

THE RADICAL CANDOR PODCAST

A show about how to kick ass at work without losing your humanity

Season 3, Episode 4: Gauge the Feedback You're Giving & Getting

Jason Rosoff: Welcome to the Radical Candor podcast. I'm Jason Rosoff CEO and co-founder of Radical Candor.

Amy Sandler: And I'm Amy Sandler, your host for the Radical Candor podcast. Today. We're talking about how to gauge feedback. In other words, how does the feedback that you give land for the other person? One of the things that we like to say is that Radical Candor is measured, not at the speaker's mouth, but at the listener's ear. In other words, it's not so much what you say, it's how the other person hears it. So we'll talk about that, then we'll go on to how we can actually think about gauging the feedback, not just that we're giving, but that we're receiving. So Jason, can you start us off by talking about, at a high level, this whole idea of gauging feedback and why, why does it even mean

Jason: One thing that we've learned as we've been teaching Radical Candor in different places across the U.S. and around the world, is that people are really nervous about how their feedback might land for the other person. In fact, that's one of the reasons why they don't wind up giving it. And the question that they ask us is often: How can I make sure that my feedback will never land in a bad way with the other person? And the sad, but true answer to that there's no way for you to prevent that because we don't control other people's feelings and reactions to things. There's no way to affirmatively prevent that. Instead, we want you to focus on actually being fully present in that conversation, paying attention to how the other person is reacting, and being willing to adjust our approach accordingly.

Amy: It's really interesting, Jason because the things that you were just describing paying attention to how the other person is responding, really getting curious about what it is that they're saying. A lot of these behaviors are really things that we can cultivate through practicing mindfulness. So we'll get into that in a little bit. We think about how to actually gauge and work with what we're receiving. But one of the things just to amplify what you were saying is that, you know, if we had a way to manage other people's emotions, we would all be on an island somewhere, you know, sipping pina colodas.

So I do think that's important to say is that we cannot manage other people's emotions, but what we can do is build the relationship and really pay attention to how the other person is responding. One thing I want to mention is that when we talk about feedback, we're talking both about praise, as well as criticism. I think people go right to thinking that Radical Candor is just

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criticism. And in fact, it's about praise or criticism. So let's say, in this instance, I'm giving you some, some criticism, Jason, and you start to get emotional. What, what should I do about that?

Jason: So I think the way that we think about this is if you're encountering a strong, emotional reaction or response, and it could be sadness, it could be frustration or anger. If you're encountering a strong emotional response, the first thing we need to do is sort of take care of that emotion, right? We need to tend to it because we've all been in conversations where it's very clear that emotions are running high, and everybody just starts pretending that it's not happening and that doesn't actually help resolve it. So what that really means tending to that emotion is really all about moving up on care personally, right? So if you're encountering a strong emotional reaction, I want to move up on care personally. The other common reaction is the sort of brush-off reaction where someone starts making excuses or telling you it's not a big deal in those cases.

We actually should treat that as an opportunity to, to be even more clear, to challenge more directly all of this. If we couch it in an example, we can kind of help to make it clear. So the scenario that we sometimes use in our workshops is that let's say you have a person who's new to the team. And you have a norm that in every meeting, there's someone who's responsible for taking notes. And the reason why that norm is in place is to make sure that meetings are as efficient as possible. And everybody can pay attention to the decisions that are being made. And you notice that the new person, in their first meeting is clearly sort of typing or writing things down. And you decide, you want to approach this person with feedback. I think the first consideration is like, where do I start on the care personally challenge directly 2x2. And we'd like to say, you want to start reasonably high up on care personally, not all the way out I'm challenged directly.

Amy: I think it's helpful, Jason, as you're sort of painting this picture, I think one of the things that people love about the Radical Candor framework is that it is a framework. So just for those people that don't have the 2x2 emblazoned in their foreheads, the way that we do what we're talking about is not to get all sort of high school math on you, but this two by two matrix of a vertical axis and a horizontal axis and the vertical axis going sort of up and down is care personally. And the horizontal axis is the challenge directly? I certainly hope I got it correct, correct me if I'm wrong, Jason.

Jason: Oh, you got that right. And so if I was starting in that situation and I want to approach this person, be reasonably high up on care personally. I might try to find them in a quick moment privately and say, Hey, let's say it was Amy. I'd say, "Hey, Amy, you know, it's really exciting to have you on the team. Great to have this first meeting. I noticed something during the meeting and I wanted to bring your attention to it. I noticed that I saw you a couple of times typing or

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writing something down. And I wanted to share with you that we actually have a note-taker during these meetings specifically so that you can pay full attention. And it really does help us keep the meetings running on time. So I just wanted to make you aware of that. “

I would say that is reasonably high up on care personally, I'm not making any assumptions or judgments about Amy or why they might be doing that. But sometimes it can be easy to sort of like fly out on the challenge directly axis. So you might find yourself saying something like, “You know, we have these rules in place for a reason, Amy, and probably wasn't your intention to violate them, but still, it really does make the meeting run less efficiently. And if you want to be an effective member of the team, you're going to need to make sure not to be distracted during future conversations.”

How do you feel Amy? How did, how did that feel differently than the, than the first example?

Amy: It felt judgmental like I'm gonna let the team down. And I was already, like, I was feeling far more defensive and reactive in that scenario than in the first one. It didn't feel helpful.

Jason: Right. And even though I didn't actually use words of judgment, I didn't say you were a bad person. I think the moment we get into consequences, that the moment we jump from an observation into like, these are all the bad things that are going to happen, the more difficulty we were going to have. So if you start at that first place and let's say you got that brush-off reaction, maybe we would wind up there, right? Maybe we'd wind up talking about the consequences.

Amy: It's really interesting when you talk about the consequences because I got this question recently in a workshop where someone said, “Well, what if you moved the orientation of the framework that we like to use, which is context, observation result next step. So when we think about giving our feedback, here's the context, you know, we were in the meeting together and I observed you typing the notes. And the result is that we're going to be less efficient and that's not a team norm.

And, and then what the next step might be. And someone was saying, well, what if we moved that around? If you started with, for example, the impact of that was that perceptions matter. Right? And so I thought that was very interesting because I think to your point, there's something about the results. If I don't know where the results are coming from it felt judgmental, even though that wasn't necessarily the way that the words were going, but that's how it landed for me. People are going to think that you're not a team player or you're not following the rules, you'll lose respect. And so, I don't know, what's your take on moving things out of order in our kind of context, observation result, next steps framework?

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Jason: There like a couple of things that are popping to mind. But most importantly for me is the value of the sort of context, observation result framework is really getting clear in your head. What happened from your perspective and why it mattered? That's the value in a conversation. I think you don't have to rigidly follow the order things in order for the conversation to be effective. Because I do think sometimes it's important, especially if there was real harm done in that situation to come in and say, "You know, I needed to talk to you because I was really bothered by that last discussion. I was left feeling like there was a real problem in our relationship, but our relationship is important to me. And I want to talk to you about it."

It may be important to start with the impact, but I think if you do not follow that up quickly with like, here's what happened, and this is why I'm feeling that way. I think that's where like, things get really sticky pretty quickly. It's hard to know what to do with that. Like it's very serious. You're feeling really hurt without the specifics. I think it's hard for most people to respond to that.

Amy: Yeah. That's really helpful. So it's obviously dependent on the relationship and the context and this, when we think about gauging, what you were talking about, just to bring it back to that example was that it's easier to move out on the challenge directly. It's much harder to take back once someone's already feeling judged or defensive, it's hard to bring them back into that conversation.

Jason: Correct. And that's one of the things that we've noticed too, is that a really unhelpful reaction when we do go too far on challenge directly is instead of moving up on care personally because we realize we've been a jerk and like a helpful thing to say in that moment is, "That was very harsh. I don't think that I said that in a way that was helpful and I'd love to be able to correct that. But I just want to recognize that I don't think that was helpful." Full stop. That's moving up on care personally. That's noticing that the other person is starting to get defensive and realizing that there is something you could have done differently in that moment that might have helped them. There are still things that you could do differently to make it better.

Amy: That's really interesting. What's coming up for me is that if you had said that to me and I felt, "Oh my gosh, I'm new. And now this person is telling me that everyone's thinking I'm not a team player," like I might've gotten really quiet. Right. So if I'm really quiet and you don't know why I'm quiet, what would you do in that case?

Jason: What we would recommend is actually trying to have me express my uncertainty, right? So if I really didn't know how to, how to react to what was going on, I might say something like, "Hey, I feel like I've been talking a lot and I haven't heard from you yet. Like, can you tell me, how are you reacting to this?" Explicitly trying to pass the microphone would probably be my first

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pass. And then after that, if the person was still reluctant, I think it would be important to say something like, “I think it’s important that we be able to take some next step from this conversation. And right now I’m really unsure how you’re thinking about this, which makes me worried that we won’t be able to make progress coming out of the backside of this. I’d love for those conversations to be helpful. What can I do to help?”

Amy: You know, I think what’s really interesting about that is when there’s emotion, one of the things that we shifted was that rather than explicitly calling out the emotion, “You look sad, you look angry,” what we realized was that emotions can manifest very differently for some people and people could be furious and yet crying. And so if you say, if you name it incorrectly, so really shifted more to acknowledging the emotion, “I’m noticing, it looks like something’s coming up for you. Can you tell me more?” The example of if I’m not saying anything, you don’t really know why I’m not saying anything. And I think that getting curious or just saying, “Hey, I’m not sure how to interpret your reaction. Can you help me understand?” That is one, one possible way in, and then we had another conversation that for some folks “interpret your reaction” could sort of seem judgemental possibly because it’s not specific.

Jason: What we’re talking about, that the sort of theory that undergirds all of these things is, is your willingness as a participant in this conversation to be agile and your response to not be caught flat-footed by the unexpected. Because what I will tell you is that these conversations will often lead to unexpected results and not always in a bad way. As Amy said that, often we go to the criticism and negative emotional place. But I have also been pleasantly surprised many times where I walk into a conversation that I’ve sweated the entire night before. And I’ll say to the person, “Hey, you know, I noticed this thing and I wanted to bring it up with you.” And they’re like, “Oh my gosh, I totally felt the same way. Like, I’m glad you articulated that. It’s really helpful for me to hear it.” And I always feel sort of silly in those moments.

But what I’ve realized is it’s the same sort of flat-footed reaction. And that’s the thing that we’re trying to avoid, which is I have an intention going into this conversation, but what really matters is that connection and the relationship with the other person and how they actually respond, not how I *wish* they responded. And so I think if you take nothing else away from this, it is that conversations are not things you can plan out in advance. And if you take the tack of thinking of all of these as an opportunity to grow the relationship, even when a conversation goes off the rails, there’s an opportunity to build that relationship back up. And that really does boil down to being curious and giving the gift of your attention to that other person so that when you are caught, surprised you have space and awareness to react agilely to what’s actually happening.

Amy: I love that. And you know, one of the things that we’ve taken from the improvisation work that we’ve developed with Second City Works, our Feedback Loop course, one of the phrases

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that we love from them is that you've got to play the scene you're in not the scene you want. And I think why in our workshops, people love doing practice where they're giving and receiving feedback is because they have a script and they think that they know exactly what they want to say. And then all of a sudden, there's this other person there. And even though it's just a role play real emotions arise, they don't know exactly what they're saying. And they realize that you sort of, in some ways, almost throw the script out the window and you have to meet the moment.

And to your point, you know, this whole idea that people will not necessarily remember what you said, but how you made them feel. I believe that's a Maya Angelou quote, like in that moment, if someone is having emotion, especially now, especially given how much people are dealing with, if you can show up with curiosity, with attention, with care, you know, if they're not hearing you to move up on the care personally, and then the other side, if they're not hearing, hearing the challenge to move out on the challenge directly, but people are going to remember in that moment that it was coming from a place of being helpful that you are doing in a way that was, that was caring. And I think the other side of it is that people will often remember as they reflect on their Radical Candor stories. Oh, even though it was so hard for me to hear, I'm so grateful that they did it. And so I think to your point to not shy away from those, those moments, because that's where the richness can happen.

Jason: I am so glad that you said not to walk away from the situation. Because the other thing we wanted to talk about is actually, how do you apply some of this to receiving feedback? Cause that's the other thing that we often hear from people is that they don't know how to do this. Like it's not a skill that people feel like they have. Now. I will say that the most frequently, we get this question in reference to others. So it's like, "Hey, can you help me get other people to take feedback better," as though like, it's not us, that's the problem. Everybody else has a problem receiving feedback. We're great at it, but I can go around a room and get that same reaction from everybody. This is a place where I think our self-awareness doesn't necessarily match our actual skill. And so I wanted to get some thoughts from you, Amy, about what are some actual tactics, what are some ways that we can approach these conversations to allow us to get to that moment of appreciation and gratitude for the other person's risk-taking and feedback a bit faster?

Amy: Yeah. That is the crux of it. And one of the things that we'll often ask is what makes receiving criticism difficult. And it's, you know, the part of ourselves that's the perfectionist or we don't want to fail, it's hard for us to see mistakes. If we don't feel like we trust the other person and you know, getting our feelings hurt all of these things. So at least for me, what I've seen personally, as well as with the groups that I work with are continually anchoring to why this matters to me. So our brain is constantly going through this kind of short-term long-term

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trade-off well, in the short-term it feels like a kick in the stomach, but in the long term it's helping me grow.

So I think first of all, really committing to a growth mindset that we know that hearing this feedback will help us grow on our own professional development journey. And I think especially if we're leaders that we really have to be willing to step up and say, even if the feedback wasn't delivered as sort of skillfully, as we might have wanted, we can model and be the change of how we receive the feedback. And so for me, I think job one is really anchoring it to a growth mindset. And this is how I grow for myself. And also for the team. What do you think about that?

Jason: There's a couple of unwritten assumptions about the world inherent in Radical Candor. And I think one of the biggest ones is this idea of, of a growth mindset. And I also know that in the moment, even though we all are very dedicated to growing on this team, and we're all actually very thoughtful in the way that we deliver feedback to one another, that there's still for me, that moment of panic. When, you know, when someone's saying like you didn't do something right. And all of those unhelpful thought patterns go off in my head of like, "See you're worthless, of course, you made this mistake, you can't do anything right." Like all that stuff is going through my head, even though Amy, you just in this really kind way said, "You know, I really wish we could have approached that, that conversation a bit differently."

Amy: Yeah. We have this amazing gift to be able to reframe our thinking and we can sort of there's that first hit of the, "Oh, I'm a terrible person." And we go into the spiral. If you tuned into the episode where you said you had thoughts in that, I heard that as, "I have thoughts about how terrible Amy is," like we sort of fill in the gaps. So just knowing that, and one practice that I found is really creating more of an observer in my mind. So when that is happening, noticing what's happening. So, oh, my neck is starting to get tightened in the way that it does. And I, the gut is feeling sort of whatever shame and noticing it and naming it. You know, I will always talk about the power of the breath, but you know, those three breaths just to calm the nervous system down.

The other thing that I think is really interesting is just, there's something in the naming of it and calling it out that can be really helpful and really instructive. For example, I was leading a workshop and we had a technical issue and folks weren't able to get in. And then they got in and I was aware that as I was leading the workshop at the same time, I was having some sensations of this isn't going as well as I'd hoped and they're not going to be as happy. And it became a really beautiful teachable moment because I was saying, you know, one of the things that's hard about feedback is, and I sort of acknowledge what was happening. And so I think there's something quite powerful about saying we all have these moments.

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So first having the caring for yourself of noticing that it's happening, taking a bigger view, like just, almost having an observer, watching you a kind observer, by the way, not a judgy observer, just noticing what's happening. Because really when we come to, you know, what is mindfulness, mindfulness is curiosity, getting curious, what's really happening here. Is there an opportunity to develop this relationship with Jason, even deeper? What am I learning about myself? I'm learning, gosh, I really want to do a great job. Like there's something really beautiful about that. So creating more curiosity and kindness towards oneself, and what's amazing about attention is that the more we pay attention in the moment, it's actually where we create space.

We create space when we're actually fully present with what's going on and it's counterintuitive. But our tendency in those moments is like, we just want to get out of it. And if we really have the courage to actually sink into what's happening through the breath, through the body sensations, through noticing what's happening, then we can actually invite in even more, which is the perspective of that other person. So for me, the practice becomes the more space I have to allow what's happening for myself. The more space I have to get curious about what's happening for the other person.

Jason: Yeah. And I love that idea of sort of spaciousness inside of a conversation because I think you're exactly right. I think the emotion that you described of like wanting to escape, like wanting to be anywhere except where that conversation is happening and thinking, I just need to be away from here. That's what's going to give me space. There's a study that I saw recently that said some wild statistic, like 75% of people on Zoom meetings said like Zoom meetings could or should have been shorter. Do you know what I'm saying? Like everybody agrees that these things could or should have been shorter. But what I've noticed is, is often the conversation doesn't end there. And so instead of, instead of going away to get space, instead of like bringing that awareness to say, I've thought about it. And I actually can't process this right now, I need immediately need space.

Instead, what we do is we stay put, we become some version of our worst selves where we're retreating into our shells, like a turtle, or we're like fighting back. We start to get defensive or something else in response. And so I, I love this idea of using our awareness, using our attention, using our curiosity, to give us some space in the moment to, to realize like, what is it that we need in order to be a more productive participant. And I think I want to just emphasize something you said earlier, which is if you are a leader, if you are in a position of power or authority in the organization, or you are over-represented, your identity is overrepresented in your organization, you're talking to an underrepresented person. I think it's especially important to reach for that spaciousness because giving feedback that goes against power hierarchies is such an unnatural act.

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It's such a fear-inducing act that people deserve credit for just opening their mouths in the first place. It's an incredibly risky and scary thing to do. And you, as a leader, those are the moments where you have the most potential to learn when somebody breaks through some resistance that they have and actually share something that really means something to them, with you and reacting with defensiveness reacting with anger or frustration or annoyance is the best way to devalue the person sitting across from you and impede your own learning and development.

And so I wonder Amy, I love the simplicity of the three-breath response, but I do think something like that is really helpful. I tend to use the noticing and naming technique. Like that's really helpful for me. For me, it's like my jaw that tightens up first. And so maybe I'll notice like I'm holding a lot of tension in my jaw or I'll start noticing like negative self-talk or I'll hear the sort of voice in my head saying like you're terrible. And those things create space. Like the awareness of that creates space because it's like, okay, I'm having this reaction, but I don't need to center on myself right in this moment. I can actually change my attention. I can pay attention to what Amy is saying. And so that technique has been really helpful to me. And are there any other tips that you have, I don't mean to put you on the spot, but ...

Amy: I don't know if it's a tip so much as a reframing of what we were talking about with sort of wanting to be anywhere, but here. But one of the things when we first started, when I was doing more mindfulness coaching and the work with Search Inside Yourself, which was developed at Google, but one of the things we found was that when teams started meetings with a moment of whether it was, mindful breathing, whether it was just a moment to arrive, it didn't need to be very long, but meetings were so much shorter. And so I think it's very counterintuitive, but in those moments where we want to quote be anywhere, but here, if we are willing to actually sit with it, first of all, that's how we develop stronger relationships. And so I think I would just encourage people, this whole idea of slowing down to speed up.

But if we are going to be leaders, the more we can actually be present with our people a minute, two minutes of presence goes a really long way. And so I would just encourage you to make the moments count and to whether it's breathing, whether it's noticing and naming, whether it's a body scan, another practice is journaling. Just, you know, even before the session of just like getting stuff out so that your inner critic is sort of put to the side. I mean, even just visually seeing that that's an inner critic and you can tear it up, but just all of these ways to actually put things to the side so that when you're showing up with this other person, you can be fully present and then it's amazing.

Jason: Yeah, absolutely. What I'm taking away from this is on the journey of growth, we are our own worst enemy. Like the thing we're managing most is not necessarily like our skill or capability, but our willingness to actually hear the things that we need to hear. There was a story

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about improvisation and there's a jazz musician who, who said that improvisation gives you the space to hear other things, which I thought was so interesting because from his perspective, wasn't the space to like, do something interesting. It was to actually hear things and that, to your point, that like when we're open to the possibility of things going differently than we planned, it gives us the space to hear something interesting. And to follow that instinct, I love that. So should we get some tips?

Amy: Yes. We'd love to share with you some practical tips to put Radical Candor to practice right away. So number one, remember Radical Candor is measured, not at the speaker's mouth, but at the listener's ear. It's not what you say. It's how the other person hears it.

Jason: I hear you. Amy also remember number two, when giving praise or criticism pay attention to the other person and how they are responding and be willing to adjust accordingly. Remember if you encounter a strong emotion, that is your cue to demonstrate that you care

Amy: Number three. Now, if the person is not hearing you or they keep ignoring what you're saying, this is your cue to challenge more directly to be even more clear. Remember it's not mean it's clear.

Jason: And number four, when receiving feedback, be aware of your own reaction, taking a moment to get curious about why you're reacting a certain way can give us insight into ourselves, help us create space for interrupting bias, give us, and give us a chance to find super valuable nuggets in feedback that might not be as skillfully given.

Amy: So I'm going to add number five, which is use these feedback conversations. If you can lean into the discomfort and create some more space, you might find yourself pleasantly surprised and building even more powerful relationships.