Ferrazzi

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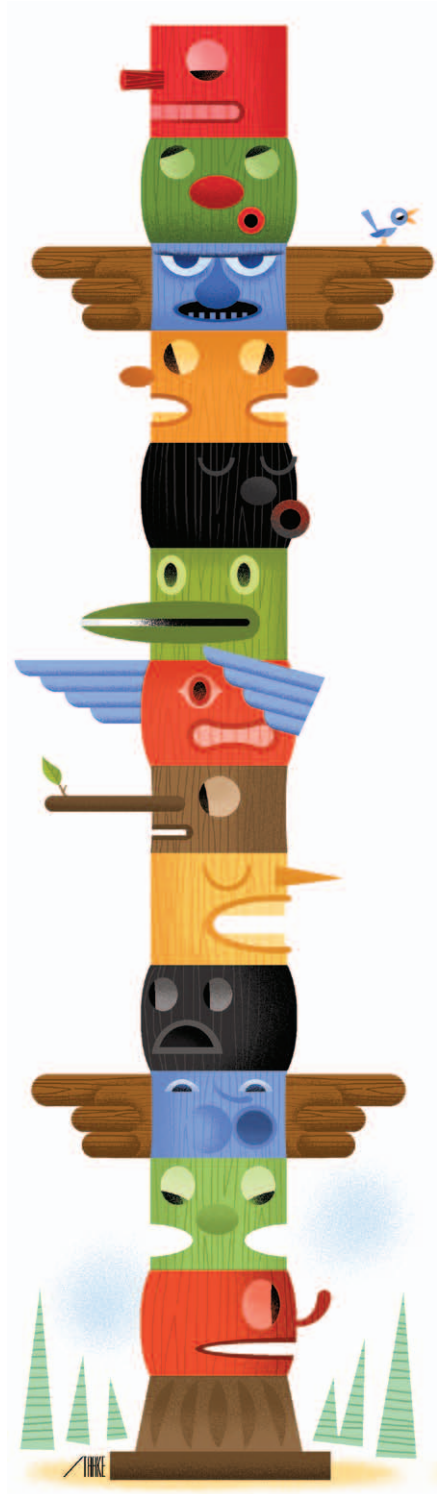
Candor, Criticism, Teamwork

We've all been there: trapped in pointless meetings where participants are afraid to speak honestly. We twiddle our thumbs through diplomatic PowerPoint presentations, waiting for the meeting to end so that the real conversations—which usually happen in private—can begin.

The desire to avoid conflict is understandable, but it's one of the most debilitating factors in organizational life. Lack of candor contributes to longer cycle times, slow decision making, and unnecessarily iterative discussions. A too-polite veneer often signals an overly politicized workplace: Colleagues who are afraid to speak honestly to people's faces do it behind their backs. This behavior exacts a price.

My team interviewed executives at six top banks to gauge their teams' level of candor. We found that the teams that scored the lowest on candor saw the poorest financial returns among those banks during the recent global economic crisis. In contrast, groups that communicated candidly about risky securities, lending practices, and other potential problems were able to preserve shareholder value.

Indeed, in our research at more than 50 large companies over the past three years, we identified "observable candor" as the behavior that best predicts high-performing teams. But asking people to be candid in the absence of a supportive organizational culture is a challenge. We believe that forthrightness should not just be encouraged but required. We've developed three techniques to help coworkers at all levels interact more directly:



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1. Break meetings into smaller groups. When five or more people meet, those with confidence and commanding voices will dominate. Even strong speakers may find it hard to take risks in front of a larger audience. One solution is to break a big meeting up into groups of two or three to brainstorm for a few minutes, and then have a spokesperson from each group report back to the entire team. Smaller groups promote higher degrees of risk taking and increase the odds that more voices will be heard.

2. Designate a "Yoda." We all remember the wise Jedi Master from *Star Wars*. In our research, we asked for volunteers or picked one or two people in the room to be the official advocates of candor. A Yoda's job is to notice and speak up when something is being left unsaid. (The Yoda may also call out anyone whose criticism is unconstructive or disrespectful.) If the Yoda has not spoken up for a period of time, the leader should interrupt the meeting and ask him if the group is missing anything.

3. Teach "caring criticism." Negative feedback can hurt, but usually it's a gift aimed at helping the recipient improve performance or avoid mistakes. We should deliver and receive it that way. Use phrases like "I might suggest" and "Think about this." When receiving candid feedback, thank the person who offered it and make clear the points on which you agree. We've found that if you think of the person giving you honest feedback as generous, rather than critical, you become less defensive and more open to changing your behavior.

True collaboration is impossible when people don't trust one another to speak with candor. Solving problems requires that team members be unafraid to ask questions or propose wrong answers. Risk management is another area that relies almost completely on people's admitting their mistakes. It takes work to create a candid environment supported by respectful, honest relationships, but it's a challenge every leader should embrace.

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