Mirahi's Radical Candor Journey

Not a high school reading experience.

by Justine Harcourt de Tourville

Once I joined Mirahi, it quickly became clear that the team was two things: busy *and nice*.

How nice? Sam always saw to it that we had napkins on the lunch table. Maxim pings the team like clockwork to see if we want to order sandwiches. "Impossible to be hungry with Maxim in the office," says Arnaud. Margot regularly bakes treats.

If I ask Freddy to help me with a ridiculously basic Jira function, he'll drop what he's doing, park himself in front of my monitor and show me. If I suggest, "Wow, the kitchen could use

a large corkboard," one arrives the next day—and it's installed.

The team eats together, argues about the best ramen together and teases Ralph about his coffee-in-an-ordinary-glass together. "The coffee cup has a handle for a reason" insists Céline. She worries about him burning himself.

You see? Nice. Nice. Nice.

NICE AND QUIET

The trouble with nice is it often means people don't like to make things unpleasant, even momentarily, even if it's necessary. Yet, uncomfortable subjects awaited.

In my first month at Mirahi, I held one-on-ones with the entire team. Like everywhere else in the world, the two years of Covid wreaked hav-

oc. My findings were compiled and presented to the team. Several key goals were mapped for the coming year.

1. **Increase connection at work**
2. **Reduce anxiety**
3. **Upskill**
4. **Increase business market position**
5. **Improve communication**

Disconnection and anxiety are documented post-pandemic global phenomenons; upskilling and increasing our market position are appropriate goals for a business, but communication? Communication was key to all of the above.

I could see people wanting to say something, "that deadline/design/code doesn't work," but not knowing how or when to say it. Introverts and engineers formed the core of the Mirahi team; a reluctance to speak was not unusual.

Potential problems flashed on the horizon. How does Person A tell Person B that they are taking the wrong approach? Or Person C make a subjective statement about a website's look and feel? Or Person D tell a client—*Eek!*—their code (and expensive investment) is a nightmare? Or Person E tell their boss they disagree with a policy? Wouldn't all these cause more disconnection, more anxiety, and render us less professional?

Mirahi needed Radical Candor now.

AMBITIOUS ASK

Radical Candor lay half-finished in a bookcase at home. I quit reading it shortly before my Mom died, and with the circumstances, forgot to go back. Written by Kim Scott—who worked in various capacities at Google, Apple and Twitter—the book details the mechanics of poor workplace communication, particularly from leaders to a team. As I flicked through my dusty copy, some of the chapter headings beckoned like highway billboards with neon lights: read me now!

Key passages contain concepts Scott terms **Ruinous Empathy**: when you want to spare someone's feelings in the short-term so withhold valuable information that helps over the long term. I vaguely remembered Scott's description and felt it popped up at Mirahi. Other concepts worth re-discovering: **Obnoxious Aggression, Manipulative Insincerity**, and the holy grail: **Radical Candor**.

I re-read Scott's firsthand account of how she failed an employee by not giving him feedback right away. It spiraled into a horror show of poor performance: bad PowerPoints, unsatisfactory milestones, disappointing results. I was certain that Scott's unflinching honesty would be viewed as trustworthy and sympathetic to my über-nice team and set out to get the okay from Mirahi's three co-founders: **Bouba** (Dev/Design), **Dasha** (Business & Operations) and **Josué** (Infrastructure).

A week later, I rolled out a plan for a Team Reading Month. We would understand the core components of *Radical Candor* in just five weeks.

RADICAL PLANNING

As the only grandmother on the team, the only American, and part of the extrovert minority, asking people to read a book—on their time off—would get protests. After all, no one, including me, was forced to read a book since student years. And, if I'm honest, can't say I appreciated Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as reading assignments, either.

Still, I did remember that although reading homework was tedious, we read as a group, had discussions, and learned about existential themes making the ordeal fulfilling in the long run. Maybe the overall experience would be better than the process here, too.

About €250 later, we had seventeen *Radical Candors* delivered in different formats and languages. We were to complete 330 pages, or ±110 pages every ten days. Eleven pages a day seemed doable.

ROLLOUT

To prepare the team, a meeting was devoted to explaining why reading *Radical Candor* together would serve important goals:

1. We'd feel **more connected**, (which would help us feel less anxious)
2. Become **more professional**, (which would also help us feel less anxious)
3. We'd **improve our communication** (less anxious for the win!)

The team received a link to a YouTube video on "How to Read if You Don't Like to Read," and discussion questions; the latter direct from the official website.
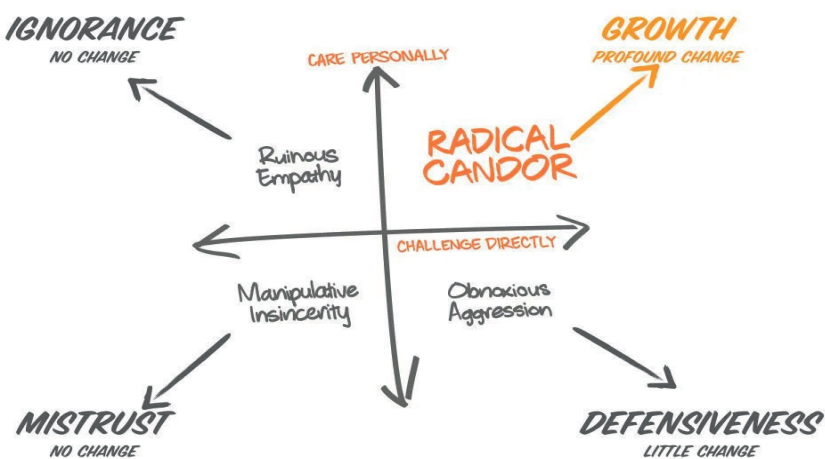
The timeline was spelled out along with their different group assignments. We would discuss the **first part in our teams**, the **second part in a mixed team**, and the **last part all together.**

"Why a book?" asked Charlotte, horrified about the prospect of reading something that wasn't a manga. But Anthony noted *"With the team having to read the same book, everyone would be on the same page."* (pun intended).

Even if I held back-to-back meetings with everyone to go over the principles behind *Radical Candor*, it's not the same learning-wise. "Suffering is a teacher, I told the skeptical group. It's how you absorb material.

It's true. Forty years later, I can still quote the beginning of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with its Middle English from the 1400s: "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote…" Chaucer,

however, has limited value in the workplace. "*Radical Candor*, I promised, will make us better at our jobs, our relationships, our futures, our futures!"

THE CRUX OF RADICAL CANDOR

"Radical Candor is the quadrant formed when **Care Personally** (meaning caring about the person you are addressing and not about being personally liked) meets **Challenge Directly** (when you share your view and ask the other person to share his/her's).

It means sharing or asking for information that can make you or your teammates uncomfortable. It requires giving and receiving criticism—*kindly but firmly*. When given from a place of care, and genuine respect, **feedback is only information**, nothing more, nothing less.

Shallow compliments (**Manipulative Insincerity**), on the other hand, feel icky and are demotivating. Angry threats paired with shouting or banging fists (**Obnoxious Aggression**) create fear and paralysis. At Mirahi, however, we tended to sit in the **Ruinous Empathy** quadrant because no one wanted to say anything useless. It felt better to remain quiet instead.

UH OH

Somewhere towards the middle of Chapter 2, I started to get worried. Kim Scott is not a writer.

Her concepts are well-fleshed out; she uses personal examples. But she's repetitive and the narrative hops and skips. The American-ness of her style started to dawn on me, too—her impressive examples at Google-Apple-Twitter felt over-the-top. Apples to oranges. Or more precisely: *Apple, Inc. to Mirahi*… We're just a small technology company *in Brussels*. Would the Team find any of her references relevant?

I came to work, and Charlotte, our Marketing & Communication Manager (and de facto team cheerleader) sidled up next to me. "Jus-

tine," she said in a breath of disappointment. "I don't know how you chose *this* book to be the one *real* book I read in ten years." When you let Charlotte down, fiercely loyal to the company, it's a terrible, terrible sign.

Arnaud, with his long commutes and late nights with his young son, could only start reading after 10:00 PM. Not ideal if your alarm is set for 4:00 AM. Margot mentioned that if she read this book, it took away from her precious reading time to read books she looked forward to. Aylin swore the book could be reduced to bullet points.

It got progressively worse: when someone talked about *Radical Candor,* a low groan rumbled across the work floor. The "less anxiety" goal was fading from view. It was going to be a long month.

D-DAY

Josué was the first up to lead his team's discussion. I watched his group file out to a café. Of all the founders, Josué was the least tolerant of nonsense. Tough on matters security, tough on bad Japanese food, tough on anything that hinted at mediocre.

When his team came back two hours later (an hour and fifteen minutes longer than scheduled), Josué was grinning ear-to-ear.
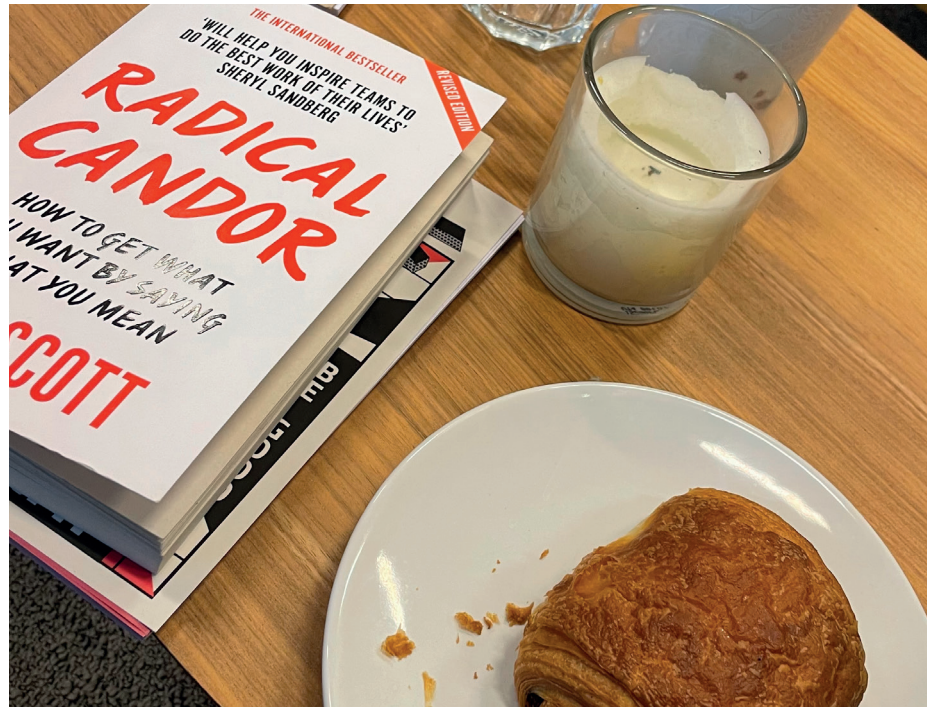
> " My team had great things to say. We spent most the time on the first question, so we have to schedule a second session to finish the rest. "

TALKING IT OUT

The rest of the in-team meetings went well, too. Bouba determined that much of the process described by Scott was specific to a product team, when we are largely in the service industry. Still, he noted that some of the book's insight meant "People will burn" when they reflected more and silently complained less, as *Radical Candor* instructs.

The smallest, and only all-female team—Dasha, Charlotte, and I—nibbled on croissants during our breakfast discussion. Dasha said all what Kim Scott wrote, we knew intuitively to be true, she was just giving us a common vocabulary. In the safety of our mini-pod, we discussed our encounters with "Manipulative Insincerity" or "Obnoxious Aggression" at previous employers. The stories were eye-opening—and heart-wrenching. Women encounter a disproportionate amount of bad behavior. The Mirahi Nice instantly vaulted to a super plus-plus-plus.

MEETING TWO

The second round of meetings, in mixed groups, had mixed results. By now, Scott's unflinching honesty was wearing thin. Her anecdotes were excessive in some sequences, and insufficient in others, and very Silicon Valley all the time. Whereas she needed eight steps for her big teams to arrive to a better outcome, our team thought five was plenty.

What was emerging, however, was a call for one of Scott's directives for more debate and discussion before decisions. The Mirahi team was steadily drumming for more opportunities to hold discussions, or opportunities to collaborate, challenge and converse. "More debate" requests arrived in my inbox. Dasha quickly noted, "We need to implement dialogue sessions with the team, both with their direct reports and as a group."

FINDINGS

While the whole project was infinitely better than the Chaucer high school English experience, reading a book between emails and video calls was harder than expected (and I had native speaker advantage). Was relieved to return *Radical Candor* to the bookshelf, because we *did suffer*. Still, **I wholeheartedly recommend a team book read as a growth tool**. It unveiled certain truths that were necessary, invaluable—even confronting.

You see, I had my own "nice" issues. My protectionist tendency is to say, "They're doing their best." Reading the passage about Jony Ive, the legendary designer behind iPods, iPhones and candy-colored iMacs was a painful awakening. Scott writes,

"Apple's Chief Design Officer Jony Ive told a story about a time when he pulled his punches when criticizing his team's work. When Steve Jobs asked Jony why he hadn't been more clear about what was wrong, Jony replied, "Because I care about the team." To which Steve replied, "No, Jony, you're just really vain. You just want people to like you." Recounting the story, Jony said, "I was terribly cross because I knew he was right."

———————————

As much as reading a book was hated by some (rating Arnaud 0/10; rating Charlotte: 0.5/10--the .5 being a courtesy)… the project's ripple effect proved significant. For one, the book-reading-haters contributed fascinating insight to the discussion groups which upped the quality of the conversations for everyone.

In fact, it was Arnaud who spearheaded the most powerful discovery in the process: the insistence not to let the extroverts (waving hand hello) overpower the conversation. We need to

1. Poll every person to make sure we get their perspective, and

2. Normalize *"I don't have an answer, yet. Let me get back to you,"* Sometimes people just need more time to respond.

After all, including everyone leads to better collaboration which leads to more connection. And that was the whole point: fostering an environment that allows people to speak up without worrying if they're sugary spice and all that's nice.

FINAL CHAPTER

Three months later, I can't say if anxiety is down, yet, but there is a marked upswing in sharing info and opinions. People *are* speaking up more than before the project. Every once you might even hear, *"Let me Radical Candor this"* in a sentence.

That's a win. In high school, pretty sure no one said "Let me Chaucer that…" — introvert *or* extrovert.

Regardless of what we thought of *Radical Candor*, the project was a triumph because:

1. We had a shared experience and developed a common vocabulary.

2. We had tough, honest discussions.

3. We learned to schedule more debate and dialogue.

4. We understand that challenging directly is an act of caring.

5. We saw that we can get through hard things.

6. We forged better connections within the team.

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Final note: the one and only reason the book club was effective? The Team pulled through. Even the reading-a-book-haters went the extra mile. Without their efforts, the project would have been a bust.

Nine months later, of all the team buildings, the Radical Candor project had the strongest impact!

WHAT THE TEAM SAID

Aylin
Software Engineer

"The book was full of ideas (anecdotes and other stuff) that we could have discussed more, but **I liked that we had a set time and expectation of what we would discuss** (the list of questions for each chapters was really handy) since we are not a book club and this is during work time, it was the best approach for us."

Ralph
UX/UI Designer

"We had the chance to learn more about our colleagues. Seeing how they deal with certain things, inside Mirahi or other workplaces, but also in life in general. The last part I enjoyed the most, because **when people talk about personal stuff, they are trusting you with that information, so you bond with them**, you can relate on another level then just work."

Jonathan
Software Engineer

"If I had to rate it I would gave it a 5/10. Why? It feels like the book was more useful for the management/business team. Also I'm not into books, I rarely read and I had hard time to focus on this one. But **it did give me hints on how to communicate** and that's always a plus for me."

Freddy
Project Manager

"I learned that managing people or being part of a team is not only a matter of productivity and attaining multiple objectives... **There is a lot of working interaction on a team, and these interactions are key to the success** of the group. Feeling that you are valuable for a team is the best motivation that you can have."

Dasha
Chief Business Officer

Liked the "Clear guidelines on how to care personally and challenge directly. I found that it is very true that as a person, **we are more open to receiving, even strong, feedback from people you know that truly care about you**, and are doing it with the only objective to make you better."

Maxim
Infrastructure Engineer

"Most things from the book seemed obvious but I'm someone who **needs stating the obvious from time to time because I tend to overlook it and only go for the details.**"

Sam
Software Engineer

Found "the exercises **important in order to built honest communication** starting from the same ground." He also suggested "organizing **more little meeings during lunch break**."

HOW WE ROLLED IT OUT

STEP 1

Upon getting clearance at the end of **September**, and before the project announcement, each team member was asked about their preferred reading format/language according to availability. Choices were:

1. Paperback: EN – FR – NL *or*
2. eBook: EN – FR *or*
3. Audiobook: EN

Immediately after, an order was placed in the correct language/format.

STEP 2

The book arrived and was distributed together with a follow-up email. A link was sent to a YouTube video on "How to Read if You Don't Like to Read," and discussion questions (found on the *Radical Candor* website). The email contained due dates and the different group assignments.

Chapters 1 - 3: The first discussion would be in our unique teams: Dev - Design – Infrastructure – Business led by a co-founder (4 teams; Bouba did both Dev & Design) completed by **October 10th.**

Chapters 4-6: The next discussion would be with a cross team mix (3 teams randomly assigned) completed by **October 20th.**

Chapters 7 - Getting Started: The final discussion would be whole team lunch discussion. (1 team) completed by **October 31st.**

*It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out that 16 busy people will struggle to finish in thirty days. The hardest part for the groups was not reading, but coordinating meeting schedules. Eventually the last date was moved to **November 9th**, giving people more time to meet with their groups.*

STEP 3

Poké Bowls were served during the final All-Team team meeting. We passed around a box and let people pick from two colors. Those that drew neon pink cards had to lead discussion questions. Added an element of surprise and allowed for different voices to take the floor.

STEP 4

At the end of the All-Team Meeting, we handed out a merit badge, which Ralph secretly designed and ordered. People were polled on their experience with the results falling; 25% loved it; 50% neither loved nor hated it; 25% hated it. However, the discussion part of the project was well-liked by 80%.

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS

Our advice for having a great office book discussion experience.
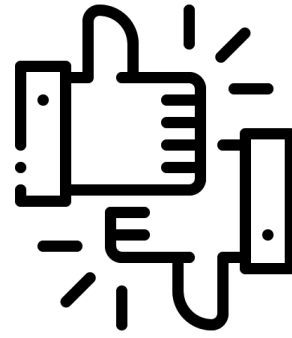
DOS

+ DO make a book shortlist with tips **from the team.**

+ DO double and triple-check that the author is a high-caliber writer. (Think Malcolm Gladwell, Charles Duhigg or Tiffany Dufu).

+ DO let the team vote on the book.

+ DO create group questions and study guides in advance! When none available, have the group prepare their own.

+ DO count on 10 – 25% of the team to detest reading. Offer as many incentives as possible. Reinforce how valuable their feedback is.

+ DO combine group discussions with food. Glucose in the bloodstream helps fuel attention spans.

+ DO consider combining with off-site teambuildings or slow periods to minimize private life pressure.

DON'TS

– DON'T forget to include authors who aren't white men. Quite a challenge in the business book category, but tells you how important it is to get outside perspectives.

– DON'T go too fast. Six - eight weeks works best.

– DON'T leave people out. Ensure that every team member leads a question.

DO
GOOD
BE

Text by Justine Harcourt de Tourville,
People/Culture Lead

Layout by Charlotte Caenepeel

Header illustration by Céline Legros

Mirahi
Technology and UX/UI Design Studio

The best kept secret in technology excellence

120 Avenue Louise
1000 Brussels, Belgium

wwww.mirahi.io