

Title: **The Effect of Candour on Workplace Relationships: The Influence of Trust**

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The Effect of Candour on Workplace Relationships: The Influence of Trust

A culture of candour, or open and honest communication between organizational members, has been touted as an important step on the road to economic, ethical, and social sustainability (O'Toole & Bennis, 2009; Scott, 2019). Yet, there is evidence that candour at the dyadic level can be somewhat scarce in organizations. For instance, managers routinely avoid conveying accurate performance feedback (Longenecker, Sims, & Gioia, 1987) and, as is commonly seen in the voice literature, employees regularly withhold important information from their managers (Morrison, 2011).

While there may be several reasons for this reticence, an individual's reluctance to pass on potentially unwelcome information may stem in part from fear of a negative effect of candour on relationships. This concern is likely well-founded, as speaking out is often contentious. Socially astute players know that it is often necessary to stay mum to avoid creating rifts with others (Detert & Edmondson, 2011, Knoll, Neves, Schyns, & Meyer, 2021). Nyberg (1993) suggests that lies and omissions are the grease that keep everyday social interactions moving forward.

In this paper we develop theory about the effects of candour on workplace relationships. We conceptualize candour as instances of communication in which the initiator conveys their perspective in a truthful manner despite a potential negative reaction from the recipient. Examples of candour include telling: a colleague that they used sexist language during a meeting; a superior that their use of work-from-home policies shows favouritism; a direct report that their tone of voice when interacting with clients seems condescending.

To understand the effect that candour can have on relationships we draw from research on interpersonal trust (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Mayer, Davis, Schoorman, 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, Davis, 2007). Specifically, we posit that candour generates in the recipient evaluations of the initiator's benevolence, competence, and integrity and that these evaluations determine in part, how candour is received and how the relationship is affected. More specifically, we expect that to the extent that the recipient believes the initiator (a) intends to help, (b) is knowledgeable about the domain in question and (c) is consistent and honorable, candour is more likely to be accepted and will ultimately serve to strengthen or maintain, rather than hurt the relationship.

We delineate the mechanisms through which recipients assess initiator's benevolence, competence, and integrity and argue that features of the information conveyed (e.g., relevance, novelty) and how it is communicated (e.g. tactfully, at an opportune time) will moderate these evaluations. We predict that prior levels of trust will moderate the effect of candour episodes on the relationship, such that negative effects of candour are amplified in relationships lacking trust. We also theorize about how candour may shape the nature of the relationships over time in both positive and negative ways. Our arguments build on research by Dutton and Heaphy (2003) which suggests that high quality connections have three main dimensions, including a wide carrying capacity (both parties feel able to express both positive

and negative emotions), high tensility (the ability withstand conflict and tensions without breaking), and strong connectivity (openness to new ideas). Thus, candour can be seen as a driver and a feature of a high/low quality relationship.

From a practical perspective, we explore how the framework can be used to help managers prepare for effective candid conversations in the workplace that serve to strengthen relationships rather than weakening them. Finally, we discuss the implications of building a culture of candour and the consequences of candour for organizations.

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