CONSTRUCTION AND APPLICATION OF RADICAL CANDOR: EFFICIENCY OF CRITICISM AT WORK

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Negative feedback has been repeatedly identified as beneficial for organizational learning, adaptability, and performance. Despite having these advantages, most organizations still do not use negative feedback to its full potential, as they fail to spread it correctly among their members. The application of negative feedback, therefore, faces several issues like misuse or process avoidance that are mostly driven by psychological factors. The purpose of this paper is to discuss potential benefits of a newly emerged organizational approach called radical candor for contemporary state of the art in feedback-related behavior and to propose how it might be successfully applied in organizational settings. We define radical candor as a proactive and compassionate engagement in an unpleasant and direct feedback process. Radical candor may help reduce the influence of psychological factors like extreme levels of attachment, harsh emotions or low self-esteem in order to make organizational members more engaged and satisfied with the negative feedback process. Organizations willing to apply radical candor might consider either official implementation from top to bottom (through managers and leadership) or unofficial intervention through the agents (employees of all levels) depending on company characteristics.

1. Introduction

It has been more than thirty years since Ashford and Cummings (1983) called for embracing of informal feedback methods in organizations, and its importance is still growing nowadays. Contemporary organizations operate in an increasingly complex and uncertain environment, and development of informal feedback may help them develop the flexibility and learning skills necessary to deal with unexpected events (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Ashford, De Stobbeleir & Nujella, 2016). Organizations also need to react to growing fluctuations in the labor market and correct facilitation of informal feedback may help them raise the loyalty and satisfaction of employees as it represents an efficient form of employee development (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010).

Informal feedback can be initiated by either feedback-givers or feedback-seekers, and in both cases, it is a negative feedback that has been repeatedly showed as the most beneficial one (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003; Raver et al., 2012). Despite having its advantages, the application of negative feedback also faces several issues such as

defensiveness of feedback-receivers and destructive criticism in case of feedback-giving behavior (Leung, Su & Morris, 2001; Raver et al., 2012; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004) and avoidance of negative information and neglecting direct methods in case of feedback-seeking behavior (Ashford et al., 2016). Although these issues are the result of more complex factors, they are significantly influenced by psychological factors such as emotional stability (Kim et al., 2009), attachment style (Brennan et al., 1998), low level of self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 2003), and goal orientation (VandeWalle, 1997).

A recently emerged practice known as radical candor is suggested to be a new antidote to the incapability of organizational members to face the unpleasant aspects of the feedback process (Scott, 2015). Radical candor witnesses popularity among US and European companies (Feintzeig, 2015; Wilkie, 2016), but lacks any empirical evidence so far. The purpose of our paper is to show how radical candor might enrich the contemporary state of art in the informal feedback and to propose how it might be successfully applied in organizational settings.

We define radical candor as a "proactive and compassionate engagement in [the] unpleasant and direct feedback process". We suggest that radical candor has the potential to encompass both feedback-giving and feedback-seeking behavior and that its practice should focus on development of supportive personal qualities in order to help organizational members to initiate and endure the unpleasant feedback-related interactions. The first quality is proactivity and it may promote development of the learning style of motivation, suitable for seeking for more unpleasant and socially risky situations (Bateman & Crant, 1993; VandeWalle, 1997). Another aspect is compassion that may further increase one's motivation to participate in unpleasant situations and promote emotional stability (Gilbert & Choden, 2014; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). The third proposed quality is self-compassion that is suggested to support an increase of self-esteem, secure attachment and emotional stability (Neff, 2003; Neff, 2011; Neff & Germer, 2013). We also suggest that radical candor intervention should start with development of supportive personal qualities in order to psychologically prepare participants for the development of feedback in the second part of the intervention.

In discussion, we suggest that research in radical candor should focus on examination of its effects on supportive personal qualities, psychological factors and feedback outcomes. Application of radical candor intervention in organizational settings should also be preceded with analysis of environmental factors that can also serve as indicators of the implementation style of the intervention. We recommend organizations with more secure and open environments to consider official top-to-bottom implementation and less secure and less open environments to use more covert intervention through selected members that would serve as role models of radical candor for other individuals.

2. Feedback in Organizations and its Psychological Factors

Feedback is generally accepted to be an important factor in the development of performance, adaptability, and learning in organizations (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Ashford et al., 2016; Allen, Shockley & Poteat, 2012). Efficiency of the whole process is influenced by willingness of feedback participants to be actively engaged in the process, especially when it might uncover what behavior needs to be changed and stimulate actions to make such change (Tsui & Ashford, 1994; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004). For both feedback-giving and feedback-seeking behavior, negative feedback is not only the most beneficial

feedback, but also the most challenging (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Ashford et al., 2016; De Rijit et al. 2012).

2.1 Feedback-Giving and Feedback-Seeking Behavior

Feedback-giving behavior has been mostly examined as a two-way process between the supervisor and the subordinate, and it has been recognized as an essential element of supervisory behavior (Leung, Su & Morris, 2001; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004; Raver et al., 2012). The first issue of feedback-giving is the defensiveness of receivers that entails dissatisfaction or denial of the feedback (London, 1997). Rejection of the feedback also tends to be followed by emergence of negative impressions about the feedback-giver as being biased or insensitive (Argyris, 1991). Therefore, these effects have the potential to negatively influence active involvement of feedback-givers in the process, as it may evoke tendencies to avoid, delay or distort negative feedback (Benedict & Levine, 1988).

Another obstacle of the feedback-giving process is destructive criticism, a kind of feedback that contains threats, sarcasm, lacks considerate form and fails to promote better behavior among receivers (Baron, 1988). The receivers of destructive criticism are more likely to feel anger, perceive feedback as harmful, blame and distrust the feedback-givers, use more inefficient methods for dealing with poor performance (like refusing to change or making excuses) and express lower self-set goals and lower self-efficacy (Raver et al., 2012; Baron 1988). On the contrary, delivering the feedback in a constructive manner supports the motivation to use the feedback for improvement of job performance and to increase the perceptions of interactional justice, creation of favorable reactions to feedback source, and organization among receivers (Leung et al. 2001).

Feedback-seeking behavior refers to "the conscious devotion of effort toward determining the correctness and adequacy of behavior for attaining valued end states" (Ashford, 1986, p. 466). Feedback-seeking behavior can be expressed either by direct asking for feedback (inquiry), by indirect observation of cues in one's environment in order to infer information from others (monitoring) or by indirect stimulation of others in order to receive information from them without direct asking (indirect inquiry) (Ashford et al., 2016). Although directly obtained negative feedback has been repeatedly showed as the most beneficial one, the seekers tend to do exactly the opposite in real situations (Ashford et al., 2003; Ashford et al., 2016). Many seekers seem to get engaged in situations which more likely provide favorable or positive information and avoid negative or threatening ones, and they prefer using indirect methods (Tsui & Ashfold, 1994). However, the indirect methods usually provide ambivalent information, mostly in the form of subtle cues and as such provide limited information which only partially mirrors expectations of constituents (Tsui & Ashfold, 1994).

2.2 Psychological Factors of the Feedback-Related Behavior

Issues related to feedback-giving and feedback-seeking behavior tend to be triggered by psychological factors of the participants of the feedback-process (Kluger and DeNisi; 1996; Raver et al., 2012; Ashford et al, 2003; Ashford et al., 2016). The first psychological factor is the emotional stability of feedback participants. In the case of feedback-seeking behavior, emotional stability is related to a better ability to face and accept negative feedback (Moeller, Robinson, 2010) and higher willingness to seek feedback

from supervisors (Kim et al. 2009). Emotional stability also has a beneficial impact on the constructiveness of the feedback-giving process (Raver et al., 2012). Decreased ability to cope with harsh emotional states has a great impact on destructive criticism that is usually driven by anger of the feedback-giver (Baron, 1988). Feedback-givers that are unable to deal with their fear of being rejected or labeled as an insensitive leader may, on the other hand, disrupt the ability of the feedback-giver to deal with resistance of the receivers (Der Rijt et al., 2012; Raver et al., 2012).

The second factor is attachment style that refers to one's emotional bond with other individuals (Bowlby, 1982; Brennan et al., 1998). Individuals who lacked appropriate attention from caregivers during their early development usually develop attachment avoidance that expresses as distrust of others, high self-reliance or discomfort with closeness (Brennan et al., 1998). Attachment anxiety, in its turn, is triggered by partial care from caregivers and usually expresses as a tendency to be jealous and to have a high need for social approval. Individuals higher on attachment avoidance tend to avoid feedback situations, while individuals higher on attachment anxiety tend to initiate them, but more for the sake of receiving attention rather than feedback itself (Wu Parker & de Jong, 2014). Feedback-seekers higher on either of attachment styles might prefer negative feedback (Hepper & Carnelley, 2010), but seek feedback less frequently than more secure individuals (Allen, Schockley & Poteat, 2010). Furthermore, individuals higher in attachment anxiety tend to be more engaged in direct feedback-seeking process than individuals higher in attachment avoidance (Wu Parker & de Jong, 2014).

The third factor is self-esteem that entails evaluation of value that individuals place on themselves (Baumeister et al., 2003). Kruger and DeNisi (1996) show that feedback interventions threatening self-esteem generally show lower effectiveness than the ones that do not. Individuals with lower self-esteem tend to take feedback situations too personally, ruminate about self-worth and show weakened ability to deal with both positive and negative feedback than individuals with higher self-esteem (Brown, 2010; Krenn et al., 2013). Feedback-seekers with low self-esteem usually tend to avoid negative feedback and prefer utilization of indirect feedback-seeking methods (Tsul & Ashford, 1994).

The last factor is goal orientation, which refers to the goals and motivation that individuals attribute to their organizational actions (VandeWalle, 1997). Performance goal orientation (PGO) makes individuals concerned about gaining favorable judgment of their competence, while learning goal orientation (LGO) is related to the actual development of their competence (Dweck & Legett, 1988). In the case of feedback-seeking, individuals driven by PGO tend to focus almost exclusively on positive feedback and prefer indirect methods like monitoring or indirect inquiry, while individuals driven by LGO seek for both positive and negative feedback mostly through direct inquiry (Parker & Collins 2010; Gong et al. 2014). The tendency of feedback participants to maintain good image in front of their colleagues (impression management) has been identified as one of the main obstacles of feedback-seeking process (Tsul & Ashford, 1994).

3. Radical Candor

Radical Candor is an organizational approach that has witnessed growing popularity in recent few years and it is suggested to be a beneficial practice for making organizational members more engaged and successful in the negative feedback process (Feintzeig, 2015;

Wilkie, 2016). However, it is insufficiently defined and lacks empirical evidence. Based on the previous review of psychological factors of the feedback process, we redefine radical candor in order to address feedback-related issues and their psychological factors.

3.1 Origin of Radical candor

Radical candor (RC) is defined as "the practice of giving criticism while showing genuine concern" (Scott, 2015), and it is suggested to be a spontaneous reaction of some US organizations for increased demand for more direct and practical forms of negative feedback (Feintzeig, 2015; Wilkie, 2016). Some aspects of RC were previously mentioned as a means to overcome exaggerated politeness and "false kindness" (Welch & Welch, 2005).

Contemporary organizations are suggested to use RC in order to encourage a frank kind of communication and to address bad behavior, poor performance, and low productivity (Wilkie, 2016). It is related to the ability to face the unpleasant aspects of cooperation (Scott, 2015), more specifically to "that which everyone knows and no one speaks of" (also known as mokita) (Wilkie, 2016). Although RC is expressed in the form of criticism, it is about judgment of people's behavior and not people themselves (Scott, 2015). Correct application of RC also requires utilization of concrete examples, clear expression of one's emotions, ability to question his/her assumptions, and development of a genuine intention to help and not to harm the others (Wilkie, 2016).

3.2 Construction and Specifics of Radical candor

We suggest that radical candor should focus both on development of feedback skills and supportive personal qualities of proactivity, compassion, and self-compassion. We define radical candor as the proactive and compassionate engagement in unpleasant and direct feedback process. As opposed to the previous explanation of radical candor as solely feedback-giving behavior, we find radical candor to be beneficial for the development of both approaches, as they benefit most from negative feedback and share similar psychological factors that trigger feedback-related issues (Kruger & DeNisi, 1996; Ashford et al., 2016).

We also define radical candor as a proactive behavior in order to explicitly state that it is voluntarily initiated. Proactive behavior refers to one's tendency to be relatively detached from the situational factors and to be able to initiate meaningful changes in the environment (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Grant & Ashford, 2008). We suggest that proactivity has potential to change the goal orientation of individuals towards more learning style, i.e. it may increase one's willingness to seek socially risky situations as his/her primary concern is learning and not the reputation or impression (VandeWalle, 1997).

Another aspect of radical candor, inspired by Scott's (2015) "showing genuine concern", is compassion that can be characterized by "feelings of warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other's wellbeing" (Singer & Klimecki, 2014, p. 875). Compassion represents another motivational factor, as it may stimulate organizational members to seek the unpleasant feedback-related situations for the sake of mutual well-being (Gilbert & Choden, 2014). It also promotes emotional stability and ability to endure the unpleasant feedback situations, as opposed to empathy that is usually accompanied with distress (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Finally, while it is practiced by more members in a team, it supports the development of mutual care

which has the potential to help members to develop more secure attachment (Gilbert & Choden, 2014).

The last aspect of radical candor is self-compassion, that is defined as "being touched by, and open to, one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness" (Neff, 2003, p.67). We decided to include self-compassion as a component of radical candor because 1) it further supports development of emotional stability as it is related to a decrease of stress, anxiety, and depression (Neff & Germer, 2013); 2) it is suggested to represent practical solutions for the issues related to self-esteem, as it does not involve clinging to any kind of self-image and focuses on development of genuine self-kindness (Neff, 2003); 3) as a practice of giving psychological care to oneself, it allows individuals to reclaim care they missed during childhood and gives them the potential to develop secure attachment among organizational members (Neff, 2011).

3.3 Radical Candor Intervention

We propose that radical candor should be implemented in the official form of an intervention as: 1) it may have a higher chance of preventing inadequate use and misleading direction; 2) it can be more compatible with particular corporate cultures; 3) it may increase the chance of being accepted by both regular employees and supervisors; 4) the transition may take less time and deliver results sooner.

We propose that radical candor intervention should start with facilitation of supportive personal qualities in order to develop the right psychological conditions among participants for facing unpleasant situations. This part includes practices of inner motivation (Sinek, 2011) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) for the development of the proactivity of participants, loving-kindness practice for the development of compassion (Gilbert & Choden, 2014), and self-kindness for the development of self-compassion (Neff, 2011). The second part should focus on facilitation of informal feedback skills that involve development of awareness of social conditions, i.e. when it is appropriate to give or seek for feedback; awareness of equal responsibility of feedback-givers and feedback-seekers; depersonalization of feedback, i.e. focusing on behavior and not on personality; acceptance of the feedback, i.e. ability to accept incoming information and not to judge it; and development of inquiry skills through the simulations and gamification methods.

Similar to other interventions in the field of personal development (Neff & Germer, 2013), a radical candor intervention should take at least 8 weeks with a minimum of 2 hours per week and one intense 6-hour weekend session. The first three weeks of the program should focus solely on development of proactivity, compassion, and self-compassion, and then the practices of feedback-giving and feedback-seeking behavior should be included in the program.

4.   Discussion

4.1 Contribution of Radical Candor to Feedback Studies

Although contemporary studies provide a lot of insight into the issues of feedback-giving and feedback-seeking behavior, less attention was given the solutions of their psychological antecedents (Ashford et al. 2016; Der Rijt et al. 2012; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Radical candor may possibly balance this lack of evidence, because it represents a practical solution to the psychological factors of the feedback process. Research should, therefore, primarily focus on examination of the effects on supportive personal qualities and psychological factors of radical candor. Researchers may consider using a compassion scale (CS) (Pommier, 2011) to assess the effects on compassion, a self-compassion scale (Neff, 2003) to assess the effects on self-compassion, or a proactive personality scale (PSS) to measure proactivity (Seibert, Crant & Kraimer, 1999).

Proactivity and compassion may show a positive effect on learning goal orientation (LGO) and a negative effect on performance goal orientation (PGO), both can be assessed by a goal orientation scale (Button, Mathieu & Zajac, 1996). Similarly, we expect a negative effect of these variables on impression management which can be measured by impression management scale (Bolino & Turnley, 1999). Self-Compassion may further show beneficial effects on self-esteem assessed by Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the quality of attachment (secure, avoidant, and anxious) measured by the adult attachment scale (AAS) (Collins & Read, 1990). Compassion and self-compassion may also support development of emotional stability assessed by the emotional intelligence scale (Schutte et al., 1998).

Finally, we suggest future studies to examine the impact of radical candor interventions on feedback-giving and feedback-seeking behavior. In the case of feedback-giving behavior, radical candor may be particularly beneficial for willingness to deliver unfavorable feedback and source credibility among feedback-givers that can be assessed through feedback environment scale (Steelman & Levy, 2004). Researchers may also focus directly on quality of supervisor feedback through measures like a Supervisory Relationship Questionnaire (SRQ) (Palomo, Beinart & Cooper. 2010). In the case of feedback-seeking behavior, radical candor may show a positive effect on the willingness to directly ask for feedback. This variable can be assessed by methods like a feedback-seeking scale (Gupta, Govindarajan & Malhotra, 1999) or information seeking tactic scale (Miller, 1996). Radical candor may also show a positive effect on ability of feedback-givers to positively respond to feedback-seeking, and we recommend the use of a feedback-seeking promotion subscale on feedback orientation scale to assess this effect (Steelman & Levy, 2004). Future studies may also find interesting results in the case of overall impact of radical candor intervention on the ability of organizational members to use, apply and be confident in the obtained feedback that may be assessed by a feedback orientation scale (FOS) (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010).

4.2 Practical Considerations of Radical Candor Intervention

We suggest that organizations willing to apply radical candor may consider two general ways to implement radical candor intervention. The first form is a top-to-bottom implementation that entails official facilitation of radical candor skills throughout the management and employees. Radical candor intervention would be officially announced and directly implemented in the work teams, starting with the leadership of the organization. The second form represents more covert development of radical candor though selected members of organization. These members would be trained in radical candor skills and then serve as role models of the radical candor approach in the organizational environment.

We recommend to primarily focus on managers as they tend to have the highest impact on others, but also to include more regular employees as it may help to make the intervention more natural. Decisions about implementation style should be based on analysis.

First of all, we suggest that analysis should focus on the level of security that members feel in their organizational environment. Such analysis can examine the level of perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) or perceived security of supervisor-subordinate relationship (Palomo, Beinart & Cooper, 2010). The low level of these factors would basically indicate that an official intervention might be perceived as threatening among organizational members. Therefore, a covert style of intervention would be more suitable in such conditions. We also suggest that organizations with a less secure environment should give even more focus on development of compassion and self-compassion in order to increase the caring processes among individuals and to decrease negative impact of these factors on feedback process.

We suggest that some of the characteristics of organizational culture like average employee age, size of company, culture of origin, field of industry or location (Deal and Kennedy, 1982) may also be worth considering during analysis. Organizations with a younger generation may have a better chance to adapt to the changes driven by intervention than the older generation (Lattuch & Young, 2011), smaller companies are able to deliver the message to all their employees faster than bigger ones (Galán et al., 2009), Western countries tend to be more open-minded and willing to take risks than Eastern countries (Garcia et al., 2014), companies from cultures with a high power distance index may show more willingness to accept official changes initiated by the leadership of the company (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). All those mentioned factors would basically serve as a good foundation for a top-to-bottom intervention as they provide a higher chance that the members would accept new changes brought by an intervention. We suggest that future studies should also include some of these factors as moderating variables in the research models.

4.3 Limitations of the Study

We suggested possible beneficial effects of radical candor on supportive personal qualities, psychological factors, and outcomes of the feedback process. Although we recommend including all these groups of variables in future research, as they may show beneficial results, the dependency between radical candor and the variables is not clear. Further analysis is required to decide which one of these factors would serve as a dependent variable and which one as a moderating or mediating one.

We also recognize that other factors such as change in leadership style, source credibility, resilience or engagement might significantly influence the quality of negative feedback process similarly to radical candor intervention. We recommend future research include some of these factors as moderating variable in the future research.

Finally, many of our suggested methods are based on self-report questionnaires that are related to several possible issues for the organizational research (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). We strongly recommend future studies to combine self and peer report measures in order to narrow the effects of social bias.

5. Conclusion

Our paper presented and discussed the emerging organizational approach radical candor. Organizational feedback is a challenging organizational topic today and radical candor has the potential to bring new practical solutions to the field. However, it lacks any empirical evidence so far. Our paper introduced radical candor as an approach designed to develop personal qualities that play a key role in the ability to constructively participate in the negative feedback process. We suggested that radical candor can be potentially beneficial for the development of feedback-giving and feedback-seeking behavior, and psychological factors that influence the ability of organizational members face the unpleasant aspects of the process. We recommend future studies conduct further analysis to discriminate dependent variables from moderators. We also recommend conducting further analysis focused on environmental factors prior to application of radical candor interventions in real settings.

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