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The *new*  
School Rules



By: [Amy Jenkins](#) on January 17th, 2019

# Feedback Is Crucial To Success In School Systems

TEAMING

I remember the day quite clearly: the door to my portable classroom opened and my principal walked in. My heart skipped a beat – it was my first year teaching and the first time any school leader had

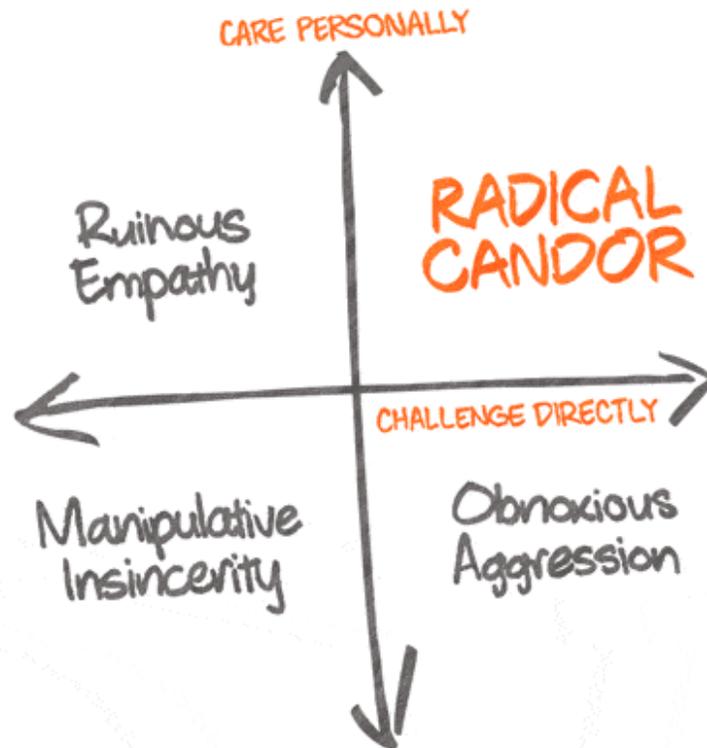
come into my room. I was immediately worried about the clipboard in her hand and the uncapped pen. I was convinced that whatever I was doing would be wrong, that the moment would be off, that my students unengaged or the lesson would go off the rails. I was nervous about [receiving feedback](#), but I now know that I needed it.

She smiled and it made me gulp; she wasn't a smiler by nature so I expected the worst. She walked toward me slowly and with great surprise I noticed the evaluation form attached to the clipboard had already been completed. "Sign here," she said, not noticing my confusion. I scanned the form and noticed I had mostly good marks; marks and ratings I knew were fictional, since it had been filled out before she had even come in to observe me. I signed it. I sighed. I didn't feel any better.

That experience was typical in my school, and not receiving feedback made it hard for any of us to learn. I spent my entire first year teaching with minimal feedback and as a result I had little insight into how to improve my teaching practice. The importance of [feedback in school systems](#) is undisputed. John Hattie's research on the topic for over a decade, and particularly his idea that it not just how you give it, but [how feedback is received](#) that matters, has shaped the experiences of students and of teachers.

Author Paul Bambrick-Santoyo talks about how to move from the scoreboard approach of teacher evaluation to an [observation and feedback](#) one, where the goal is for observers to give feedback that helps teachers improve versus simply pitting them against each other. The way feedback is delivered, and the type of feedback given, matters a lot if you want to drive to stronger student outcomes.

Feedback is no less important, nor is it less difficult, in organizations outside of the education space. It turns out it is hard to do it well, and very easy to do it poorly. If the feedback is not given in a way that is constructive, and not delivered in a way that the person receiving it feels open and cared for, it is likely to be ineffective at best, and harmful at worst. Which is perhaps why the [ideas behind Radical Candor](#) resonated with me so strongly, and why I see so much potential for applying them within school systems.



When I first heard Kim Scott, author of *[Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity](#)* speak, I was sitting in an event held at AltSchools, surrounded by the leaders of other start-ups in and out of the edtech space. The people in the room had so many questions (which I appreciated) and so much skepticism around whether these concepts would actually work for them (which I found hard to understand). It took some explaining and lots of stories to get everyone on board but honestly, it all just clicked for me when she spoke.

All the helpful feedback I had received came flooding back, as well as the times it was less helpful. I immediately thought of the manager who gave me a book with tabs in it for the pages he wanted me to focus on and a note that I was doing a great job on a project but that he knew I had the potential to be an even stronger leader. That felt a bit alarming at first (I needed to read a whole book?) and then terrific as I reflected later because he cared enough to make me better.

I was able to easily think of the people I had coached and supported by being in that upper right quadrant, as well as examples of time when I didn't care enough, or when I took caring to mean I should not be critical or constructive. And most of the room got there; most of the room believed we should all strive for Radical Candor – it's just everyone was wondering how. And I imagine you might be too. So here are four ways to bring more Radical Candor to your school system.

## 1. If You Are A Teacher

There are two great opportunities here for you. The first is maybe obvious – give good feedback to your students, show them you care for them by getting to know them, help them grow by challenging them and providing them with concrete ideas about areas to improve. For example, change “Rewrite this paragraph” to “In previous paragraphs you do an excellent job at providing examples to your reader whereas here you don’t offer enough examples to help the reader understand your argument. Try again and then see me.” The second is the feedback you give to other teachers. Step one is taking the time to observe your peers. Step two is giving them real actual feedback that they can make actionable. [Just saying “good job” doesn’t help anyone get better.](#)

## 2. If You Are A Coach

You have opportunities with your teachers nearly every day. You see a lot of them so remember to take the time to get to know them – understand their strengths, challenges and what makes them tick before you jump in with feedback. You have a great chance with principals and district leaders too. Help them understand what is happening in classrooms and don’t be afraid to challenge them to make improvements.

## 3. If You Are A Principal

As a leader, your job is to give and receive feedback. In order to do this effectively you must be clear that you are [open to receiving feedback](#) before giving it. Build strong relationships with your teachers by coming in to observe but also through interactions in your office, the teachers’ lounge etc. Take the time to show them that you Care Personally. You want to remove the fear teachers have about you coming in and get them to a place when they can’t wait for you to come because when you do they know they will learn something too. Remember to leave a positive note behind or send one later, but don’t stop there. Take the time to also reflect on opportunities for improvement for each teacher and share those too.

## 4. If You Are A District Leader Or Superintendent

Start by remembering that many teachers and principals can’t even imagine what your daily job and how your days look different from theirs. Help them understand some of the big picture things you are thinking about and how those impact the schools and students. Investing in not only asking them about themselves, but also telling them about you, helps show them that you Care Personally about them as human beings. Take time to listen to them too, before you provide feedback. You may find

yourselves observing people you don't know well, sometimes about content you're not familiar with. Asking questions is a great way to show you care.

## The Bottom Line

Overall, no matter who you are, you need to be the change you want to see. There are some easy steps you can take to make this more of a habit in your organization. Before you start giving feedback, show that you are interested in receiving it. Ask others for feedback and make sure they give it to you. Use questions like "Is there anything I can do or not do to make it easier for us to work together?" And then, after you "get it" you can start to "give it."

Start with the positive first but don't forget the honesty too. Now that the feedback is flowing, encourage it by praising it. Call people out for being good at getting and giving. Radical Candor may be tricky at first but it pays off in dividends. While receiving feedback made me nervous in my early days of teaching, what concerns me now is the lack of it. When we get feedback we grow. And if we want to be the best we can be for our students, we all need to keep growing.

*This post was originally published on the [Radical Candor](#) blog.*



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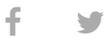
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