

# Don't let ability to finesse stop you from being frank

Last time, I discussed the untapped, hidden power of niceness in our business lives — simple behaviors like recognizing others and expressing appreciation for hard and good work.

Another action central to this topic occurred to me: one that may seem at odds with niceness, but if done right, is one of the most constructive expressions of kindness. It is the willingness to be completely candid with someone, at the right time, in the right way.

Candor is the power to change a conversation. While it may require saying things that are tough medicine, being straight can change performance, maybe even save a job. Deft use of candor can build trust, mend a relationship or make a strong bond even tighter. Candor can be a powerful diagnostic tool, clearly revealing how you may most effectively interact with someone going forward.

Easier said than done, I'm aware. And I don't mean let it all hang out, all the time. Candor is best used tactfully and tactically, in a smart framework.

Like many things, the hardest part about being candid is getting started. Too often, we wait for the right moment: one that never quite occurs. It's easier around people we know and who know us best. Conversely, not knowing how someone will react to frankness makes us uncomfortable and negates action.

Start with some pre-discussion work to get past that "first cringe" moment. Script a few opening lines and bullet the points to reduce the odds of getting off message. Calmly disclose precisely what you're about to do: level about something important, about which you invite discussion.

That word discussion is key. The richest reward of frankness is getting it back, in a productive exchange. Candor is a two-way street — it requires you to be a fully involved listener and an effective speaker. Check your point of view at the door when the other party wants to share their

thoughts.

It takes a (for many of us, very conscious) willingness to hear what someone is saying without judging. Otherwise, you'll miss out on critical cues and information that may alter your current thinking or knowledge, help steer the rest of the discussion and chart potential courses of action. If you at some point disagree, to get the conversation back on track, try phrases like, "I fully respect your view, but see it differently," or "Another way to look at it is."

Keep your candid discussions constructive and on track, whatever the reaction.

Have action steps to offer near the end, and alter those steps as necessary as your talk progresses.

Prepare for a potentially less than optimal reaction. And know that doesn't mean you won't still achieve a good outcome.

People who you'd expect to handle straight talk may well fall silent, finding it difficult to even maintain eye contact. Watch carefully for these cues, and put the brakes on if need be, while making clear the discussion will continue. Maintain your calm and composure.

If you do suspend the conversation, be sure to pick it up soon. Don't lose your sense of urgency or forget your objective. A short amount of time — a few hours, perhaps a day — is often enough for someone to regain composure and gather their thoughts.

Most of the time, I predict you'll have a positive experience in one session, and gain the deeper trust of those with whom you're leveling. They'll know you're coming from the right place, with the best of intent.

Why must candor be such a conscious act?

We can get "management trained" to the point of losing touch with what our gut says is the right thing to do. I count myself among the ranks of those too often given to finessing at the expense of frankness.

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# Focus, plan and measure to achieve success in 2010

Two headlines caught my attention recently. One proclaimed, "The recession is over." The second announced, "Small business income has fallen off a cliff."

The contrast is striking, but it goes to the heart of what is happening in the small business world today.

The good news is the long-term economic forecast is improving, and many small businesses are improving along with it. Still, for many small business owners the current income picture has not kept pace.

What is it that makes the difference between those that thrive at times like these and those that struggle?

That question could be answered many ways, but most answers will include hard work, perseverance, smart decision making, and maybe a little bit of luck. Since I don't think the best strategy is to rely on luck, I have developed some strategic tools to help me and my clients find success.

Here are my top three New Year tools for success.

First, you need to focus. Establish your destination with clarity and move toward that destination with unwavering determination. Successful business owners have a single-minded sense of purpose and clarity of vision that keeps them on target. For these people, no fuzzy images of success are allowed. They see clearly and believe absolutely that they can hit their target. I like to think of this kind of focus in Yoda's terms: "Do or do not. There is no try." Of course, to create that kind of focus, you need to have a clear idea of what it is that you want.

Clear ideas come from clear planning. This is the second tool for success in 2010. You need to make a clear plan for the coming year that includes specific, measurable, achievable, results-oriented goals. Most people don't plan very well. This is evident at the start of each new year when the lists of "resolutions" are made without any real plan for achieving them. If you want to make something good happen next

year, start now by making a clear plan with specific outcomes that you can measure.

Let's say that you want to focus on improving your overall health next year. What does improved health look like? It is impossible to describe without listing some specific changes that would demonstrate your success. In the same way, creating focus for your business demands that you create some very specific goals. List those goals in terms

that you can measure, and make sure to define when each of those goals will be met during the year.

The third tool is to track your behaviors, not results. Success is not measured at the end of the year; it is measured every day, week and month along the way. Let's use sales as an example. If you want to know if you will hit your sales targets, what you need to know first is not how much you have sold, but rather the daily things you need to do to make those sales happen. Here is a CEO Rule: Successful people have successful habits. It's not so much what you know, but what you do that determines your success. Business owners who consistently reach their goals understand this.

Write down five to eight key activities or "behaviors" that are essential to your success next year. Decide how you will monitor those behaviors on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. If you keep those behaviors on track, your success will be in hand before you know it.

Here is a bonus tool. Identify someone to help you keep your focus clear, your plan on track and your behaviors consistent. Going it alone is OK if you want to just get through. If you want to be at the top of your game, engage with a mentor, a coach, or a mastermind/peer group. What you can do without them, you can do even better with their help.

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