are, your true self, and letting others see this as well. It is about taking off the masks we all tend to wear and trust that honesty is always the right answer, instead of silent antipathy.

At one point in her career, Sammi could see that her boss was overworked and not trusting the staff to help accomplish the mission for the company. She built up the courage to meet with her supervisor and explain what she was witnessing. Although Sammi was

authentic and showed respect, unfortunately, her candor was not received well, and the interaction damaged her relationship with her boss. She explained that this was a difficult life experience, and since then has second-guessed herself hundreds of times, wondering if she was respectful enough and truly had both her boss's and the company's best interests in mind. Months after her encounter, the board mandated that her boss take an emergency sabbatical so that the company could get back on track. Sammi was still there to assist in the process and felt somewhat vindicated. Though it did not go well at first, she was glad she had stepped up with courage when it was needed to help save the company.

In essence, candor flows from our character. The type of person we are—our inward life—is what enables us to speak with true candor because candor is a virtue of the heart. Patience, kindness, and a strong sense of right and wrong are all character traits that, when rightly used (as with Sammi in the story above), could help save organizations from months of frustration. Unfortunately, however, our society has short-circuited this in conversational dynamics. People are quick to say things or post items on social media before the information is censored by their moral compass. This can cause a lot of relationship damage.

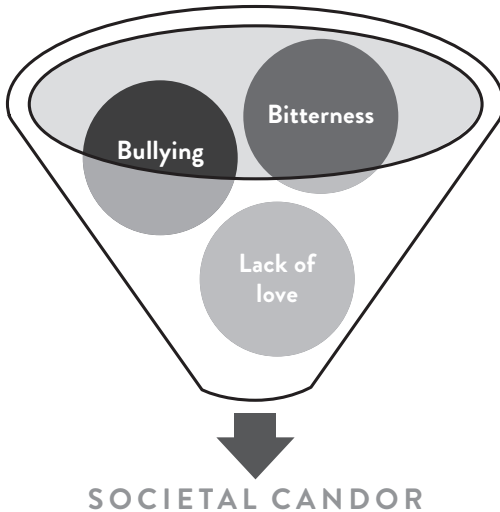
The reason candor is so misunderstood is because societal candor has become diseased. On any given day, the rhetoric flowing from our political leaders and entertainment icons provides what many might describe as candor, but is actually intolerant dogma—and no one likes a bully. True candor is never used as a disguise for personal gain. Crassness and name-calling has nothing to do with expressing candor. Candor without character is like a cancer; it can poison a conversation.

Our candor is either tethered to our character or to our ego, and

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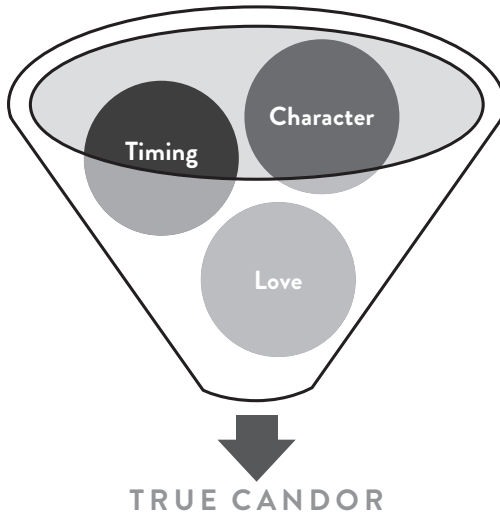
we should pursue the former. In contrast, societal candor is often anchored in pride.

The following diagram illustrates the components of societal candor.



Some might say, *Well, the truth hurts*. However, it is usually not the truth that hurts but the way the truth is packaged that hurts. Truth delivered in a sarcastic or mean-spirited way possesses barbs that inflict pain; sometimes the sole intention is to hurt the recipient. Lashing out with societal candor because of pride or anger is a type of “front-stabbing” that destabilizes relationships. Conversely, when the truth is presented from a person of character, at an appropriate time and with love, it will be more readily received.

The following illustration shows the proper elements of true candor.



True candor is possible for all of us to achieve. But it will take some work. To shed light on this challenge, I have found the Bible to be a source of wisdom and relevant answers.

THE FOUR KEYS OF CANDOR

Many stories of candor in the Old Testament are associated with prophets.⁵ In the New Testament, helpful verses related to the topic of candor are shared in the book of Ephesians. The apostle Paul encourages us to speak the truth in love and speak only the kind of words that are good for building up others, depending on their needs at that moment, so the words will benefit and give grace to the people who hear.⁶

These verses illustrate how to utilize candor. Candor, at its essence, is to speak truth, as a source of encouragement and according to the need of the moment, in order to give grace to the hearers.

Thus, an ancient letter written nearly two thousand years ago to a small congregation outlines for us a wonderful definition. Here, in summary, are the four keys to candor that will be used as a foundation for the rest of the book:

The Four Keys

1. Speak the unspoken truth
2. With love
3. When needed
4. To benefit others

As with the candor myths, it is important to understand what these four keys are *not* saying. We do not speak up in order to benefit ourselves. We should never speak up if it is to blow our own horn and to remind others of our accomplishments. That kind of candor is prideful. Also, the “with love” key cannot be sacrificed on the altar of justice. As we seek to “win our case,” we must always think of the value and human dignity of those we confront. Sometimes it is easy to impose our own agenda on another person out of our desire to see them do well. This isn’t actually loving.

• • •
**We must always
think of the value and
human dignity of
those we confront.**
• • •

The third key is likewise critical. We are not to continually speak up, but only when necessary. We are not to be the conversation police. We are not to correct every wrong thing spoken. In attempting to do so, our need to ensure every fact, stat, and detail is thoroughly communicated takes precedence over loving the people with whom we are speaking. There is a fine line here. This means that having candor is not simply speaking up but understanding when it’s appropriate and most helpful to do so.

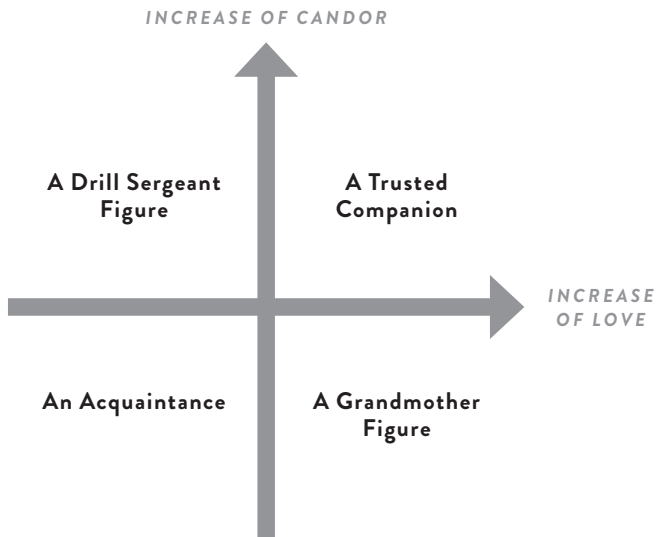
Finally, what does it mean to give grace to those who hear? Essentially, this means to speak up in order to benefit others. Instead of showing malice toward others, we are to freely communicate love to them. This isn’t easy and, depending on the setting, it might seem countercultural, but to love others and give grace is at the core of candor. We are to exhibit love and humility by tolerating obstinate people, though we are not to sit back and allow them to say things

that are untrue or hurting the discussion. When there is a buffoon present, like a bee in the room you *have* to deal with it.

Anyone can state an opinion, but to speak the truth in love (key #2) is the quality that differentiates true candor. There is a deep-rooted connection between candor and love that is essential to understanding the importance of candor. Candor is always connected to something internally. Without love, candor becomes rooted in pride, fear, cynicism, or coldness—all enemies of candor (see the next chapter). With love, candor takes its rightful place in conversations.

Instead of an iron fist in a velvet glove, think of an open handshake. There is no hidden agenda or lethal force at work. In fact, it is the opposite. The lifesaving virtue of love is the operative force.

The following diagram represents the importance of fully possessing the qualities of both candor and love.



With an increase of love on the horizontal axis and an increase of candor on the vertical axis, we can derive four patterns of how people interact with each other. These four patterns of interaction are like

four personality types, yet they are snapshots of relationships and do not necessarily mean that people will always perform within the same quadrant.

Here are the four patterns:

A. **Bottom left quadrant.** When a relationship displays low candor and low love, you typically have what I describe as an *Acquaintance* figure. These are the everyday people we meet: the server at Starbucks, the mechanic who rotates your tires, the people you may know in your community who are friendly but not friends. Though we should display kindness and compassion to all whom we meet, in the context of normal business-type transactions and social settings, there are limited opportunities for candor. Take time now to jot down the names of one or two people who are in this position in your life:

B. **Top left quadrant.** When a relationship displays high candor and low love, you typically have the *Drill Sergeant* figure. These are usually the people whose authority you may be under but may not be very close to, such as a sports coach or one of the executives at work. While people in these roles will naturally be candid with you, this leadership style is more transactional, directive, and autocratic. The higher level of authority a person has in your life, the more candor they will exhibit toward you—and with more immediacy. Write down the names of one or two people who are in this position in your life:

C. **Bottom right quadrant.** With low candor and high love, you are likely interacting with the *Grandmother* figure. These are the people

in your life who love you unconditionally and may sugarcoat everything. This type could be representative of close friends or relatives who have a hard time telling you what they truly think, but they find it easy to express their love. Inherent in this type of relationship are those with codependent tendencies. Write down the names of one or two people who are in this position in your life:

D. Top right quadrant. Finally, when a relationship displays high candor and high love, this is the *Trusted Companion*. These are the people you can count on to be completely honest with you, yet provide feedback in a loving, nonjudgmental way. Like the little child in “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” they have nothing to lose with being completely honest, yet they share an unquestionable degree of love and trust with you. Write down the names of one or two people who are in this position in your life:

The relationship candor has with love is vital, yet some cultures have a particularly hard time adapting candor into the context of their relationships. Some people feel deeply discriminated against, exploited, and/or alienated. Some have a peculiar level of bitterness, helplessness, or hopelessness they have to work through on a daily basis. It’s possible a lack of candor and love has exacerbated these issues.

What does it mean to speak the unspoken truth? It means I will share what is going on in me, not just what I want you to hear. When you are candid with someone you drop the barriers of your life. When you speak with candor it means you are creating intimacy. People are typically scared of intimacy. That is why we lie. Candor reverses this tendency. Speaking the unspoken truth also inherently means that there is definitely a tangible truth out there that most

people can agree on. What you bring to the table is your perspective on that truth, and it is for the benefit of everyone in the room as long as it uses the four keys: speak up, with love, when needed, to benefit others. We particularly have to be careful of our motives and what drives us to speak. That is the focus of the next chapter.

* * *

At the conclusion of most chapters in this book, I offer a summary, candor strategies, questions, and an opportunity to make a commitment.

SUMMARY

Think of the story “The Emperor’s New Clothes” as an illustration of human dynamics. Some leaders have not created a culture in which they will receive candid feedback. Employees often feel that if they speak the truth at work, they will be punished for it. Many times, however, the opposite occurs. When people speak with true candor (with love, when needed, in order to help), it is often received well, and the employee garners respect rather than being condemned.

Candor Strategies

1. Speak to people in private, if possible, especially if the subject matter is sensitive in nature and can be brokered without a group discussion.
2. Make it a point to engage the difficult topics. This is counterintuitive and seems dangerous. However, sometimes you have to go out on a limb because that is where the fruit is.
3. Go for gold. Speak about the most important issue that needs to be addressed. Sometimes the smaller items evaporate when the bigger ones are dealt with.

Reflection Questions

Write down the four keys of candor below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Answer the following questions with the four keys in mind:

1. What is one area of your life where you need more candor?
2. How can you speak the unspoken truth in a loving way?
3. When would be the best time to speak up?
4. How would an open discussion benefit the relationship?
5. What is the difference between societal candor and true candor?

Please mark the following items true or false. Your answers to these statements can help you see more clearly how present candor is in your life now.

T / F In relationships I am open and honest and ask for feedback whenever possible.

T / F I provide an adequate amount of self-disclosure in my relationships.

T / F I do not hesitate to provide input when I hear something that does not sound quite right.

T / F I sometimes use camouflage to disguise what I am truly thinking and feeling.

CANDOR COMMITMENT

I commit to speaking the unspoken truth, with love, when needed, to benefit others!