Linking Candour to Leadership Character with Gen. Rick Hillier

By Mary Crossan and Alyson Byrne

Reprint# 9B13TF01
Linking Candour to Leadership Character with Gen. Rick Hillier

By Mary Crossan and Alyson Byrne

Mary Crossan is a professor of Strategic Management at the Western University’s Ivey Business School in London, Ont. Alyson Byrne is a post-doctoral fellow with the Ian O. Ihnatowycz Institute of Leadership at Western University’s Ivey Business School in London, Ont.

Jack Welch famously called lack of candour “the biggest dirty little secret in business.” It’s an important observation, one that sits at the heart of too many public accounts of corporate scandals and tragic accidents, not to mention not-so-public failures of decision-making. In this article, we describe the critical connection between leadership and candour. Then to understand its application, we turn to General (Ret.) Rick Hillier, former Chief of the Defence Staff for Canadian Forces, who has dedicated himself (and the organizations with which he has worked) to developing a culture of candour.

Lack of candour stems from avoidance of difficult or uncomfortable conversations. There are many reasons for this avoidance, ranging from the human tendency to avoid conflict to the inherent power imbalances in organizational hierarchies that make it difficult to “speak truth to power.” We silence ourselves due to a perceived lack of credibility or when we fail to fully grasp the facts. Sometimes we withhold our views out of genuine desire not to hurt or harm people. However, what often starts out as a simple attempt to avoid difficult or uncomfortable conversations, can morph into a series of bad decisions, which ultimately manifests itself in serious consequences.

In the book *Winning* (Harper Collins, 2005), Welch provided three key reasons for being an advocate for candour. First and foremost, he noted, you get more people into the conversation, generating better ideas and more opportunity to learn. Second, candour speeds up problem solving by putting issues on the table faster and allowing them to be handled without dealing with “beating around the bush” or the conversation camouflage that makes it difficult to trust information and people alike. Third, candour reduces cost because it fosters more efficient processes and helps managers avoid costly mistakes that arise when people are afraid to speak up.

Candour without character, of course, is undesirable. Indeed, speaking your mind when it is rooted in self-interest, ego and low emotional intelligence can be abrasive and abusive. This is not the type of candour we are talking about. Leadership candour emanates from character. In fact, you need character for leadership candour. Many people attempt to justify keeping their views quiet by hiding behind smokescreens (such as being shy, introverted, not a good speaker, not in a position of influence, not 100 per cent sure). There is no doubt that a person can be naturally introverted and tend to enjoy solitude versus the social interactions of an extrovert. But this doesn’t prevent someone from having a point of view and speaking it. If it does, the missing ingredient is character.

Our basic premise is that candour requires character and with character comes the judgment that ensures candour is expressed in appropriate ways. Exercising character and candour requires a disposition to leadership whether or not one has a formal position of leadership. Candour plays out in day-to-day conversations and interactions and it is these conversations that culminate in quality judgment and
decision-making. Both character and candour can be developed. But understanding the critical connections between character and candour requires unpacking the dimensions of character.

Character needs to be considered alongside competency and commitment in organizations as shown in Figure 1. Leaders need them all, but weakness in character is particularly problematic.

We insert competencies, character and commitment into the following quote from Warren Buffett: “Somebody once said that in looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity [character], intelligence [competency], and energy [commitment]. And if you don’t have the first, the other two will kill you... If you hire somebody without integrity, you really want them to be dumb and lazy.” Despite the importance of character, little is understood about its meaning and application in organizations. Philosophers have discussed character for millennia. Modern psychologists have added their voice to the growing chorus of advocates on leader character. However, the importance of character is still finding its way into the thinking of mainstream management.

Bridging the wealth of underlying scholarship with relevant practice, our research has revealed key elements of character in support of 11 inter-related dimensions as shown in Figure 2.
Figure 2: Dimensions of Leadership Character

Candour requires depth of character in all 11 dimensions and they all must work together and support one another. Developing one dimension without the others risks turning virtue of character into vice. Courage in excess, for example, is simply recklessness. Developing depth of courage requires the self-regulation that comes from temperance. Consider the critical links. Candour requires courage for individuals to voice things that may be difficult. The motivation for doing so comes from dimensions of accountability and often a sense of purpose, optimism and future-orientation that comes from the dimension of transcendence. Caring enough about other people to engage in difficult conversations requires development of the dimensions of collaboration and humanity. Personal ego can get in the way of people being candid about things that may not reflect positively on them and therefore the dimension of humility is critical. Difficult and challenging conversations can become emotionally charged while having the capacity to remain calm, composed and self-controlled arises from the dimension of temperance. Drive brings both a sense of vigour that helps to sustain one’s efforts and also a striving for excellence that ensures individuals don’t settle for inferior approaches. Judgment draws on all dimensions including justice, which provides a sense of fairness in both process and outcomes.

But can you have too much candour? How do we avoid becoming mean-spirited? How do organizations develop a culture of candour? Since he was ideally positioned to understand leadership character and candour as Canada’s former senior ranking military officer, we posed these questions to General Hillier (the following Q&A has been edited for length).
Q: General Hillier, why is candour so critical?
A: I think candour can be brought up a level to the strategic level of leadership, because that is what leadership is all about. I fundamentally believe that part of being a leader is being focused on people, by inspiring them, by having a vision, and some kind of a plan or strategy. Leadership is about that great purpose. By linking the efforts of people on a daily basis to that great purpose, they can see that their daily work in a cubicle, or in an infantry section, relates to what you are trying to achieve overall. You have to win the respect of people, and you win the respect of people by showing them respect. I believe that the greatest respect you can show people is simply a thing called inclusion. You include them in that great purpose and how you are trying to achieve it in every way. In order to do that, you have to be candid with them and you have to be open with them. I actually think that being candid and having candour are fundamental parts of being a leader.

Q: How do leaders develop the ability to have candour?
A: A little thing called moral courage. A lack of moral courage often causes difficulty in being candid. As Chief of the Defence Staff I spoke frankly, both publicly and with my team of 100,000 men and women in uniform and their families around the country. You have to have the moral courage to be able to do that. I use an infantry battalion as an example. If you are developing a purpose and a plan, the entire battalion of 800 to 1000 people contributes to both the purpose and the plan. You have to have the moral courage to develop a relationship with all those people and then be frank with them and build the trust that comes with being a leader. If you’ve got the trust of your infantry battalion, and every soldier is part of defining, achieving and contributing to the mission, you have to be candid at the start of it, and it takes moral courage to do that.

Q: How do you distinguish positive and negative candour?
A: Well, candour in its positive aspects, which is the type of candour I try to engage in, is the form of candour that emerges by focusing on your people. It’s about getting your people to get up in the morning and come to work, bringing both their body and their mind. Leaders need to inspire them to do so. To be inspiring, you need to get them onside by using candour. When I see the negative side of candour, it is when leaders use exclusive knowledge or make comments for their own personal gain. That’s what I think sometimes occurs. If you watch what people do when supposedly leaking secret memos or other secret things, they are doing it for personal gain about 50 per cent of the time. That is where I see candour being very negative because it destroys organizations and drags down good people who are trying to achieve great things in most cases.

Q: Why is it so difficult to be candid?
A: Insecurity, which often comes from incompetence or ineptness or lack of ability to do the job. That insecurity leads to types of behaviours that you don’t want leaders to have, one of which is secretiveness or not being fully candid. Another is thinking that knowledge is power and therefore I know more. Folks don’t understand that leading is about people. People have to be part of the equation, and sometimes leaders are not comfortable with people questioning what’s happening. If leaders are insecure, they tend to withhold information. They think that gives them additional power or an edge where they can appear competent in front of others.
Q: Might it be equally difficult to be the recipient of candour?
A: Receiving candour is not an easy thing to do. People talk about these 360-degree assessments for leaders. Anyone not using them personally and for the folks that report to them is missing out on one of the most powerful tools. It doesn’t even have to be formal. I talked to every soldier, sailor, airman or airwoman, and family member in the Canadian Forces that I could possibly meet. Those tens of thousands of people helped me form an opinion of other commanders, subordinate commanders, senior leaders, junior leaders. That was as good a 360-degree assessment as you can get and that’s a big part of it. Receiving the positive and negative aspects of this feedback, I tried to always remember that my view of somebody as a great individual was from a relatively narrow point of view. I needed to balance that point of view. Sometimes you get information that goes against what you believe, so you stop and reassess thoroughly before you carry on.

Q: Can you have too much candour? Should candour be used all the time?
A: Well, as my dad said to me, if you never lie, you don’t have to remember anything. I thought that was an incredibly wise comment. As Chief of the Defence Staff, when I stood up and talked to either the nation or my soldiers, I tried to tell it exactly as it was. I would try not to put a negative or a positive spin on it, but just to be absolutely candid because I knew that if circumstances changed, I would get up the next time and say this is how I see it from my perspective and it was only the circumstances that changed from last week to this week.

Q: How do you develop a culture of candour in the workplace?
A: Actions speak loudly. As a leader, you try to guide others in the way you guide yourself, with the same principles, ethics and values that you operate upon. When your actions have said to folks that you are going to be frank and candid, you have to be prepared for subordinates, those who want to follow you, to be equally candid. You set up a culture of candour by not punishing people when they follow your lead. I had a young major who had done some incredibly valorous things in Afghanistan on behalf of our nation. We were together at an event after I retired and he said, “You can’t believe what an impact you had on us. When I questioned things and I was straightforward and frank, I did that with the comfort of knowing that is what you believed in and that is the fundamental way you lead.” And I thought, well okay, we’ve established the culture here, now it needs to keep going, but at least it’s established. In other words, actions speak loudly.

Q: What are the impediments to developing a culture of candour in the workplace?
A: There are three legs to the leadership stool: experience, training and education. The seat of the stool is mentoring, which holds everything together. If you develop leaders with that process in mind and a base of articulated values, you start to build the right culture, remove the impediments and begin to have an organization with leaders that are focused on people who are inclusive and who are willing to be candid. If you don’t do that, you get the opposite, lack of leadership, which manifests itself into a lack of candour in the workplace. Then negative outcomes spiral down and you create a culture where people emulate that. You will quickly and regretfully find that people of that nature will come into leadership positions very quickly. If you want to break that culture, you have to start with the three-legs-of-the-stool thought process in mind. You have to remove impediments by your own actions. That means you have to accept it when people speak up, when people are frank and when people are candid throughout the organization. You have to accept it with all the warts that come with it. Sometimes that’s really difficult to do.
Q: How can we measure individual and organizational candour and assess progress?
A: That’s difficult because it is a very subjective measurement. I think the only thing you can do is measure leadership. You use 360 degree assessment tools, and you assess the success of the organization in achieving its defined overall purpose. If the purpose is not defined, you’ve got a big problem with being candid and you are not being open and honest about your overall purpose. You will see the presence of candour in leadership most during times of crises. Even when a leader is not present, leadership candour helps create an organization that is going to step up and lead. I gave my very best, but I wasn’t always successful in providing the right leadership. I figured getting it right 60 per cent of the time was good. My intentions were always honorable and whenever I tripped over myself, or wasn’t doing my job the way I should have been doing my job, the people who wanted to follow me said, “You know if the boss was on his A-game today, he would have done this, so we’ll just step up and carry on.”
We had that bond. I was carried on the backs of incredible men and women because we had a trust that came from a straightforward all-in-the-shop-window approach to leadership.

Q: Can you provide examples of candour under times of crisis or difficulty?
A: We went through a period in the 1990s and early 2000s when soldiers were not permitted to talk to media. Everything was so constrained and tightly controlled. We said our best ambassadors are our young men and women on the front lines, wherever those front lines might be, and we want them to be seen and heard by Canadians. We knew that 98 per cent were incredible citizens of our country, Canada’s sons and daughters, and if they are fully included in everything we are trying to achieve, they are going to be powerful. It was absolutely incredible to watch our men and women working professionally doing their business while in front of a camera. Whenever I stood up and talked with our deployed men and women, in Canada, the Arabian Gulf or Afghanistan, I always looked at it as a job interview. On average, I did that about 12 times a day in groups ranging from 200 to 500 people, sometimes more, sometimes less. When I stood up to talk, these soldiers knew 98 per cent of what I was going to say. Sometimes they might have known it all. What they were watching for was how I was going to say it. If I had tried to put political correctness on it, if I had tried to mask the tough things we had to deal with, round off the edges, get rid of the warts, they would recognized it in a heartbeat. I would have lost credibility and been finished as a leader, and I don’t think we would have been successful in our mission.

Q: What are the systems and processes that help facilitate candour?
A: It is not candour development. It is leadership development. I think how you develop your leadership and how you put your leadership in place is how you develop candour. It’s about how you select, train, educate, experience and mentor your leaders, and the principles and values that you articulate to them. You set the standard that you expect everyone, especially yourself, to be accountable to. Leaders have to be candid because they have to bring their people onside. We call it “mission command.” You give people a job, a mission, a purpose, along with some resources and a regulatory framework to work within. Then you set agreed-upon values and tell people to go perform their missions. I used to say to officers, “Look, I’m going to give you your mission command and I’m going to work with you on it. It’s a two-way conversation all the time, but I’m not going to do your job.”

Q: Does this system also speak to how leaders need to be able to receive candour?
A: Part of my fundamental values as Chief of the Defence Staff was that I had to represent my soldiers, my people, as robustly outside the organization as I asked them to be accountable inside the organization.
And that meant I sometimes had to say things that people in government didn’t like, that people across our country didn’t like. When you get criticism from all sources, then you know you’re probably doing it right. I asked, if I don’t represent that 18-year-old private going to Afghanistan for our nation, if I don’t articulate his or her fears, concerns, needs or lack of equipment, preparation and support, then who will? The answer was nobody. A lot of leaders of organizations are bullies inside and pussycats outside and that can destroy credibility with the team.

Q: Is candour culturally bound? How would you bring candour to a workplace that is culturally diverse?
A: By knowing about the people you work with, specifically knowing their background and their culture. If you go into Afghanistan, or the Arabian Gulf, and immediately start talking business, you are not going to do very well. Before getting down to the actual business there is an incredible lead up period, which involves all the niceties and the politeness and the tea or the coffee. If you jump that, you’re going to be seen as somebody who doesn’t know the local people or doesn’t understand them. They will see you as an abrupt Westerner. You will lose face and be ineffective. So even though it went against my grain, I’d spend a half hour talking about things like the weather to develop relationships, to get to know the locals and understand their situations. It is no different inside the organization, where you have got to get to know people and develop relationships. With some people, you can yell at each other for fifteen minutes and be perfectly content that it is a good way of doing business. But someone else can be shocked and finished with you if you so much as raise your voice. By getting to know people, you understand how to treat them with respect. And the greatest form of respect stems from including people in what you are doing in every aspect, which requires you to be candid.

Q: How do people achieve the ability to be candid throughout the organization?
A: Hard work. Out of 100,000 men and women in uniform, I met at least 75,000, perhaps more, as the Chief of the Defence Staff. It was exhausting. But I was exhilarated and inspired by meeting them, by traveling this nation, the continent, the world, by meeting soldiers on ships at sea, on ground operations, in aircraft overhead. I was trying to figure out how to put in 28 hours in a day. I went without sleep for long periods of time. But you have to get to know the people that are going to make you successful and, equally important, they have to get to know you. Leadership is very personal. It’s about your values. When I stood up and said something and got criticized by either government or media or some other aspect of our society, the people in uniform and their families had to know me. They needed confidence to say, “Okay, this is General Hillier, our leader, our Chief of the Defence Staff, trying to do something on our behalf.” So you have to get to know your people, even if it’s exhausting. I spent 50 per cent of my time just trying to get to know my people. This ties back directly to candour. I heard many things from the men and women in junior ranks. Sometimes they would explain they were doing things a certain way because it’s what the Chief of the Defence Staff wants. And sometimes I would say, “Hang on, I’m the Chief of the Defence Staff and I never ever wanted this so what’s going on here?” I would then get a chance to circle back to the leaders reporting directly to me and correct the issue and then use it to learn and develop the organization a little bit more. Getting to know all of your people definitely takes work, time and energy. It is fatiguing. But it is powerful. The end result is that you get inspired and receive the feedback necessary to help shape and change the organization.
Q: Do you have any final thoughts on candour and how it relates to leadership?
A: When we talk about candour, we really need to be talking about leadership. And if you are going to be a leader, you must focus on people. You need everyone bringing their mind and their bodies to work every single day, and leaders need to inspire people to do that. You inspire in a variety of ways, and the most powerful way is by being inclusive. You show respect and make everyone part of what you are trying to achieve in every way, shape or form, and that means making candour part of how you do business.

CONCLUSION

We often talk about integrity in leadership and the importance of candour and transparency, but we fail to consider where candour and transparency come from or how we prevent these important virtues from turning into vices. Our conversation with General Hillier reveals how leaders require courage to have open conversations. He draws from his sense of justice to recognize that being candid with others is the best way to treat people fairly.

The general’s leadership is fueled by a sense of purpose, optimism, future orientation and sense of inspiration, which fuels his own resolve and inspires others. Moreover, his strength in humanity along with a strong sense of empathy facilitates his people-focused leadership and creates an open culture of mutual respect and inclusion. The emphasis on people underscores the general’s collaboration, where he uses candour to inspire members to work together, engaging them in a common vision and purpose. Being candid in different cultures requires judgement, so he uses humility to continuously learn about the people he works with.

General Hillier illustrates the need to have depth of character to effectively receive candour. Through humility and temperance, he notes emotions can be self-regulated, allowing leaders to take responsibility for their actions and be accountable by using feedback constructively. He explains how lack of character can motivate leaders to refrain from being candid or make candour detrimental to leadership. Last but not least, he points out how weak character can negatively impact individual leadership outcomes and establishes an organizational culture in which withholding information and ineffective organizational behaviours become the norm.

General Hillier puts in the necessary time, energy and effort to know his people and be candid with them. Developing the ability to lead in this manner takes time, experience and personal reflection. But it is worth the effort. Candour grounded in character fosters an inclusive style of leadership, one that promotes mutual respect, credibility and ultimately, the ability to achieve organizational greatness.