

# Radical Candor: A Review

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**Scott, Kim. (2019). *Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity*. Fully Revised & Updated Edition. St. Martin's Press. 297 pages.**

## INTRODUCTION

Former tech executive Kim Scott's *Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity* is certainly not a "Christian book." The *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller is, however, a book that acknowledges the humanity of employees in a way that Christian readers will recognize and appreciate. With themes of love, compassion, and the nature of mankind, this is a popular secular book that is indicative of a larger embrace of Christian principles in the modern American workplace.

On first read, I was reminded both of the fruits of the spirit (Gal 5:22-23) and Paul's encouragement for us all to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (Col 3:12). Not only is there no law against such things, but Scott argues that those virtues lead to being a better boss. In spite of the crude subtitle, the Christian practitioner or teacher of management will find the book interesting and affirming. The Christian business student will benefit from seeing a sort of congruence between a popular secular approach to management and his or her faith. This is the kind of book that shows students practical ways to act as faithful Christians in a pluralistic marketplace.

## THE FRAMEWORK

*Radical Candor* is presented as a new management philosophy, and while it may not be as novel as it portends, it is clearly articulated and well-argued. The foundation of Scott's philosophy is a 2x2 plane in which "care personally" sits on the vertical axis and "challenge directly" sits on the horizontal. Scott advocates for a high dose of each, a situation she labels "compassionate candor."

Challenging directly means introducing a healthy dose of candor into the workplace. Workplace candor is not new, of course. The late Jack Welch (2005), CEO of GE for 20 years, was well-known and heavily criticized as an advocate of candor in the workplace. Welch devoted an entire chapter of his book *Winning* to candor, the lack which he called "the biggest dirty little secret in business" (p. 25). To Welch, candor was a tool to declutter, to increase speed, and to cut costs. Scott (2019) takes a different tack, saying that candor should be motivated by care and "is not a license to be gratuitously harsh or to 'front-stab'" (p. 15). She acknowledges that delivering bad news or negative feedback is a difficult but necessary component of leadership and is best done with high levels of both compassion and frankness.

Scott encourages her readers to "care personally," with an emphasis on "personally," meaning that bosses (her preferred term) should care about the whole person, not just the person's work outcomes. She cautions against superficial trappings such as birthday memorization that we might associate with a caring boss and steers toward having meaningful conversations and "getting to know each other at a human level" (p. 13). Her section on "ruinous empathy" will remind the Christian reader of the balance we must strike between compassion and stewardship of our roles and organizations.

## LOVE THE POOR PERFORMER, HATE THE POOR PERFORMANCE

Where Scott really caught my attention is in her entreaties to be charitable toward those whose behavior or performance is unacceptable. She tells stories of people deemed to be jerks (and uses some vulgar language in the process) and takes her past self to task for being dismissive

of them. “Blaming people’s internal essence rather than their external behavior,” she says, “leaves no room for change” (p. 27). There are examples throughout the book of her telling the reader to take people seriously as fellow humans. I was reminded more than once of C. S. Lewis’s (1944) statements in *The Weight of Glory* that “there are no ordinary people” and that we should be people who have “taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.” Scott’s separation of the person from the action and her acknowledgement that value does not come from hierarchical rank put her book in contrast to so many other management books that, like *Winning*, either buy into the leader-as-hero myth or assign people to categories based on potential or outcomes. Although her framework is a 2x2, she warns the reader not to write names in boxes. “We all fall into each quadrant multiple times a day,” she says (p. vii).

Scott’s book takes place in Silicon Valley, where she has had an impressive career, including stops at Google (leading AdSense, YouTube, and Doubleclick Online Sales and Operations) and Apple and as co-founder and CEO of Juice Software. While the setting may be foreign to the *CBAR* reader and his or her students, I consider that more of a feature than a bug. Scott keeps the reader’s interest with personal anecdotes that include Larry Page, Steve Jobs, Tim Cook, and Sheryl Sandberg. The stories sound like more than name-dropping and she resists the trap of nearly deifying Jobs as others have done (see Isaacson, 2012). Instead, she treats them all as humans who understand the creative capacity of others and the need to harness that creative capacity for the greater good.

I recommend this book to the Christian thinker, practitioner, and business educator. There is an ever-growing body of leadership literature that ties the virtues of love, compassion, kindness, gentleness, and patience to positive outcomes for leaders, followers, and organizations (Hurt & Heath, 2015; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). *Radical Candor* is not an academic resource but offers a simple framework, ample anecdotes, and four chapters of “tools and techniques” for implementing the ideas it contains. While the book is not written from a Christian perspective, the Christian can celebrate that there are those in the world who want us to keep our humanity intact at work and who know that one’s humanity is “an attribute, not a liability, to being effective” (p. 11).

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