

Bob Gunn, Editor

A Can of Worms

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As the country lurches toward the next Presidential election, decision making is highlighted as a key aspect of leadership. But all too often discussion focuses on the process—information gathering and sifting, dialogue and distinctions, matrices and analyses—and misses the heart of the matter. The essential requirement for

making decisions is candor.

Without candor we might as well be working with blindfolds over our eyes, cotton in our ears, and tape on our mouths. We've all heard people speaking eloquently without making sense; we've sat through presentations in which data and rhetoric obscure understanding. Candor is the missing piece. It's the courage to lay things bare, to face who we are in order to move toward what we want to become. It arises inside each individual, transforming truth from noun to verb, from a principle to an action. Candor reveals assumptions, speaks to motivation, expresses state of mind. It shines light in dark corners, disarms "conventional wisdom," un.masks pretenses, punctures inflated egos. What's more, it's available 24/7, standing at the ready to lubricate human interaction. Candid

dialogues generate commitment, enthusiasm, and confidence; they release focused human energy—essential for good decisions and powerful actions.

No institution operates with 100% candor. Every organization has issues; when confronted with a can of worms, it's a natural impulse to hide. One of our clients recently opened such a can. He had joined a company that enjoyed a long-standing business relationship with another firm. Some time ago the two collaborating CEOs—both charismatic powerhouses—got into a shouting match over strategy, and the games began. By unspoken mutual agreement, the core disagreement was shunted to the dark recesses of institutional memory. As a result, the people managing day-to-day affairs struggled with decisions

that seemed to be based on nothing, forced to choose from a puzzling list of actions that are allowed or forbidden. It became more and more difficult for the staffs to work together as the under-the-surface power struggle exacted a huge emotional and performance drag. Soon, profits stagnated while staff defections accelerated.

This continued until a new leader opened up the "can of worms." He insisted on candor. He didn't blame anyone, nor did he seek retribution or redress. He merely pointed out what was obvious and called for change.

What makes this act so brave is his willingness to invite others to step into the unknown. Candor requires us to get comfortable with discomfort—to be fully in the present moment without the shelter promised by denial or distraction. A forthright conversation often pushes us to our edge; we find ourselves suddenly exposed on a precipice as the seemingly solid footing of our delusions tumbles into the void.

Even the best-intentioned leaders, men and women deeply committed to principles of integrity, may falter. For example, a Buddhist monk we

know recently became irritated with the behavior of her visiting granddaughter. Deeply embarrassed—after all, she teaches mindfulness and awareness—she was surprised to find herself urging the girl not to talk about Grandma’s outbursts.

Such self-protection is an unavoidable aspect of the human condition. We want to look good and be well thought of. We all have unexamined beliefs about ourselves and others. The jolt we receive when these thoughts surface can be very disturbing. Consequently, we tell white lies, direct attention away from our darkest secrets, or cover up behavior that falls short of expectations. In institutions, this natural human tendency to put a good face on things is compounded by politics, performance goals, and power games.

Little wonder that every company has its can of worms. Sometimes these are “hiding in plain sight,” visible in the annual report, analysts calls, or press releases (watch the unfolding drama as Boeing’s leaders obscure Dreamliner delivery delays). Laura Rittenhouse, a colleague who helps CEOs compose annual shareholder letters, calls it “corporate fog.” Laura researched the 100 largest companies, correlating stock performance with the degree of candidness in their shareholder letters. She found that companies that are constantly “foggy” in their letters perform markedly worse than peers that are more forthright.

But while the benefits of candor are obvious, being candid isn’t easy. Candor takes discipline. For example, Bob has been chipping away at a thought habit of being irritated and impatient—it was his New Year’s resolution. Candor has forced him to face how pervasive that habit is.

To face that tendency, he sincerely asked for feedback from the people around him. Not a week goes by without someone making a comment like, “Aren’t we being a tad impatient?” Now Bob can accept that his default attitude, deeply rooted in his psyche, is irritation. And candor is helping him catch the feeling in the moment and let the thought go rather than acting it out.

Getting to this point has been painful. Candor can be searing, unleashing all sorts of emotions, especially regret and remorse. It requires commitment—the stance of being willing to stand firm in one’s resolve, to look unflinchingly at circumstances, thinking, deeds, or words. It can’t be done when there is judgment or blame—that just makes us feel even worse. It must be done with gentleness, compassion, and kindness to ourselves.

Inevitably, the culture around us tests our commitment. Fidelity to truth may cause us to be the lone—and lonely—dissenter to accepted norms. In the crucible where we most desire human connection and support, we may find ourselves feeling isolated.

That is why the practice of candor is a journey. Start with a topic that won’t be overwhelming—a relationship, a habit, or a circumstance that you feel you can handle. Resolve to see what is true for you with an unwavering gaze and with confidence that you can handle whatever emotion arises. Take it one step at a time. Breathe in candor’s pain, take its searing effect into as big a space as you can muster, and then breathe out with a thought, an observation, or an insight that starts correcting the error. Repeat. Repeat again. See if action is required. Do this without judg-

ment, without being unkind to yourself.

As this practice takes hold, you will discover that candor comes more easily. For one thing, you will find it harder to condemn others! If any one of us had been more aware in our subtle mendacity, would we have persisted? Or would we have stopped ourselves before our falsehoods got out of hand?

You may be surprised as you realize that these small steps are having a cumulative effect, that you can be more honest with yourself and others, moment by moment. The load you have been carrying around? It will begin to vanish like waves washing away a sand castle. Not much happens at first. As the tide rises, the edges disappear, then collapse, and suddenly it’s gone. A habit of a lifetime dissolves, and forthrightness emerges.

Graceful leaders have personally explored candor’s frontiers. They understand its preciousness, its power to transform and release human energy. By dint of hard-won personal knowledge, they appreciate the power of candor to heal wounds as well as prevent injuries. Candor informs their decisions as they help us conquer our propensity to deceive ourselves, gently guiding us back on the path into the unknown with more calm, confidence, and courage. ■

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