


COMMENTARY

Radical candor: Creating a feedback culture based on learner care and empowerment

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Kath et al. (2021) skillfully leveraged transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006) to promote individualized consideration for undergraduate student feedback. We are sympathetic to this approach and affirm their recommendation for personalized feedback by presenting a medium to large feedback innovation that is emerging in the context of Aotearoa, New Zealand. We are interested in feedback processes that serve to build the capabilities and the well-being of our learners. Well-articulated feedback can cater to the diversity of learners and a variety of needs. Drawing on an Indigenous (Māori) concept of mana, we describe two applications that are relevant to the feedback-giving process, namely, manaakitanga (to give care) and whakamana (to empower).

Our revised approach to providing feedback in undergraduate courses stems from our disenchantment with students' general disregard for traditional feedback. We offer radical candor as a method of creating a feedback culture that promotes learner interest and empowerment. We also believe that feedback that is respectful and learner-oriented should be tailored toward individual needs. Reading and reflecting on feedback is a key aspect of student learning. However, a constant refrain from our colleagues is that most students do not read feedback or reflect on it and, instead, focus exclusively on the letter grade. A specific frustration for undergraduate instructors is that some students request an assessment remark without reflecting on the original feedback. We have also worked on teaching teams that have a proclivity for the feedback sandwich as a mode of providing learner feedback. This formulaic approach requires the instructor to package critical information between positive comments about some aspect of the learner's work. Research has shown the feedback sandwich to be problematic because it dilutes the critical message (Richardson, 2004). Overemphasizing the positive aspects of performance can lead feedback recipients to overlook corrective comments and thus draw overly affirmative conclusions (Shute, 2008). As instructors, we ought to provide our learners with feedback that emanates from a place of mutual respect as opposed to a patronizing place. Our goal is to promote a feedback culture based on frankness and respect minus insincere flattery. The remainder of this commentary explains how we provide undergraduate learners with performance feedback while simultaneously showing care and concern for their well-being.

Māori are the Indigenous people of Aotearoa, New Zealand. Although there is an obligation on the educational institutions to protect, promote, and embed mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) in the curriculum, this rarely occurs outside of Indigenous-led departments and programs and is often absent in pedagogy or content relating to organizational behavior (OB). Here we draw on the Māori concept of mana for two applications that are relevant to feeding back to undergraduate students, manaakitanga and whakamana. We then connect this to the practice of radical candor in the provision of feedback to undergraduate students.

Mana, manaakitanga, and whakamana

Mana is an Indigenous (Māori) concept that is multilayered and complex. Here we define mana as a spiritual authority and power that exists within each individual. In traditional Māori society, the preservation and enhancement of mana was key to guiding interpersonal interactions. Although individuals are born with mana that can vary according to birth status, mana can also be built through positive actions, such as taking care of others (Dell et al., 2018).

Two applications of the word mana that are relevant to this commentary include manaakitanga (to give care) and whakamana (to empower) (Buissink et al., 2017). Manaakitanga derives from the root word mana and refers to the giving and taking of care in the form of respect, kindness, and generosity. To manaaki others is to enhance the mana of both giver and receiver. In education, this extends to caring for learners, creating safe spaces, and sharing knowledge in ways that cares for both their development and well-being. Whakamana as a verb is translated to mean empower. This is about uplifting and enhancing the mana that is inherent in the individual. For learners, it applies to the respect for and consideration of the unique and special qualities of each individual.

Radical candor

Radical candor as a practice occurs at the intersection of challenging directly and caring personally (Scott, 2018). When an instructor provides a direct critique of a learner's performance while simultaneously showing care and concern for both their well-being and future performance, they are being radically candid. To simplify, radically candid feedback is both kind and empowering. To be considered *caring personally*, the instructor's feedback must be driven by common human decency. An instructor may only teach a student once throughout their entire undergraduate experience, but the student is more likely to remember and reflect on feedback that is centered on their development. Thus, in providing feedback that is personally caring, the instructor develops positive relationships with learners that permit difficult conversations. The instructor provides feedback that is not overwhelming and is centered on the needs and success of the learner.

Feedback that *challenges directly* is specific, humble, and timely. An instructor who specifies what is good and why, what is poor and why, and where a learner should look for help creates an environment conducive to learning. An instructor who expresses humility toward learners by explaining how they have understood the learner's work and evaluated it creates an atmosphere of openness where learners can correct misperceptions. Last, instructors that provide feedback in a timely fashion allow learners to make quicker and hopefully stronger connections between their work and the feedback. Timely feedback is formative and allows learners to adjust subsequent assessments.

Aligned with Kath et al's (2021) theme of really getting to know students, we believe that this can be achieved through radical candor when providing learner feedback. Getting to know learners through feedback conversations that both manaaki and whakamana them, will create a culture where they are more open to critique and development. By modeling and implementing radical candor, learners will learn to receive feedback and appreciate it as a bespoke evaluation of their work product and not an appraisal of who they are as an individual. Giving and receiving radical candor also has a societal benefit. It prepares learners for post university life as citizens that are comfortable with open and frank dialogue.

Radical candor in an undergraduate organizational behavior course

In 2018, the first author trialed radical candor in an undergraduate course in OB. Radical candor advocates for honest feedback even when it is uncomfortable. Consequently, preparation is

crucial. Research demonstrates that critical or negative feedback can cause defensiveness, preventing a person from hearing important or corrective information (Taylor & Bright, 2011). Thus, as a tactic to overcome feedback defensiveness, the first author held a mini workshop (20 minutes) in the class meeting prior to returning the assessments. In the workshop, the purpose and utility of critical feedback was discussed. To model the practice of receiving, reflecting, and responding to feedback, the first author drew on excerpts of critical feedback that he had received for a journal manuscript that was in the review process. This can be an uncomfortable experience for the instructor because it publicly displays their shortcomings in a domain where they claim expertise, and it can be even more challenging if the feedback was unnecessarily caustic. However, it demonstrates to learners that even for those with high educational attainment and years of academic experience, feedback is part of professional development, and continuous learning and growth necessitates a lifetime of professional critique. This activity also demonstrates to learners the time and care that are taken with each assessment to provide critical feedback. Each point instructors make is made with individualized consideration for them as developing learners. A guide with our recommendations on how to provide radically candid feedback can be found in the appendix.

Reflections on radical candor and recommendations

The OB course was delivered in the evening (6–9 pm), which meant that it attracted older, employed students who may have had experience with radical candor in other settings. Feedback received from students in the OB course suggests that they appreciated radical candor and they were surprised by the instructor's willingness to share the criticism that he received in his work. Traditional undergraduates may find radical candor confronting, and it would behoove the instructor to assess student readiness for it. We believe a mini workshop or video tutorial explaining the purpose of feedback would support their readiness.

Moving forward, we suggest two further refinements of a radical candor approach for providing feedback. First, questions evaluating radical candor should be included in the learners' evaluations of teaching. For an initiative as fundamental as radical candor, it would benefit the instructor to have some information on how it was received. Learners should be surveyed on how they feel (affect) about radical candor and how useful (utility) they think it is. We hypothesize that learners will rate utility higher than affect. We think learners, like most other people, struggle with separating a critique of their work from criticism of themselves as individuals. However, the purpose of our approach is to build student capacity and comfort with radically candid feedback. Second, we think points should be allocated to a *second score*. In a second score, learners can earn an additional 5%–10% of marks toward their overall grade if they write a reflection of what they learned from the feedback. Learners can express their views on the feedback they agreed or disagreed with, why or why not, and what they will do differently to improve future performance. Again, the purpose of the second score will be to build a development culture by rewarding it.

Organizational behavior education provides numerous opportunities to engage in radically candid feedback beyond summative assessments. In-class discussions and team and individual activities all provide opportunities to encourage the giving and receiving of *personally caring yet directly challenging* feedback. In suggesting this innovation as a mode of giving feedback, we acknowledge that this tool may not be suitable for every course. Each instructor will have to decide whether the learners are ready for radically candid feedback. Thus, it may not be appropriate for lower-level courses where learners' intellectual curiosity is still being developed and they are not quite prepared to be challenged. It may also be impracticable to use radical candor for a large class given the demands on the instructor's resources. We suggest that radical candor be considered for use in upper-level courses where instructors can spend more time thinking and curating feedback for fewer learners who are also psychologically prepared to receive it.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, we are interested in feedback processes that serve to build the capabilities and the well-being of our students. Our choice to try radical candor was born out of frustration with skirting around critical issues through feedback sandwich techniques and a desire to recognize the inherent uniqueness and potential in every learner. Thus, we have proposed a feedback approach that tries to acknowledge who learners are and engage them where they are. We believe that in efforts to manaaki and whakamana learners, radical candor provides a useful feedback approach for learners that are ready for it.

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Appendix: Learner feedback guide

1. The tone of feedback should be conversational yet frank. Learners should be referred to by name and feedback tailored to their performance.
2. It should be unmistakably clear that the sole intention of the feedback is to improve future performance.
3. A strong emphasis should be placed on issues that have a significant effect (positive/negative) on the quality of the work. This can be further separated into major and minor issues.
4. AVOID the feedback sandwich at all costs. The learner should be clear about the strengths and weaknesses of their work without unnecessary puffery.
5. Specific problems within the assessment. These include
 - a. inappropriate language
 - b. biased statements
 - c. overgeneralizations
 - d. improper use or interpretation of literature
 - e. significant typographical errors and omissions
6. Given the growing size of international enrollments, sensitivity to learners who are nonnative writers of English is paramount. In our feedback, nonnative writers of English are strongly encouraged to make use of university-provided resources. Links to online assistance are also provided.
7. Feedback should be provided as soon as it is reasonably possible so that learners can adapt it for future assessments.

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