

# RADICAL CANDOR: BE A KICK ASS BOSS WITHOUT LOSING YOUR HUMANITY

BY KIM SCOTT

Last year, I started my review of *Brave New Work* by saying, “The year 2020 has been one for the books.” Unfortunately, 2021 seems to be well on its way to making an even more unique mark in history. As leaders, we have the responsibility to be creative, innovative, and dependable, taking the curve balls as they fly, while leading a team of human beings with their own unique personal and professional lives. ‘Radical candor’, as explained in great detail by Kim Scott in her book, is a tool that every leader can use to hold their team accountable while also caring for them personally.

Kim Scott led multiple teams at Google before being hired by Apple to create a course on leadership and management. She has also served as an executive coach for CEOs of companies such as Dropbox and Twitter. With all of her experience, she wrote this book, full of amazing ideas and tangible recommendations, to improve your leadership style. The book has so many awesome concepts, but I would like to focus on the main concepts of what ‘radical candor’ is and then the concepts of ‘rock stars’ and ‘super stars’.

First, she poses to questions to evaluate how well you are managing your people:

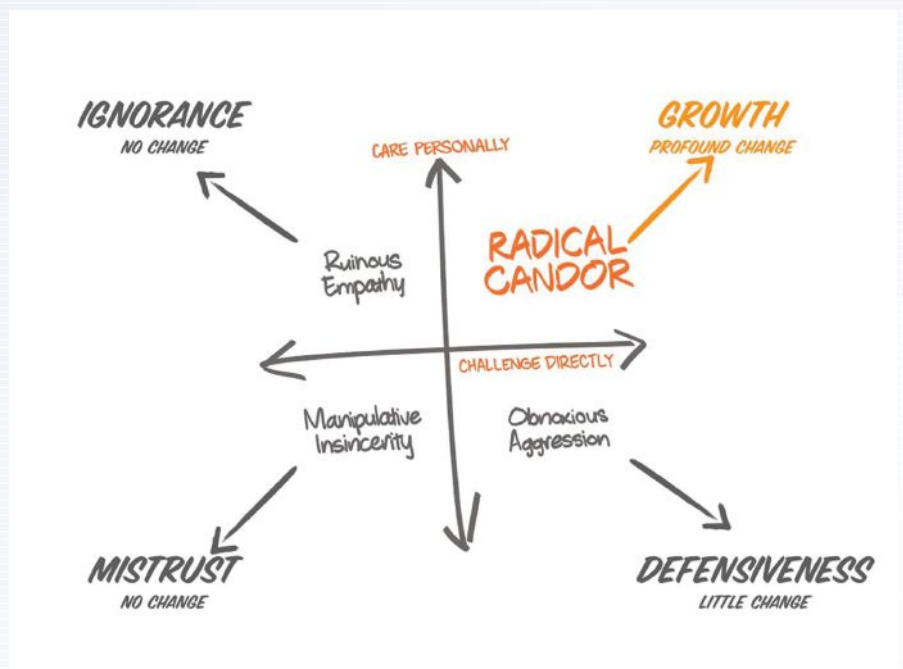
- How well did you challenge them directly?
- How much did you care about them personally?

Challenging directly involves telling people when their work needs to be better, and when it is great, or giving the tough feedback, sometimes even firing someone. Caring personally means ‘giving a damn’ as Scott puts it. It means sharing more than just your professional self. If you do either of these poorly then you find yourself in one of the less impactful quadrants. She breaks it down like this (image 1):

1. **Manipulative Insincerity:** The leader is bad at challenging people and does not care about them. These leaders are the ones that will tell

someone they did a nice job, when they really did a terrible job, just to get them out of their face. As you can imagine, this will result in reinforcing bad performance for the employee and the organization. Most employees will see through this and you will lose their trust which results in no change.

2. **Ruinous Empathy:** The leader is great at caring personally about people, but lacks the ability to challenge them directly. As the quadrant name suggests, this will ruin both you as a leader and your subordinates. People need to know what they need to work on or your organization simply won’t improve. This leads to ignorance and no change.
3. **Obnoxious Aggression.** The leader is great at challenging directly, but lacks the empathy to care personally. Basically, you are a jerk. What is interesting is that Scott describes this as the second most successful form of feedback. This



is because these leaders actually give feedback, which is essential for effective leadership; however, being obnoxiously aggressive leads to defensiveness and less change than if you also cared about your subordinates.

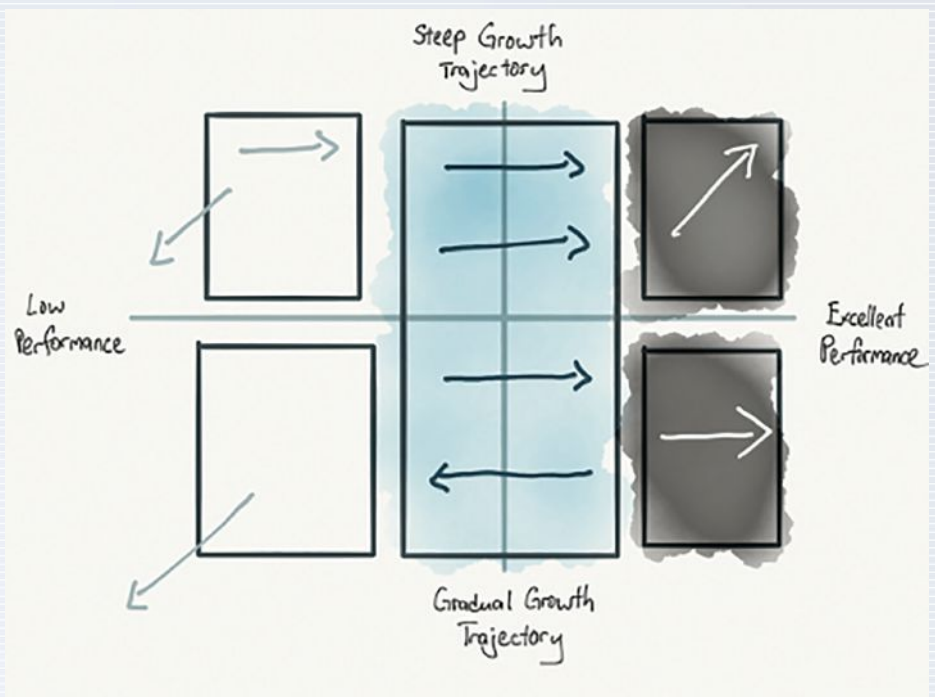
4. **Radical Candor:** The leader challenges employees directly because they care personally about the employee and want them to perform to their potential. This is what the entire book is basically about and can result in growth for the employee and organization with big change. She gives GREAT ideas on how to do this. For example, if you are someone who doesn't do well with subordinates who cry. She recommends keeping bottles of water in your office and when the employee starts to cry offer a bottle of water and excuse yourself to go get some tissues for the employee. This gives them time to get themselves together. Of course, if you don't mind the tears, that is fine too.

Scott recommends that you use Radical Candor with praise and criticism. She recommends starting with praise for subordinates and then offering them the opportunity to give radically candid criticism to you. If you have a team that is hesitant to give you criticism, she recommends the following:

1. Don't let people off the hook when they try to refuse. Use silence to get them to say something.
2. Reward them for their criticism. Give them praise and actually do something to address what they have told you.
3. This can be done in one to two minute conversations between meetings, patients, etc.

As you can imagine, using Radical Candor takes practice and it is okay if you find yourself in some of the other quadrants from time to time. Most of us have a quadrant that we tend to lean towards. It is good to know so that you know what to work on as you try to improve. One of the concepts that really resonated with me was the concept of rock stars and superstars.

The leaders described in these quadrants are largely the focus of the book, but Scott also describes that your subordinates and teammates are one of two types of people. They are either rock stars who are on a slower growth trajectory or they are super stars who are on a steep growth trajectory. This may be a little



confusing as we often think of rock stars and super stars as the same, but I love how she describes the rock stars as the backbone of your organization. These are the people who are happy to come to work and do their job. They do it well and meet your expectations, but they have no interest in quick promotions, doing extra work, trying to climb the ladder, etc. She describes superstars as the employees with a steep growth and career trajectory. These are the 'go getters' who want the challenge and to climb the ladder. She describes how to intentionally use their talents while you have them so you can support their movement upwards. My favorite part is that both rock stars and super stars are still expected to have excellent performance (see image 2) and that it is okay if your subordinates are a rock star sometimes and a super star at other times. Life happens and sometimes you need to be able to be flexible. She goes on to discuss how promoting a rock star can be detrimental. I have used these concepts with resident advisees. I explain the concepts and ask how they identify. Then based on their answer, I know how much to try and push them. Again, I expect excellent performance from all of them, but it is okay if some don't want the extra publications, responsibilities, and duties. She describes the conversations she has with new employees in detail and how to use that conversation to build trust and to evaluate if they are interested in being a rock star or superstar.

These concepts are just a few of the many that Kim Scott explains in the book *Radical Candor*. She really outlines amazing tools to allow you to care personally for subordinates and challenge them in a meaningful way. I highly recommend reading it to gather even more insights. I plan on rereading every couple of years just to remind myself of her great ideas!