

# HOW TO PRESENT THE OPPORTUNITY OF **COACHING** TO A **TOXIC LEADER**



Unleash Your Collective Potential  
Custom, Scalable, Data-Driven Leadership Coaching

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A blue-tinted background image showing a person's hands writing on a notepad, a laptop, and a coffee cup on a desk.

***"You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink."***

## Introduction

We are frequently approached by companies desperate to find coaching solutions to help a toxic leader. Invariably, each organization is confronted with 3 tensions: the need to successfully address their leader's destructive behavior, the need to rectify and prevent further collateral damage from impacting the team, and the need to, wherever possible, prevent the leader from walking out the door.

For the sake of this book, we are labeling these leaders as "toxic" even though we acknowledge the limitations of using such a label. Most of the clients that approach us with a "toxic" leader refrain from using the word for fear of incorrectly or unfairly labeling someone. We understand and appreciate the sensitive nature of the work. We also recognize that even though someone may be described as "toxic", they can change.

We use the word "toxic" because it describes the effect the leader is having on the work environment. Harvard professor and author of numerous books on psychological safety, Amy C. Edmondson, refers to work environments as the soil in which plants grow. Her research on this subject is clear, when toxicity enters the soil, the potential for teams to learn and grow is substantially hindered.

When the toxicity of the work environment can be traced back to one irreplaceable member of the organization, that's when coaching for behavior change enters the equation. Even though coaching is an amazingly effective tool for improving the behavior of a leader, it may not work. One of the preventable reasons that coaching fails is that it is incorrectly presented to the toxic leader. The old proverb states "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink" yet you can take it for a long run first.

In this book, we are going to show you how to create the right conditions to give your toxic leader the best chance of embracing the opportunity of coaching.

Whether you are a CEO and a valuable member of your senior leadership team is causing personnel issues, or you are an HR manager and a labor relations complaint has found its way to your desk, we want to equip you to leverage the power of coaching. If done right, you will have demonstrated a level of care and accountability that creates an environment of stability for your people to thrive.

Not only can you avoid terminating anyone, but you can turn your toxic leaders into your most powerful advocates for behavior change and leadership development.

Within six months, one of our clients' leaders went from being on the brink of termination to winning the "manager of the year" award in their company. In addition to the professional accolades, many of our toxic leader clients report benefits that spill into their personal lives. Another one of our clients was excited by their leader's improved ability to communicate with enterprise clients and yet the leader was most excited by how coaching had helped her become a better mother and spouse.

That's why we do this work. Here at Noomii, we are on a mission to make the world a better place by unleashing the collective potential of people - your people.

So let's get started. This book outlines a step-by-step process that you can take to present coaching as an opportunity to a "toxic" - err, a challenging and yet wonderfully capable - leader. Don't delay, this may lead to the most important conversation you have all year.

## How to Use this Book

If you or someone in your organization has not yet approached the toxic leader about their behavior, then this book is perfect for you.

Although it might be abundantly clear to you, your board, your senior advisors, or the leadership team of your organization that the leader's behavior needs to change, the toxic leader may not know it's coming. They probably don't know that their behavior is a problem and they almost certainly don't know that you're thinking about intervening in some capacity.





Our goal is to help you navigate this situation to produce the best possible outcome for your organization. In most cases, that means your leader embracing coaching, leaning into the difficult work of changing behavior, and then becoming a model of success for other leaders in your organization.

The first step in the process is to do the internal work to make sure that you understand the nature of toxic leadership and develop the belief that your leaders are capable of change.

In step two, even if you are skeptical about the toxic leader's ability to change, you want to be overwhelmingly convinced that coaching is worth the investment.

Step three is not for the faint of heart because it means having an open and direct conversation with the toxic leader to inform them that, despite their accomplishments, their destructive behavior can no longer be tolerated and change is required. For many people we speak with, this step is often the most difficult to navigate but don't worry, we'll guide you through it. We will show you how to present coaching as an opportunity so even the most difficult leaders will be motivated to take action.

If at any point in time you would like assistance, reach out to one of our coaching experts for a free consultation. We are ready to partner with you in solving workplace people problems.

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## **Step 1: Challenge Your Perception of the Toxic Leader**

Hollywood is no stranger to dramatic storytelling of good versus evil. Whether it's Batman versus the Joker, Clarice versus Hannibal Lecter, or Dorothy versus the Wicked Witch of the West, many of the most classic stories are built around the evil nature of the "bad guy" (sorry for the non-gender neutral use of the term) we love to hate.

When it comes to real life, it's dangerous to get wrapped up in the drama of destructive behavior and have that be the sole lens through which you evaluate the toxic leader.

If the antagonist of your story is wreaking havoc in your organization, we urge you to suspend judgement for two reasons that we'll discuss in more detail within this chapter:

1) **Systemic Factors:** Many of the toxic leaders we work with have been with their organizations for a long time which suggests that there are systemic factors supporting the behaviors elicited by the leader

2) **No Ill Will:** Even if they are aware of their impact, toxic leaders rarely have ill intent to cause harm. Often, the source of their aggression is their own insecurities and fears.

Our findings suggest that rather than vilify the toxic leader, we want to approach them with openness, and even some compassion.

Before we dive into the reasons why toxic leaders may not be as bad as Hollywood portrays, let's first be clear about what we mean when we talk about toxic leaders.

## What Is a Toxic Leader?

When clients come to us, they often have a pressing behavioral problem with one or more of their leaders that is impacting the organization's ability to succeed. Although they refrain from labeling leaders as "toxic", we hear many common adjectives to describe their behavior, such as:

- **Threatening:** "As the boss, she thinks she can force people into complying with her very specific demands or report them to HR for disciplinary action."
- **Insensitive:** "This guy thinks everyone around him is an idiot and he has no problem saying so."
- **Explosive:** "When pressure mounts, he lashes out with derogatory comments about his fellow coworkers."
- **Clueless to their impact on others:** "She has no idea that people avoid her and if they have to interact with her, they are afraid of saying the wrong thing."

Notice that we use examples from both female and male leaders. We do that because we have worked with an almost equivalent number of each.

The impact of a toxic leader is usually pretty obvious to the organization. At the minimum, the leader is causing their team to under perform. At worst, legal action may be taken against the company if the destructive behavior does not stop.

Regardless of the degree of toxicity surrounding the leader, it's easy to build the case that the leader is the villain in the story. We need to challenge that assertion.

## Systemic Factors: How is the Villain a Product of Their Environment?

With one of our clients, a “toxic” leader had been with their organization for 37 years before seeking coaching to help them manage their intermittent “blow ups”. Yes, 37 years! If someone was destructive to the people around them for decades, how did the organization let that happen?

In another case, a “toxic” leader who, for years, was causing people in the organization to leave was simultaneously the CEO's most trusted leader, overseeing the organization's most complex projects.

Again and again, what we've found is that if an organization is seeking coaching for a “toxic” leader that has been with the organization for more than a few months, it's likely the

organization has been contributing to the problem by tolerating or even encouraging their behavior. Sure, it may be true that the organization finally wants the toxic behavior to stop, but can we really place all the blame on the leader? What has the organization done to exacerbate the problem?

We urge you to answer the following questions about organizational norms, rules, and rewards to consider the ways in which the organization has failed to stop or has encouraged the abrasive behavior:

- What are the values and behavior norms of your organization? How has your organization placed the importance of results over care and consideration of others?
- How has the direct supervisor of the toxic leader confronted them about their behavior? Have they ever told them their behavior is inappropriate in a direct and honest way?
- How have others in the organization become a “shield” for the leader’s toxic behavior? How do others jump in and do damage control? How do others act as a buffer for the toxic leader? Has the org chart, team composition, or reporting structure changed to accommodate or work around the toxic leader?
- What are the ways that your organization rewards the leader for their behavior? How are they being applauded for their achievements? How are their compensation packages linked to key deliverables that reinforce that their conduct is exemplary?

**You want to answer these questions for two reasons:**

- 1) To reframe the story that the leader is an evil villain
- 2) To assess what the organization needs to change in order to stop enabling toxicity from occurring



In conclusion, yes, the leader may need to change their behavior but the organization may also need to address the systemic factors that are contributing to the problem, otherwise, no amount of coaching is going to solve the problem.

In addition to answering the questions above, reach out to Noomii for a free consultation to get help uncovering the systemic problems. For many organizations, it's difficult to observe the systemic factors when you're in the system.

[Book a Consultation](#)

## No Ill Will: Toxic Leader as Superhero or Villain?

We once worked with a world-class physician leader with impressive credentials and a great track record performing some of the most high risk surgeries. In their role as a specialist their skill was first-rate, but as a leader and director, let's just say that they didn't make a lot of friends.

What we find is that most of the villainous leaders that we work with are exceptionally bright, hard working, and results-focused. Like superheroes in their industries, they are often the best in the business and as such, incredibly valuable to their organization. Their professional reputations are directly influenced by their ability to perform at a world-class level.

When such a person is put into a position of authority, managing others, they feel pressure to produce the same level of results except now they need others to do the work. Researcher, Dr Laura Crawshaw, explains how the pressure felt by a supremely competent, superhero leader can turn them into an outwardly aggressive villain:

In the course of my work with abrasive leaders, I discovered that any perceived threats to their professional competence (and thus, survival) were vigorously defended against with the fight mechanism - with interpersonal aggression. Driven to demonstrate their superior competence (a defense against unconscious self-perceptions of inadequacy), they

experienced immediate and intense anxiety when coworkers did not meet their expectations, and defended against these threats to their competence with aggression. I learned that most abrasive leaders are neither evil nor insane; they are afraid, fearful of perceived threats to their competence which could jeopardize their workplace survival.

Although the leaders in your organization may be behaving in harmful ways, the scientific explanation for the aggressive behavior reinforces the assertion that at their core, they are not malicious.

Instead, superhero leaders have strong intentions to produce results and they just don't know how to more productively deal with the fear and anxiety caused by threats to their professional reputation.

**That's where coaching comes in.**

## Step 2: Calculate the Cost of the Toxic Leader

"We're not even sure we want to move forward with coaching for this senior executive," said the HR Manager, "To be honest, I would let her go because nobody should have to deal with her emotional outbursts. Her 360-reports are really low and she's been this way for years."

"It's true that her 360s are near the bottom," echoed her direct supervisor, "But she has produced results that we never thought possible. I'd like to give her a chance."

Does this fence-sitting sound familiar? If so, you're not alone. Toxic leadership issues are complex and as a result, can persist for years. We don't want that for you.

Our goal is to eliminate doubt and help you, one way or the other, make a choice. This chapter of the book will guide you through a process of evaluating your options so you can engage your toxic leader with confidence.

At the minimum, you have three options for dealing with the toxic leader:

- 1) Do nothing and maintain the status quo
- 2) Replace the leader
- 3) Invest in behavior change coaching for the leader

You may have already concluded that the first option of maintaining the status quo is not viable. Option 2, replacing the leader, has some significant downsides that we'll talk about. Option 3, getting coaching for the leader is not a guarantee either. If you choose to go with the third option of coaching the leader, the expected payoff should be so large that it makes coaching a no-brainer.

To guide you in making that determination, let's start by evaluating the cost of maintaining the status quo and replacing the leader. We'll end by exploring how coaching can address the immediate symptoms of toxic leadership and also create a rich environment of growth and opportunity that can last for years.

## The Cost of Keeping a Toxic Leader

When we first get a client on the phone, one of the first questions we ask is "What's the cost of taking no action? What will happen if the behavior of the leader remains unchanged?"

Common answers include:

- We'll lose staff
- Staff morale and productivity will go down
- We may face legal costs for not taking action
- We'll lose customers and revenue
- Our reputation or brand will suffer

Although quantifying the direct financial impact can be difficult, we have some published findings to guide our estimations. In a study published by Center for American Progress, the cost of replacing lost staff is between 16 and 21 percent of the employee's salary. That means, at the low end, someone earning just \$32,000 per year costs over \$5000 to replace. That cost rises to close to \$20,000 for an employee earning \$100,000 per year.

One obvious cost of reduced staff morale and productivity that accountants can tabulate is unplanned absenteeism (sick days). One study found that "victims of bullying took an [sic] average of seven more sick leave days per year than those who were neither bullied nor witnessed bullying take place." That means thousands of dollars per year per incidence of bullying.

One workplace harassment expert claims “the average out-of-pocket expense of the defense of an harassment-related lawsuit exceeds \$250,000, whether or not the organization prevails.”

As you can see, there are significant costs associated with toxic leadership and every case is unique. We could spend weeks trying to measure the exact financial impact but that’s not the objective here. We want you to run through the “back of the napkin” assessment to further support your assertion that maintaining the status quo is not a viable option.

Below is a table that you can easily fill out to provide an estimated “impact score” of a toxic leader. Look at each potential impact attributable to the toxic leader (e.g. loss of staff) and evaluate the probability of the organization incurring that expense (on a scale of 0 to

<b>Cost of keeping a toxic Leader</b>	<b>A: How Likely</b> 0 = Not at all 5 = Very Likely	<b>B: How Costly</b> 0 = Not at all 5 = Very Costly	<b>Impact score</b> <b>(A x B)</b>
Loss of staff	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Reduced staff morale & productivity	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Potential legal costs	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Loss of customers & revenue	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Damage to reputation/brand	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Total Impact Score (Add up the individual line-items)			

5, where 0 = ‘not all all’ and 5 = ‘very likely’) multiplied by the estimated financial cost (on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 = ‘not cost’ and 5 = ‘very costly’).

We’ve filled out the first five rows with the most common impacts but feel free to add your own. If one of the line-items is a non-issue for you, then you can give it a score of zero (0).

The size of the impact score represents the risk your organization faces by maintaining the status quo. Obviously, you want the number to be as small as possible and only you can determine the level of risk with which you’re comfortable.

As a guide, if a single line-item scores a 10 or higher, immediate action is required. Next, let’s look at the cost of replacing the toxic leader.



## The Cost of Replacing a Toxic Leader

Once we're clear that maintaining the status quo is undesirable, we then ask clients "What's the cost of replacing the toxic leader?"

This may mean demoting them, offering them early retirement, or terminating them. Either way, moving them out means having to fill the void they leave behind.

When faced with the option of replacing the leader, the most common costs and objections include:

- Loss of knowledge and trade secrets
- Loss of competitive advantage because the leader goes to a competitor
- The cost of recruiting
- The cost of vacancy - their work and responsibilities temporarily falling on others
- Loss of customers or revenue

Again, similar to the cost of maintaining the status quo, calculating the specific costs of replacing a leader can be difficult to quantify. One thing is certain however, "jobs that are very complex and that require higher levels of education and specialized training tend to have even higher turnover costs." "Very highly paid jobs and those at the senior or executive levels tend to have disproportionately high turnover costs as a percentage of salary (up to 213 percent)...."

Alone, recruiter fees, according to one recruitment agency, are equal to 20 to 25% of the annual salary with their average recruitment fee in 2018 equaling \$33,922. Costs to on-board the new hire or pay for their moving expenses are in addition to the recruiter fees.

Alas, we don't need to calculate the exact financial cost of replacing the leader. The objective is for you to estimate the impact by thinking about the probability and severity of each line-item. Below is a table similar to the one you filled out in the previous section. Go ahead, fill it

<b>Cost of Replacing a Toxic Leader</b>	<b>A: How Likely</b> 0 = Not at all 5 = Very Likely	<b>B: How Costly</b> 0 = Not at all 5 = Very Costly	<b>Impact score</b> <b>(A x B)</b>
Loss of knowledge / trade secrets	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Loss of competitive advantage	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Cost of recruiting	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Cost of vacancy	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Loss of customers & revenue	0 1 2 3 4 5	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Total Impact Score (Add up the individual line-items)			

out and add your own cost line-items, if any apply.

The size of the impact score represents the risk your organization faces to replace the leader. What score did you get? How uncomfortable are the results?

If you calculated the impact scores in the two tables above, you are likely feeling slightly overwhelmed and anxious. The good news is that the next section is a lot more encouraging. Let's take a look at the potential upside of coaching.

## The Upside of Coaching a Toxic Leader

So far we've explored the negative impact of maintaining the status quo or replacing the leader. Assuming that real and sustained behavior change is possible for the toxic leader in your organization, not only do you avoid the costs of maintaining the status quo or replacing the leader, but you get all of the upside of them turning things around.

To get our clients to start thinking about the benefits, we ask them to project into the future 6 to 12 months and consider "If coaching works to improve the behavior, what positive impact will that have on the organization?"

Usually the answers are in the form of pain avoidance statements, such as:

- Their feedback or 360 reviews would improve
- People in the organization would no longer be afraid of them

- I would get less complaints
- We could avoid a potential lawsuit

These are good answers but they're not good enough. Is the goal of your organization to not be bad? Is the goal of your organization to have a culture that is marked by an absence of toxic leadership?

We don't think so.

The goal of your organization should be the opposite of toxic. The goal is generative growth and opportunity. The goal is to create a culture of high performance and uncapped potential. The goal is leadership that inspires greatness (not leadership that demands compliance).

To come back to the question of what positive impact could coaching have on the organization 6 to 12 months down the road, what we've observed is a contagious effect, an upward spiral of positivity that leads to systemic behavior change. Let's illustrate the effect with a story of 30-day challenges.

A number of years ago, one of our staff members, a rather quiet, introverted individual, shared how he had just completed a 30-day challenge of walking to work everyday. "Wow, congratulations!" we all exclaimed.

A month later, in the same unpretentious way, he shared another victory, "I completed another 30-day challenge. This time, I did a minimum of 50 push-ups everyday." Again, we applauded his success.

Then we started to notice some weight loss. Next, we noticed that he seemed to smile more. His mental health was improving with each completed 30-day challenge. We were extremely happy for him but it also inspired us to consider how we could challenge ourselves.

Pretty quickly, the 30-day challenge concept spread and we all took on little personal challenges of reading more, doing more exercise, exploring the outdoors, and generally, making ourselves feel better. It also spread into our work because we started to see how the principles that were being applied in our personal lives could be applied to work, such as the benefits of chunking things down, pushing boundaries, and having shared accountability.

What this story demonstrates is the positive spiral of growth that can occur in an environment where one person models new behavior.

We regularly see this with coaching programs, especially coaching that involves a toxic leader, who in addition to driving results, shows humility, courage, and discipline to change. Like a series of dominoes, the benefits of behavior change start with one person and over time, affect others. Provided that coaching is made available to others in a systematic way, behavior change and continuous improvement can organically permeate the entire organization.

## Choose Your Plan of Action

Let's review this chapter. We looked at the cost of maintaining the status quo. It's likely the most undesirable option because if the toxic leader causes you to lose just one staff member at the low end of the pay scale, it will cost you \$5000 to replace them.

We looked at the cost of replacing the toxic leader. It's not very appealing because you're looking at a recruitment cost equal to at least 20% of the leader's salary, not to mention other costs associated with replacing a senior leader.

Lastly, we looked at the upside of addressing the toxic leadership issues with coaching. Although there are no guarantees that coaching will work, hopefully you deemed the potential payoff so high that it's a no-brainer to at least give coaching a try.

If that's the case, it's time to choose your plan of action and prepare for the next step, which is to have a candid conversation with the toxic leader. In the next chapter, we'll guide you through how to prepare and effectively communicate with your leader.

## Step 3: Have a Candid Conversation with the Toxic Leader

**Put yourself in the shoes of the typical "toxic" leader:**





- You have an immense amount of experience and knowledge
- You are exceptionally good at what you do
- Because of your track record, the people around you have high expectations of you
- You have high expectations for yourself (it's not easy performing consistently at the level you do)
- Your organization pays you to deliver results and you do
- You don't have time for incompetence - when people around you threaten your ability to deliver results, you justifiably react with conviction
- The people around you may not like you much but the end justifies the means

Then, out of the blue, someone tells you that you need to change. How might you react?

What we've learned from doing this work is that you are likely to respond in one of two ways. You'll either feel threatened ("Are you suggesting that I'm the problem?") or consider the assessment a gross miscalculation, thereby deflecting the blame onto others ("If there is a problem here, it's not me. You should talk to those other people.")

Neither of these outcomes are desirable and yet, there is a way to provide feedback that is heard and made actionable.

In this chapter, we discuss who needs to have a conversation with the toxic leader, provide you a crash course in radical candor, and then give you a script for what to say to the toxic leader to make sure that they embrace coaching.

## Who Needs to Step Up

If someone in your organization has assigned you the task of finding a coach for a toxic leader and you do not have sufficient authority to influence consequences, you are not the right

person to convey the message that their behavior needs to change and that coaching is available to them.

It's not the role of the coach to communicate that message either. In fact, a coach can only build a trusting relationship with the leader when the truth of their situation is clearly communicated to them by their direct supervisor.

You can, however, be an advocate for following a good process and making sure the situation is dealt with as productively as possible. Share this book with others in your organization and more specifically, share it with the toxic leader's direct supervisor to make sure that the coaching initiative succeeds.

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If, on the other hand, you are the direct supervisor of the toxic leader and you are seeking coaching on their behalf, the prospect of talking to them may feel uncomfortable because:

- You are afraid of losing them
- You have left the issue unaddressed for a long time
- To you, it's so obvious that they need to change their behavior and it's frustrating that they haven't picked up on the hints
- You are resigned to their behavior
- Whenever you try to raise the issue with them, they quickly deflect responsibility onto others

Despite how uncomfortable it may feel, you owe it to the leader and the others affected by their behavior to address the toxic behavior head on. Don't worry, we'll help you with what to say and how to deal with objections, but first, an introduction to a proven strategy for giving honest feedback in a way that works.

## How To Give Radically Candid Feedback

For the last four years, I have been coaching my son's minor hockey. Prior to coaching, I played hockey for nearly 25 years, at high levels of competition and also with a mix of players new to the game. For me, the camaraderie is as important as the competition. As a coach, my goal is to help kids develop the same life-long love of the sport. To do that, I try to be fun and demanding at the same time.

Every year, a senior coach from the hockey association joins me on the bench for a game to observe and provide me with feedback. Early on that game, I could see that one of our star players, a leader on the team, was slowly getting frustrated. At first, you could see his shoulders slump when he lost the puck. Next, he would slam his stick on the ice. Finally, he erupted on the bench, kicking and cursing.

After the game, the coach said to me "Good job. I can see that you really love those kids." That felt good because I do love them, even the ones that act out from time to time.

He continued, "Did you see how that kid got frustrated?"

"Yes," I replied.

"You need to nip that in the bud. Did you notice how the other kids started to get frustrated and bickering at the referee? When that happened you jumped in to correct everyone's behavior but it was too late. You lost control of your bench when that first kid slammed his stick."

That stung. But he was right.

That was a great example of what author and former leader at Google and Apple, Kim Scott,

would call “radical candor”. For a moment, the feedback hurt but it made me a better coach.

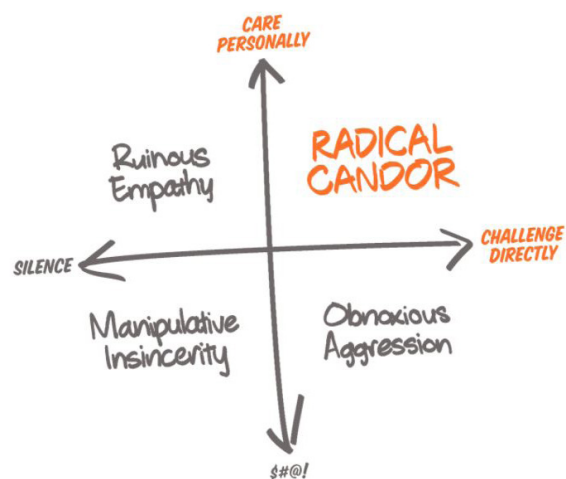
Kim Scott’s model of radical candor is a great model for how to provide direct and honest feedback to toxic leaders. For leaders who drive performance, they can sometimes think that showing care undermines accountability and results. The truth is that the highest performing teams don’t hold hands singing kumbaya. They challenge each other. They have healthy debate. And it doesn’t always feel warm and fuzzy. Being at the edge of high performance can be stressful and chaotic but stability comes when everyone feels like they can contribute without fear of personal attacks.

If you haven’t read her book “Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity”, you should get a copy (or multiple copies) for your office.

The main thrust of her approach is that caring personally and challenging directly must coexist (see the 2x2 grid below). One does not come at the expense of the other. Although we could go into great detail to define and describe the other three states on the 2x2 grid - “obnoxious aggression”, “ruinous empathy”, and “manipulative insincerity” - we’ll let you explore the differences in her book. For now, we’ll focus on the top right corner.

Radical candor is a perfect recipe for dealing with a toxic leader.

To get you started, here are a few rules that we paraphrase from Kim Scott’s work to help you constructively “sell” the opportunity of coaching to your leader:



**1) Express care with specifics.** General platitudes such as “you’re great” or “way to go”, don’t work, especially when everyone gets the same praise. One fantastic way to care personally is to think of what you specifically appreciate about the other person and then tell them. We were recently talking to a supervisor about their direct report, let’s call her Andira, and she said something to the effect of, “Andira is so effective with cross-functional teams because she is clear about what she wants. She’s also really good at challenging the science. In that respect, she makes our researchers better.”



"It's great that you're telling us," we said. "Have you ever told her?"

The answer was 'no' but that's okay because those specific details provided a great opportunity for the direct supervisor to show personal care for the other person in a clear and specific way.

Also, remember in chapter 1, we urge you to suspend judgment about the leader being a terrible villain. It's hard to personally care for someone when you think they are fundamentally flawed and incapable of change. Make sure you can see them through an untainted lens, even if you don't agree with some of their behavior.

**2) Challenge the specific behavior.** A great way to challenge directly is to be clear and direct about what behavior needs to change and the consequences of not improving. I recently had a meeting with one of my direct reports and I skipped the pleasantries and got right to the point. I said, "You have to stop saying 'oh my God'. It weakens your impact in the conversation and it could offend others." She got it right away and counter to my fears, she appreciated the feedback and opportunity to improve. I'm proud that she hasn't said that phrase again.

**3) Make sure it lands.** When you communicate appreciation or challenge directly, make sure they don't just brush it off as disingenuous. To make sure it lands, clear out distractions, look at them in the eye, and then let them soak it in. It might take a couple tries.

**4) Where relationship equity exists, get to the point.** In the "oh my God" story I shared, I didn't have to start by demonstrating personal care because I have good relationship equity with my direct report. Had I tried to initiate with fluffy compliments, it may have detracted from the impact. By jumping in and challenging her directly, it communicated that a) I care enough about her to say something and b) I believe in her ability to change.

Each time you show care for another person, it builds equity in the relationship that affords you the ability to correct behavior without jeopardizing the relationship. And that's exactly what I did. It took two minutes and it's had a lasting impact.

**5) Balance the short-term impact with the long-term impact.** Remember that

radical candor is a strategy for producing long-term results with the people around you. Although by challenging someone directly, it may cause short-term discomfort, it needs to be balanced with the long-term view. That's why in step 2, we get you to go through the rigorous exercise of evaluating what's at stake for the organization as well as the leader. You want to address the specific micro-behavior while also keeping in mind the bigger picture, months, or even years down the road.

If you're not sure what's at stake for the leader, you may want to explore that with them to show that you care personally. Find out what they want? Do they want more responsibility? Do they want to be recognized as a world leader? Do they want more pay? When you know, you can emphasize what the organization wants and align that with what they want to get them more motivated to change.

With this crash course on how to care personally and challenge directly, let's move onto the meat of the conversation: what to say to a toxic leader to get them to buy-in to coaching.

## What To Say To A Toxic Leader: A Script to Challenge Directly

To apply the rules of radical candor to a toxic leader, you need to clearly and succinctly communicate that:

1. Their behaviors are causing harm
2. There are serious consequences if the behavior is not changed
3. There is a plan to support behavior change

To help you know what to say, we provide you with a sample script and a worked example. We also provide you with a strategy at each step of the way.

To give you more confidence, keep a few of these key points in mind when preparing your agenda with the toxic leader:

- Direct feedback is appreciated - Most toxic leaders don't mince words so you shouldn't either.

- They're competitive - Most toxic leaders are competitive so if you can present this as a challenge, they will do everything in their power to succeed.
- They like control - To give the leader more autonomy over the process, let them know that they will be involved in choosing a coach and determining their new behavior goal.

It may be tempting to take the script and use it verbatim but in order to make sure that your message is received as intended, you need to contextualize it for your particular situation

Also, at the end of each agenda item, we explore the types of responses or objections you may get from the toxic leader and how to deal with those. If you want additional information and support, we'll provide you with details for how to connect with a coaching expert at the end of the book.

Okay, let's jump into the script.

## **Agenda Item #1 - Communicate that their behavior is causing harm**

### **Objectives:**

- Show that you care personally
- Acknowledge the behavior issue and its impact on the organization

### **Key strategy for having them embrace coaching:**

When you're acknowledging the behavior, avoid describing the person and instead describe the perceptions of the person. For example, describing the perception "they feel like you don't respect them", is less threatening than describing the person "you don't respect them". The first is a statement of opinion, the second is a statement of fact.

Script	Worked Example
<Quick Intro>	I have an important issue that we need to discuss.
<Express care with specifics>	You know that we value your work. What you did on the XYZ project was exceptional.
<Describe specific undesirable behavior and how they are perceived>	At the same time, some people around you feel like you don't respect them. They complain that you walk out of meetings, raise your voice when challenged, and don't reply to emails unless a senior VP is copied. I've seen it myself.
<Describe impact on the organization>	It's causing people to miss work and leave the organization. Last month, we almost lost an important client account because of your outburst. This is not the kind of work environment we want to create.
<Handle objections>	* See the next section of this chapter to deal with objections.

At the conclusion of agenda item #1, if you provide the leader with an opportunity to respond, you may encounter a variety of objections and the two that we address in the next section of this chapter are:

- Objection #1: Wanting to know who said what
- Objection #2: Justifying their behavior and impact as beneficial to the organization

Once you've handled the objections, advance to agenda item #2.

## **Agenda Item #2 - Communicate that there are serious consequences if the behavior does not change**

### **Objectives:**

- Be clear about consequences
- Start to form an alliance



### Key strategy for having them embrace coaching:

At this stage, you have to give them the news that their employment (at the minimum a demotion) is on the line. Even though the consequences are potentially extreme, you want to counterbalance them by starting to form an alliance. Remember from Chapter 2 that the consequences of replacing them are undesirable for the organization too. The best possible outcome is one in which everyone benefits.

Script	Worked Example
<Communicate the conundrum of the organization>	On one hand, we want to keep you for all the positive contributions you make. On the other hand, the abrasive behavior can't continue.
<Challenge directly>	We want you to continue to drive quality but in a way that is respectful to others. There is a way for you to do both.
<Make the consequences clear>	We don't want to take this situation to its extreme but if staff continue to miss work and leave the organization because of complaints about your leadership, we will terminate your employment contract with the organization.
<Reiterate conundrum and desire to work with them>	Again, termination is not what we want. We want to work with you to change your behavior and we just want to be clear that you understand the consequences if the situation does not improve very soon.
<Check-in to make sure they understand>	Do you understand?
<Handle objections>	* See the next section of this chapter to deal with objections.

Clearly laying out the consequences is usually the hardest part for the person delivering the message but not always that difficult for the toxic leader to take. If there are objections at this time, the main ones we see are as follows and are discussed in greater detail in the next section of the book:

- Objection #3: Expressing frustration that nothing was communicated sooner
- Objection #4: Deflecting issues onto other people

Once you've handled the objections, advance to agenda item #3, communicating the plan for supporting them in changing their behavior.

### **Agenda Item #3 - Communicating that there is a plan to support behavior change**

#### **Objectives:**

- Remove anxiety by communicating that there is a plan
- Give them some control

#### **Key strategy for having them embrace coaching:**

To get someone to buy into coaching, you want to give them some control.

Script	Worked Example
<Communicate the plan to provide assurance>	To support you in developing new leadership behaviors, we would like to provide you with a qualified executive coach. The coach will have relevant senior leadership experience in our industry and will also be an expert in behavior change.
<Give them the choice of which coach to choose>	We have partnered with a coaching company that specializes in supporting leaders in this type of behavior change. With their help, we have shortlisted a number of qualified coaches and the next step is for you to interview each coach and choose the one you think would be the best fit.

Script	Worked Example
<Give them choice over stakeholders>	In addition to helping you change behaviors, we want to help shape the perceptions of your stakeholders. We will be involving them in the process and we'll work with you to figure out which stakeholders would best support you in your development.
<Give them choice over the goals>	Once we settle on stakeholders, we'll have to confirm the goal for the coaching, how we'll measure progress, and what the outcome expectations are.
<Check-in to gauge their readiness>	Does that make sense to you? What do you say?
<Handle objections>	* See the next section of this chapter to deal with objections.

As a parent, to get my children to brush their teeth, instead of allowing them to choose between brushing and not brushing, I invite them to choose between the yellow toothbrush and the blue toothbrush. It's a win-win outcome because I get what I want (they brush their teeth), and they get what they want (control over the choices).

You can employ the same strategy with coaching. You don't want to compromise on the outcome but you are able to give some flexibility to the leader to choose which coach they want to work with.

In the worked example, we have made some assumptions about the way coaches would be selected and the way we would involve stakeholders. Obviously, these details would need to be discussed prior to presenting the plan to the toxic leader.

The last of the objections that we address are specifically about coaching. Questions and concerns that may arise include:

- Objection #5: Concerns the coach will be a hired agent working on behalf of the organization

- Objection #6: Concerns that coaching doesn't work

Now that we have completed the script, let's explore the most common objections and how to handle them.

## How to Handle a Toxic Leader's Most Common Objections

When addressing an objection from anyone, rather than just combating it, you want to create a safe space for those concerns to be voiced so they don't just bubble under the surface. In a constructive dialogue, there is both advocacy and inquiry. If all you're doing is hearing an objection and then combating it, you're not allowing inquiry into the space. Inquiry comes in the form of validating what you heard and also expressing understanding of what they said.

So the strategy for addressing objections from a toxic leader is to:

1. Seek to understand their concerns
2. Validate the concerns
3. Address the concerns with new information

Let's look at the most common objections we hear from toxic leaders about the prospect of coaching.

### **Objection #1: Wanting to know who said what**

If you're presenting feedback that has been collected from stakeholders or other individuals within the organization, it's critical that the specifics of what was said and by whom is held confidential. The only time you should disclose that information is if the person who shared the information has explicitly allowed their feedback to be shared with the toxic leader.

If the leader is asking for details of who said what, you want to put the emphasis back on them by saying something like:

I appreciate that you want to know who said what. We collected a bunch of feedback and what we are communicating to you are not specific but common findings across



a group of people. Furthermore, we can not share the details with you as it would be a breach of trust. What we can say is that we are taking the feedback seriously and that's why we are having this conversation. We are here to discuss your behavior and how we might change it for the better.

## **Objection #2: Justifying their behavior and impact as beneficial to the organization**

It's not uncommon for a toxic leader to take a negative consequence of their behavior and justify it as a service to the organization. For example, if people are staying home sick, they might argue that they are toughening up the people and helping them build resilience. If people leave the organization, they may argue those people are not a good fit and the company is stronger for having them leave.

If these are the types of objections you are dealing with, a good strategy for handling them is to point out that there is a better way of building resilience and a culture of people who are a good fit. You might say something like:

I understand that you might think that by challenging others, you're building resilience and helping the organization weed out the weak. There are other ways of achieving the same result. Rather than push people out because they experience a lot of stress and anxiety, we want them to stay because they can thrive. Yes, we want people to work hard and create results but not because they are afraid someone is going to get mad at them. We want them to do so because they are excited about our mission and values. And if they are not excited about what we stand for and what we're trying to achieve, then we can have a discussion about what we can do about it.

## **Objection #3: Expressing frustration that nothing was communicated sooner**

Consistent with what we communicated in Chapter 1, toxic leaders often fail to recognize their behavior as a problem. It may be abundantly obvious to you and many other people in the organization that the leader's behavior is a problem, but they may not see it that way. As a result, when you communicate to them that a) their behavior is a problem and b) their job may be on the line, this will come as a shock to them. Understandably, they may also be frustrated that they were not told sooner.

If you get that reaction, you could point out how they were blind to the hints but that will

likely breed resentment and combativeness. The other way to handle it is to first, offer an apology and then, commit to being more direct. Your response might look like this:

I'm sorry that you were not informed sooner. I was afraid to confront you because I thought you might quit and I definitely don't want that to happen. Going forward, I commit to being more direct and honest with you. As you go through this process, you deserve to hear from me and others more regularly. Does that address your concern? What else could I do to prevent you from being blindsided again?

#### **Objection #4: Deflecting issues onto other people**

It is common for people to blame others, especially when they feel threatened by accusations. If you're dealing with a toxic leader that is continuously blaming others, try to bring it back to them. You can admit that there may be other behavior issues within the organization but the focus of the conversation is their behavior.

I understand that you think other people in the organization are the problem. We are actively collecting feedback about all the leaders and managers in this organization and we are dealing with them separately. For now, we need to focus this conversation on the impact you're having on the organization and what you can do about it.

#### **Objection #5: Concerns the coach will be a hired agent working on behalf of the organization**

If a leader is concerned that a coach will be hired by the organization to only look out for the organization's best interests, you can alleviate those concerns by discussing the confidentiality of coaching. In a typical coaching engagement that is paid by the sponsoring organization, the only information that is communicated back to the organization is the level of participation of the leader and the progress on their goals. For example, if the leader is not following the coaching process (e.g. skipping sessions or not checking in with stakeholders), those details will be communicated to the sponsor. Also, if stakeholders are providing progress feedback to the leader, the feedback will be communicated to the organization. Any other information communicated to the coach during coaching conversations will be held confidential unless there is a legal reason for it to be disclosed.

Also, if the leader has any doubts about the coach, a new one can be selected.

A response to such a concern may look like this:

It's natural to be concerned that a coach, hired by the organization, would be purely interested in looking out for the organization's best interests. That's not how coaching works. When you get a coach, the conversations are held confidential and the only information that is communicated back to the organization is your participation levels, progress toward goals, and feedback that is collected from stakeholders. If at any time, you feel like you can't trust your coach to be on your side, we can discuss the issue or get you a new coach.

### **Objection #6: Concerns that coaching doesn't work**

If a leader is expressing doubts about the efficacy of coaching, that is a legitimate concern. Coaching is not a panacea for all behavior issues and results can not be guaranteed. However, as the practice of coaching matures, more and more research is being conducted to better understand how and why coaching works.

Without trying to overwhelm people with the research, we like to have people consider coaching in terms of high performance. World class athletes have coaches to help them see their blind spots and be their best. World class leaders in business should too. When framed like that, offering coaching to a toxic leader is an exciting reward as opposed to a punishment. Perhaps one of the most convincing books on the topics is called *Trillion Dollar Coach: The Leadership Playbook of Silicon Valley's Bill Campbell*, a book written by Bill Campbell's long list of clients, some of the biggest names in tech.

Here's how you might phrase it for a leader who's concerned about the efficacy of coaching:

You're right, coaching may not work. Nor can we guarantee that it will work. However, we know that it can work and many great leaders have reported amazing results. Feel free to do some of your own research into the efficacy of coaching. There is a growing body of evidence that is trying to understand how and why coaching works.

The other way to think about it is with respect to high performance. All the best athletes in the world have a coach. Why shouldn't the best leaders in business have a coach? You may not know this but many of the biggest leaders in tech have worked

with a coach. Some of their experiences are documented in the book Trillion Dollar Coach, which makes a very compelling case for the effectiveness of coaching. I'm happy to get you a copy if you're interested in reading it.

## What's Next? Need Help?

Need help addressing toxic leadership in your company? Reach out to Noomii.com today.



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