



## White Paper 2013-17

### Candour, a Key Cultural Trait for Project Success

*Some corporate cultures refuse to watch reality in the eye. As a result, when issues inevitably happen during project execution, it takes a long time for these organizations to address them. This state of denial remains until the issue grows to a point that it is not possible any more to deny it – and it is often too late to do something about it. This destabilizing situation is entirely created by a lack of candour in the organization culture. How can we identify this undesirable trait and what can we do about it?*

#### Candour – a natural immune system for organizations

Bureaucratic and traditionally command-and-control organizations often promote all sorts of denial and lack of candour behaviours. Because people don't want to be scolded they prefer to hide from issues. Turning their back on reality, they expect somebody else is going to get caught and invent all sorts of strategies to escape responsibility. Those few courageous enough to speak up and be the messenger of reality face the very real possibility to get shot on the spot.

Nothing is worst for an organization than lack of candour. Reality, how ugly, needs to be looked straight in the face for the right decisions to be taken. Undesired events happen, inevitably. They need to be addressed early. Hiding and denying them, hoping that they will disappear by themselves, is generally wishful thinking.

Lack of candour allows organizational tumours to grow until the point where they might suffocate the organization. Candour enables early detection of those tumours and treatment while they are still benign. In that way, candour (coupled with the right information filtering system to identify significant deviations from the background noise) is the natural immune system of organizations, the system that allows them to detect and fix diseases early without jeopardizing the entire organism.

#### Candour and projects

Projects are a fast-paced endeavour – like an organism that would have an extra-high metabolism. Tumours can grow much faster and stifle the entire project in a matter of months. It is even more vital to detect preliminary signs of issues or dysfunctions early and act on them immediately so as not to jeopardize the project outcome. This explains why lack of candour is even worse in project organizations. Yet, we are astonished to still repeatedly find that trait in a number of recognized project organizations. This often leads to catastrophic failures – made even more catastrophic by the late recognition of the issue.

**Lack of candour is possibly the single most important factor in organization derailments, and it is particularly impactful when it comes to project management, which are much more fast-paced endeavours**

#### How do you recognize a lack of candour in a project organization?

- Lack of candour often reveals itself through conversations and through the data gathering and reporting system;
- A large distance between the reality in the field (as ascertained by a field trip and/or conversation with field personnel) and the 'official' stand on progress or issues (as expressed for example, through schedule update or reporting);
- Denial to recognize obvious problems in the project environment that will have a significant impact on the project (even if the industry is already talking about these issues);
- Very significant near-misses that could have derailed an entire project are not reported up into the organization (they are covered-up); while this is rarely the case nowadays for safety-related events, it can be routinely the case for other events impacting project delivery like logistical delays, lost equipment, damaged material etc;
- Large delays in taking into account events in the project forecast (a variation of this is to update correctly some parts of the schedule and leaving suspect negative floats which mean that the impact of this information is not carried forward to the final project outcome); or, alternatively, making the project forecast look nicer through premature revenue recognition;
- Messengers that raise issues into the organization are (almost) literally shot.

On the other hand, a constant trait of candid organizations is that they generally have setup a number of redundant information gathering systems. This redundancy with several parallel streams of information gathering and processing has the aim of sparking debate which will give a better understanding of event - ensures that the view of the leadership conforms to the reality of the field.

## What needs to be done to change the organization's candour mindset

The expectation for candour, and the example of proper behaviour, needs obviously to be driven from the top of the organization. As usual in these instances, declarations are not enough; actions and examples are necessary. In particular,

- People that raise issues early need to be rewarded even if the issue they raised finally proves to be innocuous,
- Denial cases in front of obvious issues need to be severely treated,
- A spirit of investigation and evidence checking needs to be supported.

An excellent way to ensure candid information of senior management is to have a few experienced people that know how to speak their mind reporting directly to them and in charge of cross-organizational studies and reviews. This model can be replicated lower in the organization. It has the benefit of improving immediately the quality and reliability of information, and gives the opportunity for healthy debates. Of course, it should not be pushed up to the point where a parallel organization is in place that competes with the normal organization. It should remain a lightweight, informal setup. Still it will influence significantly the organization to change its behaviour as issues will then not remain uncovered. More generally, the successful project leader will develop a network that will allow him or her to have access to independent opinions and views on the situation, helping identify events at an early stage.

### When is waiting the right attitude?

Sometimes, just waiting without taking any action can be the most effective way to solve the problem. And indeed, knowing how to use time is sometimes a great tool. However, the fact that it can be effective sometimes is often used as an excuse to leave time do its work without making the effort of taking action.

Waiting only works in specific cases, namely only when:

- it is ascertained that other forces are at work that will influence the root cause of the issue more powerfully than what you could do;

- there is no use to take any major action (including limiting consequential impact) within your action circle.

Even in these rare cases, you need to determine whether you could not help those other external forces to resolve the issue more quickly.

### Candour is tough

Candour is emotionally tough. Looking at reality in the eye – and telling about it - can be draining and stressful. This explains why lots of people prefer to live in denial or just avoid to look at, and act about what is happening. When asked about it, most managers and leaders believe that they are not part of this category of deniers. Yet in the reality of organizations this happens far more often than you might think: how often do people avoid difficult conversations about performance or behaviour? How often do people avoid giving sound feedback to a person that obviously behaves inappropriately? How often do people remain passive when major events shake the project?

Because candour is tough on an individual level, the organization's culture must be strong enough to promote it. Success requires that the entire organization's culture

changes into a culture of tough conversations held on the background of a realistic assessment of the actual situation.

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### Conclusion

Lack of candour is possibly the single most important factor in organization derailments, and it is particularly impactful when it comes to project management, which are must more fast-paced endeavours.

Developing a candid culture is a must in project management organizations, in particular when large and complex projects are executed that could have dire and far reaching consequences in case of failure. Determine the level of candour in your organization, and make sure that through the right leadership, it improves to the point where no major issue gets denied, ever.



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