

A Leader's Guide to "Super-Candor"

Harness insight. Spot opportunities. Deliver measurable impact and results.

Who is this for? It's for any leader at any level of an organization who believes their team is capable of delivering more. This guide provides the roadmap that will lead you toward:

- Understanding how your business actually works
- Identifying the opportunities that, if capitalized on, could shift the team from good to great
- Defining the steps to realizing those opportunities... yielding outcomes that matter to shareholders and customers

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In Part 2 we will identify the tangible actions a leader can take to unlock the Super-Candor that will fuel and inform the wisest path forward.

Introduction

Delivering bottom-line results has never been more critical – or more challenging – than it is today. The demographic changes in the workforce, the pervasiveness of digital technology, and the accelerated rate of change (a la Moore’s Law)** have all conspired to raise the bar on leadership. Today more than ever, *we need to get this right.*

While so many leaders are great at action-planning, the most critical missing link for many is a true understanding of our starting place: of how we actually operate today, and where, frankly, we fall down. Understanding this allows us to customize an approach designed to solve for our own unique challenges and opportunities. It is this clarity, this transparency that has the power to inform, align, and design the teams and strategies that will be most relevant for your business. One-size-fits-all’s time has passed!

Sitting at the top of an org chart no longer correlates with relevance of knowledge. Today, critical insights live everywhere – at every level – of our organizations. And the leaders with the skills, tools, and insight to harness that knowledge, allowing it to inform the design of their teams and organizations, will be the biggest winners.

This guide is designed for anyone ready to be that leader.

**Bersin, Josh, et al. “Introduction – The New Organization Different By Design” Deloitte University Press. February 2016

Part 1: Understanding Super-Candor

a) What is it?

Super-Candor, as I define it, is the counter-point to the “good soldier” or “team-player” mentality; it’s the gritty, uncensored set of truths that every leader needs to hear, in order to ensure alignment between (a) how their team or organization is designed, or set up to work, and (b) what that team or organization is striving to achieve.

It’s authentic clarity around things like:

- How your team or organization actually operates today
- Where breakdowns are occurring due to gaps or breaks in the system
- How well (or not well) that team or organization is supported by its leadership
- What would need to change in order to shift from the present state to the state of highest achievement

And it is with these candid insights that leaders are able to truly design the most effective organizations that align to their unique vision and goals.

b) Why does it matter to my business?

When we see an opportunity to achieve something more – whether that’s reducing cost, growing profit, expanding into a new industry – we have a tendency to move quickly toward actions and solutions.

And while I have no bias against actions or solutions, the truth is that when we embark on any quest for achievement without an honest assessment of our starting place, we are leaving potential results and impact on the table.

Imagine visiting a doctor due to an illness... and then not sharing with that doctor your full list of symptoms and habits. When that doctor offers you a treatment plan... how effective will it be? Maybe it will yield you some health benefits, but it will never have the same impact as a treatment plan tailored to your unique and real symptoms.

Personally, I experience a professional heartbreak every time I see a well-intended team or organization embarking on a quest for greatness – complete with analytical rigor and gobs of resourcing – without beginning said quest with a call for... no – an INSISTENCE on Super-Candor from within.

So in short, Super-Candor helps inform your “treatment plan” ensuring an alignment between where you are today, and where you’re striving to go.

c) What are the risks of disregarding it?

Can your team or business continue charging ahead without embracing Super-Candor? Indeed it can. But it’s being done a true disservice, and there are legitimate business risks associated with a failure to harness Super-Candor.

Here are just a few:

- A broken process in your system leaves you vulnerable to exposure or a customer disappointment... and no one is brave enough to call it out
- The perspective of key Subject Matter Experts is missed because they are invited to the table too late in the conversation (i.e., they are box-checkers versus strategic advisers) and your products and services may be suffering
- You sacrifice agility because people will continue soldiering through the inefficient ways of doing things, even when their fresh eyes have spotted more streamlined or strategic ways of working
- You miss out on real innovation because:
 - (a) Talent is spending time “band-aiding” problems, making the current state work – versus offering new ways, products and strategies
 - (b) Great ideas live too far down your hierarchy... and there is fear or uncertainty around “running them up the flagpole”
- The values and commitments you communicate are not actually being experienced by your team. They won’t tell you... but they will leave you
- Goals aren’t being hit and/or customers are unsatisfied -- not due to lack of capability, but rather someone’s lack of empowerment to do what needs to be done
- Enron. Wells Fargo. AIG. Need I say more?

d) Why is it so hard to unlock?

“Business” is not a term that was coined accidentally. Business is busy. Leaders in particular. And as our teams watch us juggle too many balls at once, it’s natural that they infer we’re looking for “good soldiers” and “team players” – definitely NOT whiners, complainers, or nay-sayers.

And as a result, our teams avoid highlighting the issues, the problems, the reality. They want to be viewed as heroes, as those who will “power through” and get the work done without drama or complaint.

But there is a real difference between whining or complaining, and raising legitimate business issues or concerns, in conjunction with a proposed solution.

And as leaders, it is imperative that we get this message across to our teams (easier said than done!).

In Part 2, we will cover Role Modeling as one of the critical steps leaders should take, in order to help their teams see the difference between the unconstructive whining, complaining, and accusing, as compared with a constructive and respectful dialog aimed at impact and outcomes.

e) What form does it take?

If I’ve sold you at this point on the opportunity ahead, and the risks of not capitalizing on it... then likely you’re wondering – what does Super-Candor actually look like?

Super-Candor is present when real and gritty dialog can happen: at any time, between anybody. And to get to it, there are some key guiding questions a leader can pose to begin the conversation.

Getting to Super-Candor is a journey. And in the next section we’ll discuss the key elements of that journey. But for now, here is a set of guiding questions a leader may pose. The following captures a sampling, but leaders should:

- (a) Choose questions that feel relevant and authentic to their teams and organizations
- (b) Customize these or any questions to ensure the tone matches their intention

See the Guiding Questions on the following page

Guiding Questions: Driving Super-Candor

- ① Are you ever seeing ideas being stifled or shut down? If so, what can we do to change that?
- ② Are you / your team being held accountable to anything that you're not empowered to deliver on?
- ③ Where are the brightest spots in how we work today? Where are you seeing real efficiency, innovation, and empowerment already in action, and what can we learn from those examples and apply elsewhere?
- ④ Are there any points of disconnect between the promises and commitments we've made to you, and our actions and behaviors? May I have an example?
- ⑤ Do you ever have the experience of seeing clients or customers being frustrated or disappointed, and you're feeling helpless to improve their experience?
- ⑥ Where do we need to enhance and increase our diversity of perspective, and what is holding us back from doing so?
- ⑦ Are you finding yourself spending time on things that aren't adding real value to the business? What would happen if we simply stopped doing them?

Part 2: Getting to Super-Candor

By now, let's assume that you're sold on, and committed to the value of unlocking Super-Candor within your team or organization. So let's move from the foundational what and why, to the actionable how.

Following is a set of steps you can take to drive your team or organization in the right direction. And with the power of Super-Candor at your fingertips, you'll be positioned to assess and adjust your team or organization's design, to ensure its alignment with your specific goals and objectives.

Step 1: Make your case

As we've already established, for years we've been sending (whether intentionally or inadvertently) signals to our teams that we're busy and we don't want to hear the negative. So simply asking your team for candid feedback likely won't get you far. You need to convince them you really mean it – and that there is purpose and intent to such Super-Candor.

The key to opening the gates is making your case. It lives all throughout Part 1 of this document, but let me boil it down further for you:

- a) Positioning: Explaining that heroes on this team aren't the ones who "tough it out" or "create workarounds to get things done" – no, heroes here are the ones willing to help move our business forward with a candid assessment of (a) where we have opportunities to improve and (b) what capitalizing on (or fixing) those opportunities might look like.
- b) Distinguishing complaint from Super-Candor: Equally important – to ensure our Super-Candor is constructive, and not simply an open can of worms – is setting the tone for your team. We aren't looking for a series of complaints. We're looking for the identification of opportunities, and a willingness to be part of the solution.

Take away: Think about how you might make the above resonate with your team. Jot down some thoughts, some phrases you might begin to insert into your conversations to lay the foundation for a belief in Super-Candor.

Step 2: Extend a genuine invitation

Many organizations distribute an annual employee survey (which may be positioned as assessing culture, satisfaction, engagement... or who knows what?) and then check the box. Yes (they tell themselves) we've asked the important questions, and our teams have answered. We're all set.

But honestly, what typically happens with these surveys? So many employees either (a) don't trust the guaranteed anonymity, so they opt out, or (b) unleash all of their complaints and frustrations, largely because this is their singular opportunity in the year to vent.

The above may be a cynical view, and certainly there are some constructive insights to be gleaned from a survey. But the anonymity, the once-a-year frequency, and the one-way means of static communication do not, in sum, add up to the level of insight required to really define a change.

So how do we change the playing field? Make this a real dialog with our teams instead of an annual check-the-box exercise?

Here are some ways to make your invitation of Super-Candor feel genuine to your team.

Start conversations that are:

- Face-to-face: and therefore dynamic and interactive
- Regularly occurring: not just once a year
- Prioritized: too many leaders let one-on-one meetings with team members be the first thing to go in the face of too many meetings. Leaders need to earn the right to Super-Candor, and this happens by demonstrating a commitment to having these conversations
- Grounded in opportunity-finding: not complaining or whining
- Reciprocal: questions should be asked and answered in all directions

Take away: Recognize this will not be like flipping a switch, but rather it will take time and persistence on your part. Your initial invitations for Super-Candor might yield little. But don't let that dissuade you. Persist in creating these opportunities, and over time your team will start to test the waters.

Step 3: Role Model the behavior

Extending the invitation and creating the opportunities with our teams are critical. But to really persuade our teams that we mean business, we as leaders need to begin role modeling Super-Candor; walking the talk.

This can come in various forms. Perhaps you find yourself having a conversation, in a public or open forum, with a peer or even leader of your own... and you can take the opportunity to raise a constructive point. Or maybe you can think of some "real-life" scenarios today that warrant some Super-Candor-style insight... and you can do some role playing with your team in which you play the employee, role modeling the type of Super-Candor you'd like to see. What would you say?

After so many years of believing candor is our enemy, likely your teams will need to see some evidence that you're genuine in what you're asking for... and they need to see a roadmap for what it looks like.

Take away: Put yourself in the shoes of your team members. If you were in their position, what type of example would you need to have set for you in order for you to begin to change your own behavior? And where do you have your own opportunity to be brave and deliver some Super-Candor of your own? Maybe that's the right place to start.

Step 4: Recognize and reward the behavior

Moving your team toward Super-Candor may feel glacial. It won't happen all at once, but rather in small successes along the way.

People learn and adopt new behaviors through positive reinforcement. So your job at this stage is to keep your Super-Candor antennae up at all times... and any time you witness even the tiniest success, call it out, reward it, make the biggest deal you can without feeling foolish. And a success at this stage doesn't need to yield a significant outcome. The simple act of someone on your team offering up Super-Candor is the result, the behavior you're looking to reward. Success begets success.

Often we associate reward with money and/or promotion. And those are powerful motivators... but by no means are they our only options. Think creatively about what reward and recognition look like for those on your team. A hand-written thank you note? Public acknowledgement? An opportunity to present an idea at a team meeting? An introduction to another senior leader? Push yourself to think outside the box.

Equally important is the way you speak about Super-Candor and its positive impact on your team. It's not enough to reward the individual who exhibited the bravery, but we need to create our stories around it. We need to be weaving a narrative about the series of positive impacts Super-Candor has had on our business. Start weaving these small moments of bravery into the stories you tell.

Take away: Your primary goal at this point is to drive behavior change, not perfection. Really think about how the individuals on your team are wired. What sorts of recognition and acknowledgement would be meaningful to them? And how can you really hone your ear for examples of Super-Candor, and turn those moments into stories you can start sharing with your team?

Step 5: Close the loop

And last but most certainly not least... if we want our teams to be courageous in their candor, then we owe them the courtesy of circling back with them once they have offered it.

If someone takes the time and shows the bravery to offer up a constructive insight or recommendation – whether or not we choose to action it – we owe them the courtesy of follow-up.

- What did we do with their idea?
- Why or why not?
- What value did it add to our own thinking?
- What did we learn from their willingness to share?

Employees across many organizations will tell you the number one reason they don't offer up feedback is their firm belief that no one is really interested or listening. Therefore, why waste their time?

Take away: Spend a few minutes reflecting on a time where you offered up an idea or suggestion (whether in person, via survey, etc) and you felt like it landed in a black hole. How eager were you to share, the next time you had an idea? Consider this with your team going forward. Any time an idea or suggestion is shared, make the commitment to circle back and close the loop... and then do so.

CONCLUSION: The purpose, once again, of this guide is to leave you, leader, in a position of being:

- Compelled and empowered to drive Super-Candor
- Equipped to facilitate the conversations to yield the necessary outcomes
- Inspired to see great and authentic change happen

Great leadership takes courage; and sometimes it's about the courage to hear what we don't want to hear. But those truths will offer us the opportunity to grow and improve if we treat them with the respect they deserve.

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