Changing Your Rules Of Belonging: Candour

There are lots of important dimensions of culture, but few have such a profound impact as candour – the extent to which people say what they really think.

The idea of trying to increase candour in a team scares a lot of people. They worry that if they encourage people to say what they really think, they will end up with team members who are rude or disrespectful. Given that our brains can't tell the difference between social and physical pain, and are trying to help us avoid both, the prospect of conflict or disrespect is something we usually try to avoid – often to an almost desperate degree.

However, the ability of a group to respectfully share what they are really thinking, especially when they disagree, is one of the major hallmarks of a high-performing team and a healthy, productive culture. The key is to make this a safe thing to do; you need to provide your team with psychological safety. People need to feel that they will not be punished for having an opinion that is different to the majority or for questioning the status quo – otherwise they will clam up in front of their colleagues and keep their contrary opinions to themselves. They will often say 'yes' to a request in a meeting but then fail to follow through and do the thing they said they would do. This can seriously slow everyone down.

If you're the leader of the group, you have a critical role to play here. If you express a strong view too early in a discussion, the power differential between you and the rest of the group amplifies your view and makes it far less likely that anyone will disagree in front of you. Doing so would typically risk their degree of belonging in the group, or has the potential to do so, which is enough to make people avoid it. You need to be particularly mindful to compensate for that power differential.

This also means never punishing people for saying what they really think. You only need to do that once to stop anyone in your team from being candid again.

You should frequently and consistently thank people for being candid, rather than punishing them. The kind of punishment I mean is anything that would cause social pain – even the most subtle indication that a person is thought less of for sharing their view. This could be something as small as a sigh, or a raised eyebrow – this behaviour from the leader is particularly powerful, but it's also important to watch out for this behaviour from others in the group. You will find that your

team will be hypervigilant to these signals. The challenge is that most people are unaware of when they are communicating these signals, so asking for the help of the group on identifying this behaviour is a smart thing to do.

Here's a typical example of shifting from a current to a desired rule of belonging around candour.

The rule we have now: We earn belonging around here by being polite and 'nice'.

The impact of this rule: We don't say what we really think. In meetings we nod and smile and agree to do things, then we get outside the room and do something different. We talk about each other outside the room. That means we can't trust that our colleagues have our backs or will do what they say they will do, and we must constantly protect ourselves and double-check that things are getting done. It significantly slows us down.

The problem: our strategy requires us to move faster than we are. To move faster, we must have confidence that people will do what they say they'll do. If our people don't start telling it like it is, there's no way we can be successful.

The goal: to increase candour.

The rule we want: We earn belonging around here by being courageously and respectfully candid.

If you want to change the culture of your team, you have to change the rules of belonging.

Fiona Robertson is a culture transformation speaker, facilitator and executive coach who helps senior leaders create cultures that people really want to belong to.

She can be contacted via fionarobertson.com, fiona@fionarobertson.com or +61 (0)474 031 546.

Fiona ROBERTSON