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How *Radical Candor* Helps You Become a Better Boss: Q&A with Jennifer Keller and Leigh Davis

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December 14, 2018

Radical Candor, as described by the author, Kim Scott, in the book by the same name, is a direct, insightful approach on how better communication with your team helps that team reach its desired result, whatever that may be. We sat down with Baker Donelson's Chief Operating Officer, Jennifer Keller, and Alabama Power's Vice President of Customer Services, Leigh Davis, for their own insight into how they have used – or not used – radical candor in their climbs up the corporate ladder. Their life experiences and takeaways from the book provide lessons for us all.

What is radical candor and its role in law firms?

Jennifer Keller: The axis graphic in the book more clearly summarizes what "radical candor" is, but generally, it is the intersection of caring personally and challenging directly. I think of radical candor as doing what needs to be done and saying what needs to be said. At the beginning of the book, Scott describes what a "good boss" does and frames up what a boss or leader is. Basically, bosses are responsible for results, achieved by guiding people on a team. Leaders need to give guidance (or feedback), build a team (getting people you have assembled to work together), and achieve results.

Describe a time when you didn't give appropriate feedback but wish you had?

Leigh Davis: A time that jumps out to me is when I recently joined a new team and began building relationships. When that happens, it can be hard to know when you should begin giving feedback that is more direct. You have to build relationships before you can really do that effectively. When you don't give feedback in the moment, then you have to go back and cleanup to get the results that you are after. That can become disruptive. There isn't a green light/red light that tells you when to start giving feedback with a new team, but you have to be deliberate about it. Also, you should give feedback all the time; that will help you develop a relationship with the members of your team along the way.

Jennifer Keller: I loved that the book gave us a glimpse into companies like Google and Apple, and it laid bare a lot of their issues and showed that we all share the same common struggles. It also showed very successful businesses doing things in incredibly different ways. I found that fascinating. In thinking about my history of giving feedback both as a department chair and now as COO, I recalled a scenario where I was a pretty new shareholder working with an associate who did really good work. The feedback that we gave was about the quality of the work product, and not that the associate simply didn't work hard enough, didn't apply enough effort or exert enough hours in the day toward their career. Fast forward, the feedback the person received was "what a great brief, good job on that argument, etc." Everyone avoided the elephant in the room – hours were below par, effort was below par. We were not direct enough with the associate. When that associate became more senior and the habits remained, in the career run up they fell behind. At that point, we had a very direct discussion – and it was hard to take. They were further along in their career, and it became a much tougher conversation. I think that it's possible that you can challenge directly and care personally, and the individual may not change. But, at least you had the conversation. There is also a great example in the book of the "ruinous empathy" style of giving feedback, where an owner decided to cut the dog's tail off a little at a time,

causing more pain for the dog than just doing it all at once. It's better to have the candid conversation so you help guide the individual to a desired result, which is your job as a boss.

Tell us about great leaders you have worked for and what made them exceptional.

Jennifer Keller: Bosses who I have worked for who got great results were not necessarily the nicest or sweetest people that I've worked for, but they were clear in their desired outcome. Every boss who I've tried to emulate, I've had hard conversations with – ones that challenged both of us. I'm also personal friends with the bosses who I've found to be great, so we have personal relationships that continued.

Leigh Davis: I've had 15 bosses in a 23-year career. One boss I think of invested time and attention to helping me find the resources in other people that I needed to grow, and also set me up to find other coaches to help me move up in my company. I had another boss who found ways to challenge me and to cultivate challenges that would help me grow as a manager. Yet another boss truly focused on investing in his people. I had routine and regular coaching on a daily basis. These are examples of a right focus at a right time in someone's career. What people need as an entry-level employee, or someone headed toward management, are often different but very necessary.

What are the ways that you show your team that you care personally?

Leigh Davis: You have to spend time with your folks, and allow them to get to know you and let you get to know them. The more that you can humanize yourself in getting to know your employees, the better your relationships will be.

Jennifer Keller: There is a team of people I work with all the time, the practice group leaders and office managing shareholders; I deal with them on a daily basis. I do think spending time with your team is critical. I spend a lot of time on the phone. I'm on the phone nine hours a day. It's important for you to hear their voice, for them to hear your voice. You have to communicate, and not just over email. I am a fairly open book as well; most everyone knows me well – what I like and what I don't. That may at some juncture create problems for me, but I don't think so. That has helped foster genuine conversations about where people are in their careers and what's going on with them. One thing I have noticed looking at the broader Firm, is that the hardest part of this job is that you know everyone, so you know everyone's hurts. In an organization our size, there are a lot of people in pain at any given time. If you care personally, it hurts. That makes you a better leader, but you need to be prepared for that.

Are there questions that you ask your employees that you think provide good guidance about your performance?

Jennifer Keller: I probably did a better job on asking for feedback when I was a department chair. I had a routine question, something like, "Is there something I can do that you think would benefit you or the progress of the department materially?" Scott's question in the book, "Is there anything that I could do or stop doing that would make it easier to work with me?" is a great way to get feedback. The 360 review that we use is a way to get feedback, but there are still some that fail to participate. We ask a lot of questions about trust and communication in the review, but the feedback needs to be close in time. It's essential to elicit feedback as you are leading – at the beginning or end of a meeting, depending on the person. Many people will respond, "Everything is fine." They don't trust that their feedback will matter. So, you have to show people that you are using the feedback that they provide. If you review some form of feedback and decide to address it, tell the employees that you are working on it. It will encourage others, who may have been reluctant, to give feedback during the next year's review.

Leigh Davis: And when you give feedback, offer resources to help. Listen and figure out how to take each issue, and respond to your employees when they offer feedback to you. Have an in-person conversation.

How do you have important career conversations with your employees?

Jennifer Keller: Attorneys need to take ownership of their own careers, and part of that is teeing up important conversations with people. All of the Firm's departments have goals and plans. People want to understand how they fit into these goals and plans. We ask attorneys whether they have had conversations with their department chairs or practice group leaders about their fit into the department's goals, and often, they haven't. I spend time encouraging these leaders to start these conversations, so that they can continue into the career conversations that attorneys need for their development.

Developing a knack for radically candid conversations can be difficult, and requires us to be more intentional in our conversations with each other. Scott's next book will focus on how the principles of *Radical Candor* can be applied to gender dynamics in the workplace. Scott recently asserted, "[i]f gender politics makes it difficult for men to be radically candid with women, gender bias makes it difficult for women to be radically candid with both men and women." See *the entire article* [here](#). Nonetheless, a more mindful approach to how we communicate with our teams – as a boss or an employee – can help us all move forward.