Introducing Radical Candor

By Amy Sandler, MBA

The Radical Candor logo and framework are trademarks of Radical Candor, LLC. Photo courtesy of Amy Sandler.
During this year’s Build Business conference, July 31–August 2 in Washington, D.C., attendees will hear two compelling keynote presentations. *Marketer* recently posed some questions to Wednesday’s opening keynote speaker Amy Sandler, CMO and coach for Radical Candor, an executive education company based on Kim Scott’s best-selling book, *Radical Candor: How to be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity*.

Giving and receiving feedback can be uncomfortable for many of us, but it’s an important part of success at work. In her keynote presentation, Sandler will introduce the Radical Candor framework and describe how you can use it to solicit feedback from others, improve your impromptu feedback, and encourage it between the people you work with most closely.

**Marketer: Amy Sandler, tell our readers a little about yourself.**

After getting my Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Harvard Business School, while most of my classmates were getting jobs in this new thing called “the internet,” I moved to Los Angeles and got a Master of Fine Arts in Screenwriting from the University of California, Los Angeles. I also continued to deepen my practice of yoga, mindfulness, and meditation. Let’s just say it was not the typical career path for a Harvard MBA!

A few decades later, mindfulness is mainstream, and executives and organizations around the world fully appreciate that self-awareness and communication skills are critical to success at work. As CMO and coach for Radical Candor, most of my time is spent on the road, working with people around the world who are looking to do the best work of their lives and build the best relationships of their career.

We have seen that practicing Radical Candor—caring personally about the people you work with, while being willing to challenge them directly—enables the kind of communication and collaboration we all need to succeed at work.

When I’m not on the road, I teach at Unplug Meditation in Los Angeles. Whether it’s Radical Candor, meditation, or marketing, I’ve found that the best way to sharpen my skills and keep learning is through practice and teaching.

**Marketer: What is the inspiration behind Radical Candor—the philosophy, book, and company?**

The inspiration for the philosophy of Radical Candor actually started when Kim Scott was walking her dog Belvedere (Belvy). More like, Belvy was walking Kim, because Kim loved Belvy so much she never said a mean word to her. As a result, Belvy was totally untrained and ran the show.

One day, Kim was standing on the side of a busy New York City street and Belvedere bounded into traffic, almost getting hit by a taxi. As Kim pulled her back just in the nick of time, a stranger appeared at her side.

He said to Kim, “I can see you really love that dog.” And then he continued, “But you’re going to get that dog killed if you can’t teach it to sit.” He pointed at the ground and yelled clearly to Belvy, “Sit!” To Kim’s amazement, Belvy sat. She didn’t just sit, she looked up at the man, wagging her tail.

Then the man turned to Kim and said, “It’s not mean, it’s clear.”

The light changed and the man crossed the street, leaving Kim with words to live by, and the inspiration for a book, a management philosophy, and a company.

Now we’re not saying that we should all speak to each other in one-word commands. We’re saying there can be a real kindness in communicating from a place of caring and clarity. The man could see Kim loved the dog. Talking about how to help Belvy survive was all he needed to do to show he cared personally. Then he offered some help—he showed Kim how to get Belvy to sit.

As for the company Radical Candor, this is its second iteration. The first version of the company built three apps before it became clear that the reason they weren’t working was because when you’re trying to get people to put their phones away; look each other in the eye; and have real, human conversations, apps are counter-intuitive.

While almost all the problems we’ve seen companies encounter are covered in the book *Radical Candor*, there are limitations to how much people can put the framework into
practice from a book. So we focus on the things that do work: training teams and companies how to practice and develop a culture of Radical Candor.

Because, let’s face it, some things are still better explained by a real, live human being.

**Marketer: How can Radical Candor apply to the business world?**

At its core, Radical Candor is caring about the people you work with while also being willing to challenge them directly.

I’ve led workshops all over the world, at places like Capital One, Facebook, and Google; with CEOs and small business owners; and with marketing and business development teams, like your audience. One question I like to ask is, “What are your greatest challenges at work, and what do you appreciate most?”

Whomever I’m talking with, whatever their industry or role, the answer to both questions is people. We love the people we work with and yet they drive us crazy. Why don’t they just do everything we tell them to?

The thing is, telling people what to do doesn’t work. What we’ve found is that the way we can thrive at work—get more stuff done and deliver results collaboratively—is by developing caring relationships with the people we work with and practicing Radical Candor.

**Marketer: What can attendees expect to hear to help them in their roles as marketers and business developers?**

Marketers and business development teams need to be listeners and translators, advocates and champions, and strategists and storytellers. They need to understand the message they want to share, and they need to understand their audiences and what matters to them. One thing we like to say is that “Radical Candor is not measured at the speaker’s mouth, but at the listener’s ear.”

Since we’re big believers in the power of storytelling, your audience will hear some of my own stories when I received Radical Candor as well as when I messed up—what we call “Radical Candor Wipe-Outs.” In other words, they’ll learn about what not to do, as well as what to do.

What makes Radical Candor radical is it’s a deviation from the norm, which tends to fall somewhere between acting like a jerk or avoiding confrontation altogether. If you’re not caring about the person you’re giving challenging feedback to, you’re not doing it right. You can’t just say, “In the spirit of Radical Candor...” and then go on to act like a garden-variety jerk. If that’s your approach, you’re still acting like a jerk.

**Marketer: What would you like the audience to learn, feel, and walk away with after hearing your keynote address?**

Radical Candor is simple, but it’s not easy, because changing behavior isn’t easy. If we could market emotional novocaine, we would, and we’d give it away for free. But while we’re all still human and feeling all the feelings, it’s going to be hard.

The audience will learn what Radical Candor is, what it isn’t, and how the ability to give and receive feedback effectively can support their own growth, as well as that of their firms. I will encourage them to create a new normal where guidance is kind and clear, specific, and sincere. Finally, they’ll get tips and takeaways they can start putting into practice immediately, because small changes can go a long way.