



USING POSSIBILITY TRAINING TO GUIDE DIFFICULT DISCUSSIONS

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(He/Him/His)

ABSTRACT

- In an ever-evolving world where tensions appear to be at an all-time high, the ability to have compassionate discussions seems like a relic of the past. However, we are capable of having difficult conversations and achieving meaningful outcomes with a bit of intention. In this discussion, Dr. Shane T. Spiker will discuss the idea of possibility training and how that can be applied to help guide difficult decisions within interpersonal relationships.

OBJECTIVES

- Participants will be able to:
 - Define and describe critical elements of possibility training
 - Identify factors that may create difficult conversations
 - Develop compassionate and solution-oriented approaches to resolving challenging conversations

LET'S START WITH A SCENARIO...

While getting gas from a local convenience store, you notice a young woman in the same aisle as you. You make eye contact when she grabs a few food items from the shelf and puts them in her purse. She puts her finger to her lips, asking you to “be quiet” about what you saw. She then immediately walks out of the store without paying for the items.

WHY WOULD SHE DO THIS?

- She enjoyed the thrill of stealing
- She was hungry and needed food
- She didn't have money to pay for the food
 - She recently lost her job
 - She had an unexpected bill that drained her account
- She has a history of stealing
- She was dared to steal by a friend
- She was part of a televised prank show
- She had money, but it was not the correct currency
- She was unfamiliar with purchasing practices in the US
- She wanted revenge against the store owner
- She tried to pay, but her card was declined
- She was morally opposed to paying for pop-tarts from a 7-11

POSSIBILITY TRAINING

- Evaluating a scenario and identifying an undetermined amount of possibilities for the scenario
 - i.e., you come up with as many possible reasons for the scenario
- Why do this?
 - 1. It makes you think beyond your original assumption
 - 2. It gives you an opportunity to be more compassionate when dealing with difficult situations

BERNARD GUERIN

HOW TO RETHINK HUMAN BEHAVIOR



A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SOCIAL
CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS



POSSIBILITY TRAINING: BUT HOW?

- When some situation occurs, take time to think about EVERY POSSIBLE REASON (even if it's silly) for why it might have occurred
 - Important: Even if it seems SILLY, consider it
- There is no “wrong answer” when it comes to evaluating scenarios and reasons why they occur
- We are still limited by our own biases
 - But we are LESS limited if we can say “let's come up with every single possible reason for this scenario”

“STRANGE” CUSTOMS

- Jumping the Baby: Spain
 - Jumping or hopping over a baby to keep the devil away
- Tooth Tossing: Greece
 - Lost teeth are “wishes” for strong adult teeth
- Throwing Cinnamon: Denmark
 - If you are single when you’re 25, friends and family douse you with water and cover you in cinnamon on Valentines day
- Shoving Faces in Cake: Mexico
 - La Mordida is a birthday tradition (“morder” is Spanish for “To Bite”)
- Spitting to Say Hello: Maasai tribe (Kenya/Tanzania)
 - Thought to protect from evil spirits
- Kanamara Matsuri: Japan
 - Festival of the Iron Penis; Provides awareness around preventing STIs
- The Shoey: Australia
 - Formerly a symbol of decadence
- Groundhogs Tell the Weather: USA
 - Each February, a rodent tells us it’s gonna be cold

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

- Observing and accounting for variables that occur within a specific circumstance
- Let's return to the stealing scenario:
 - If she's starving? It's probably ok.
 - If she's doing it for fun? We have a problem with that.
- Contextual variables change EVERYTHING about the way we analyze a particular circumstance

There is no such thing as a bad boy: The Circumstances View
of problem behavior

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A CIRCUMSTANTIAL VIEW

- As we analyze contexts, it takes the blame off the person and puts it back on their circumstances
- This is where the Circumstantial View comes in (or contextual view)
- The Idea?
 - There is NO SUCH THING as a bad person or a weird behavior
 - Our circumstances influence our behavior and make that behavior FUNCTIONAL (or useful) in a situation

From the beginning of recorded time human beings have assigned blame to persons who misbehave. The first prominent person to make an alternative case was Father Edward J. Flanagan, the founder of Boys Town, who proclaimed there was “no such thing as a bad boy, only bad environment, bad modeling, and bad teaching” (Oursler & Oursler, 1949, p. 7) in other words, bad circumstances. This paper will refer to this perspective as the Circumstances View of problem behavior and anchor it as the foundational idea for the field of behavior analysis. This paper will discuss the origins of the Circumstances View, the benefits that result from its adoption, reasons why its adoption is not more widespread, and suggestions for disseminating it more widely.

Key words: blaming, Boys Town, circumstances view, compassion, social validity

Packs of orphaned boys roamed Omaha, Nebraska in the early 20th century. A young priest named Father Edward J. Flanagan bought a home in downtown Omaha and invited five of them to live with him. This was risky because the boys lived on the streets, doing whatever was necessary for survival and their efforts were often unsafe, uncivilized, and illegal. The citizens of Omaha thought of them as filthy, dangerous, bad boys. The situation with the boys was not confined to Omaha, it was happening across the country and, thus, Father Flanagan’s “experiment” drew substantial attention.

Father Flanagan was a brilliant public spokesperson and the Hall of History in the now incorporated city of Boys Town, Nebraska has numerous mockups of front-page articles in newspapers from around the country

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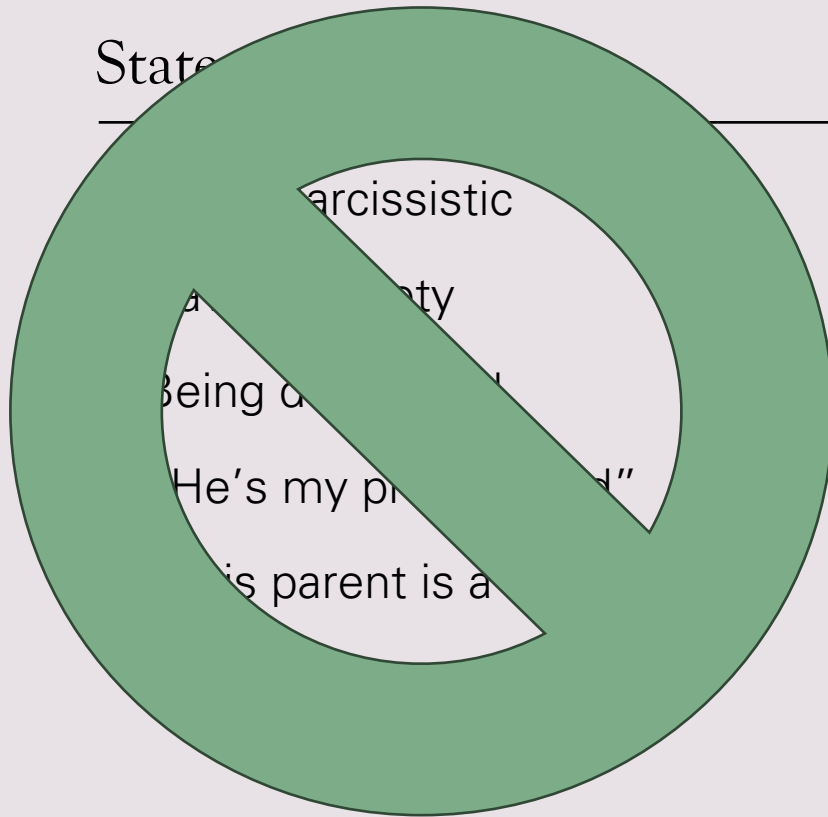
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Packs of orphaned boys roamed Omaha, Nebraska. His proclamation about the boys that drew the most attention is: “There is no such thing as a bad boy, only bad environment, bad modeling and bad teaching” (Oursler & Oursler, 1949). His position was that the boys were not bad. Instead, these were boys to whom many bad things had happened and that those bad things taught the boys to misbehave. Flanagan arranged for many good things to happen to these boys with the intent of teaching them to behave appropriately. He began his program in 1917 and it is now one of the best-known programs for troubled out of home children and adolescents in the world. Although it used a variety of programmatic approaches to behavior management in the first decades of its existence, since the early 1970s it has used a signature application from behavior analysis, the Teaching Family Model (Phillips et al., 1974). Results from a vast number of investigations evaluating aspects of the TFM at Boys Town reflect abiding success across multiple dimensions of behavior (e.g., Friman, 2000; Ringle et al., 2012).

Father Flanagan’s position on the boys reflects a view that will be referred to in this paper as the Circumstances View of behavior, meaning that behavior is a function of its circumstances. Coincidentally, this is the

BEHAVIOR VS. STATES

State

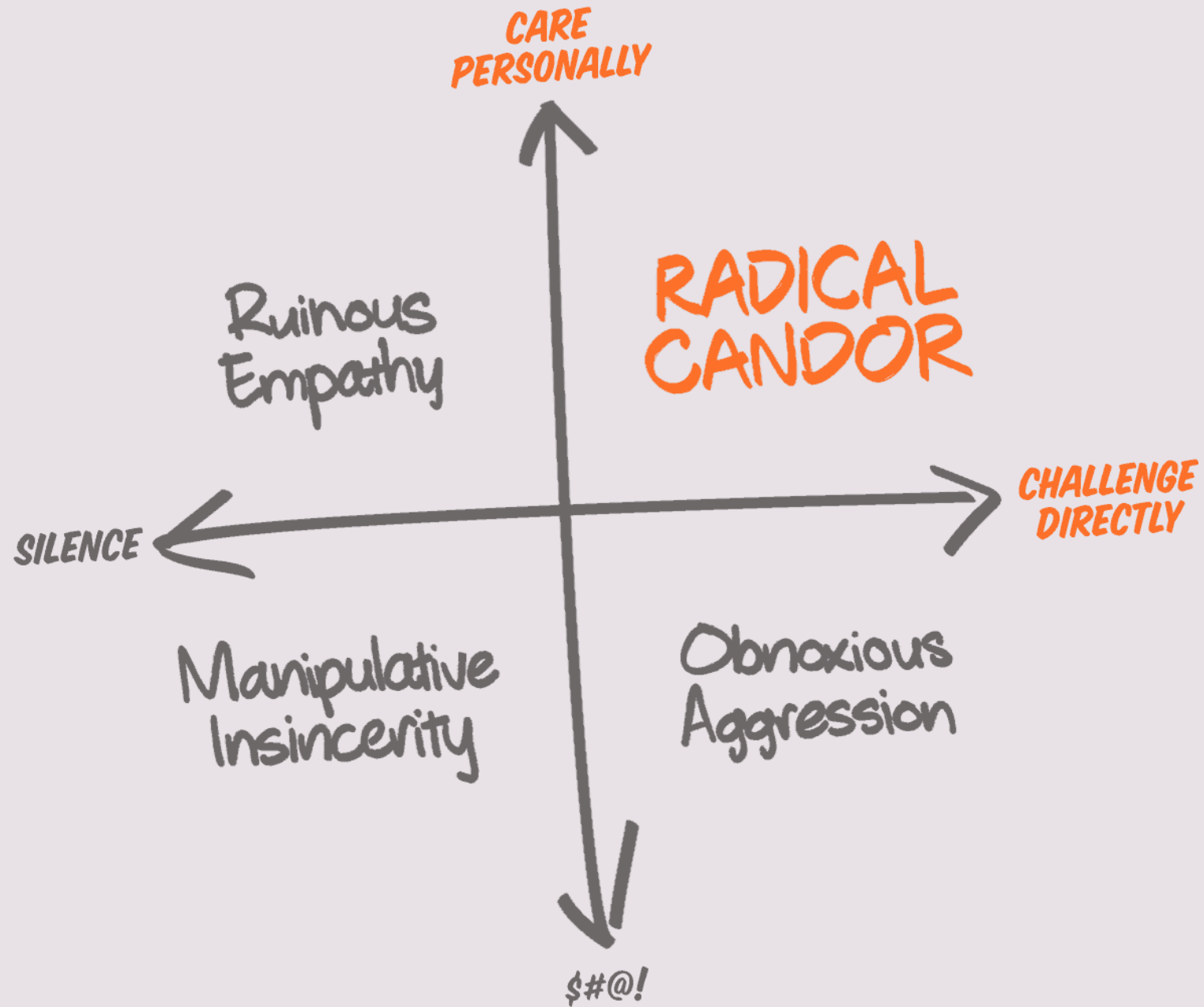


Behavior We Do

- Outbursts when I don't get my way
- Avoidance behavior when situations are tough
- Refusing to do chores
- Calling out in the classroom
- Parents advocating for their child's needs

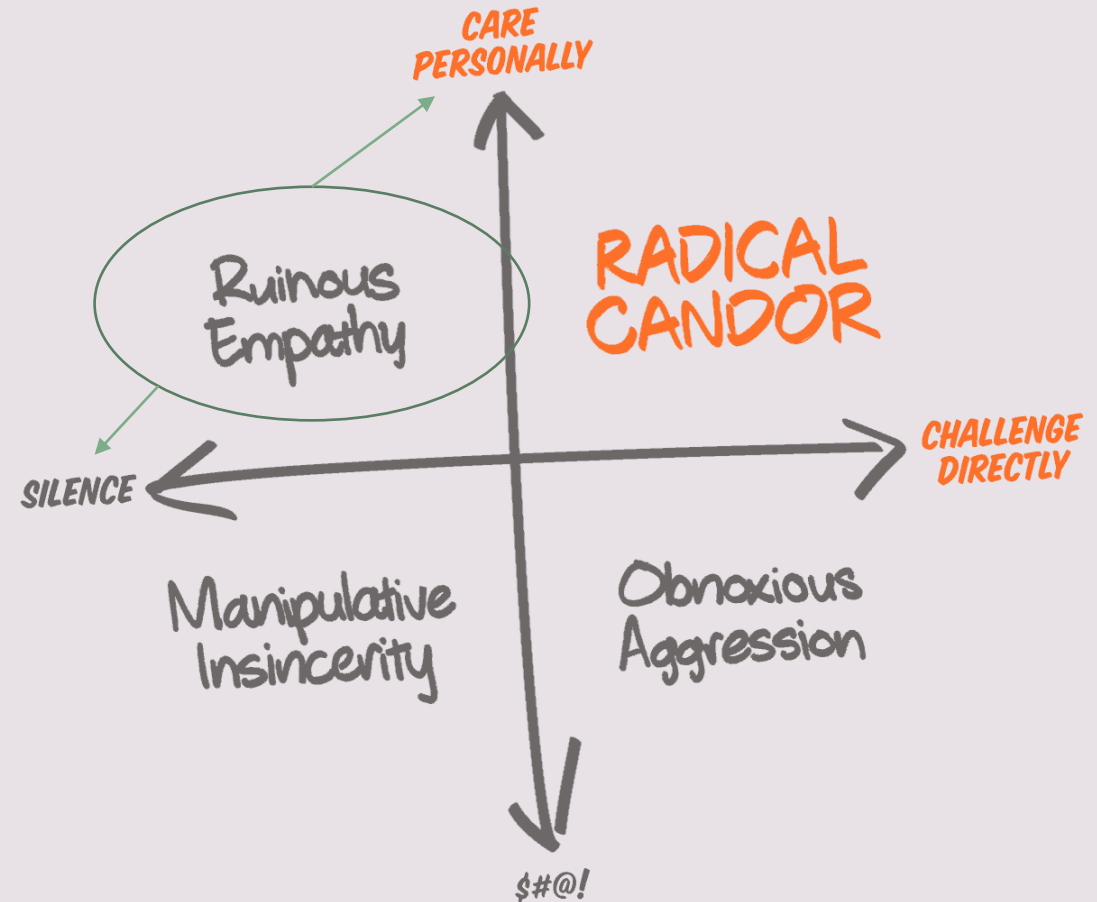
CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

- Necessary and important conversations that NEED to happen
 - But may be quite uncomfortable
- We've all experienced this from small infractions to larger, more difficult situations
- What is the problem?
 - The conversation needs to happen, but we are afraid or nervous for some reason



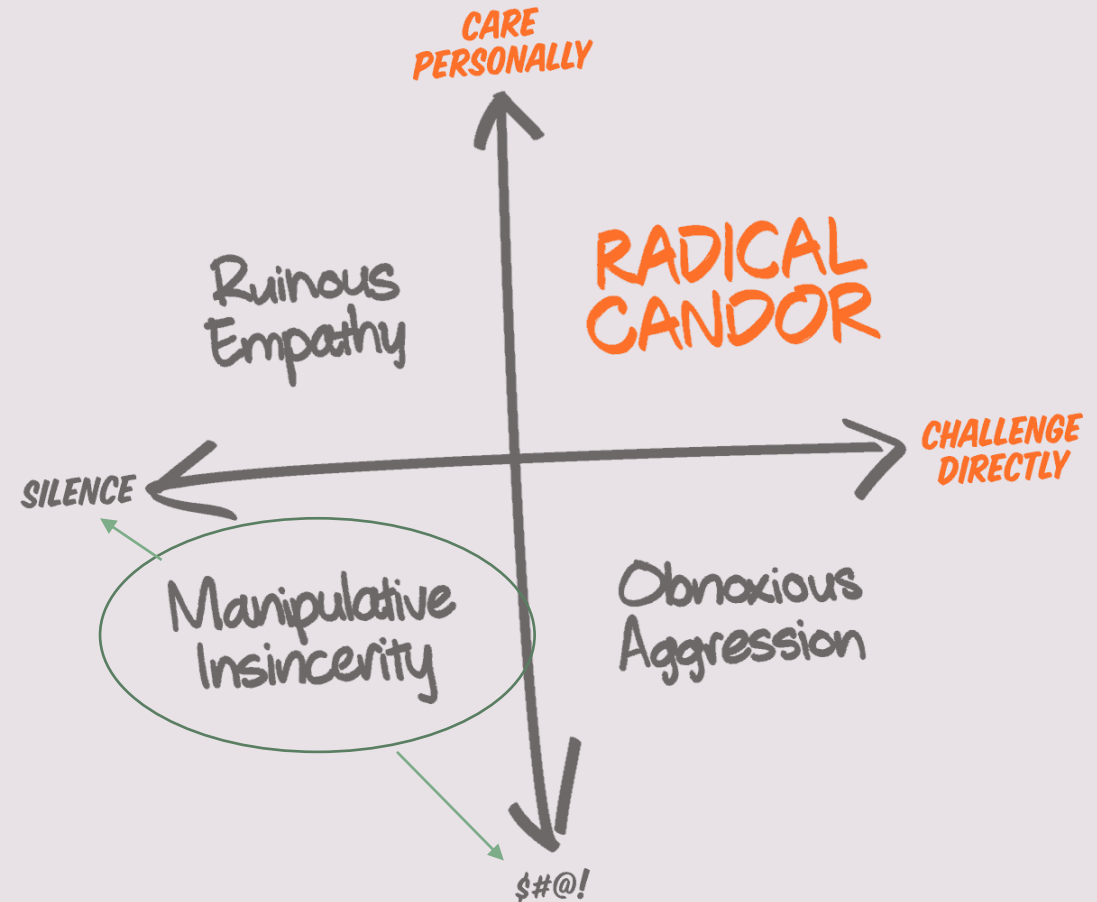
RUINOUS EMPATHY

- Trigger Warning: You will definitely feel seen
- You care personally, but you remain silent
- You avoid saying anything because:
 - You don't want to embarrass someone
 - You don't want to hurt someone's feelings
- Key features are that you CARE PERSONALLY but AVOID challenging directly



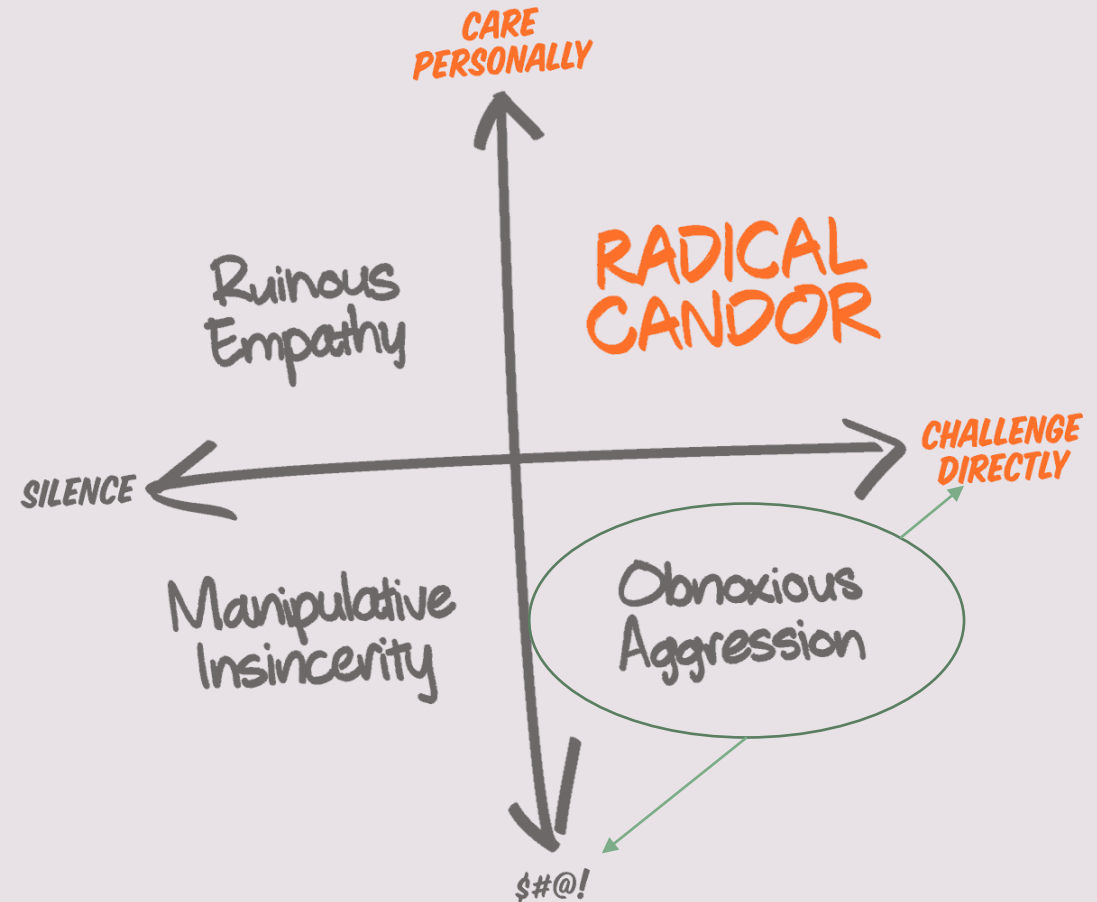
MANIPULATIVE INSINCERITY

- This does NOT mean you are manipulative or uncaring
 - This just means your MO is more about your feelings than theirs
- You avoid saying things because:
 - You don't like conflict
 - You feel awkward or uncomfortable
- Key feature: You do NOT challenge directly because you don't like how it feels



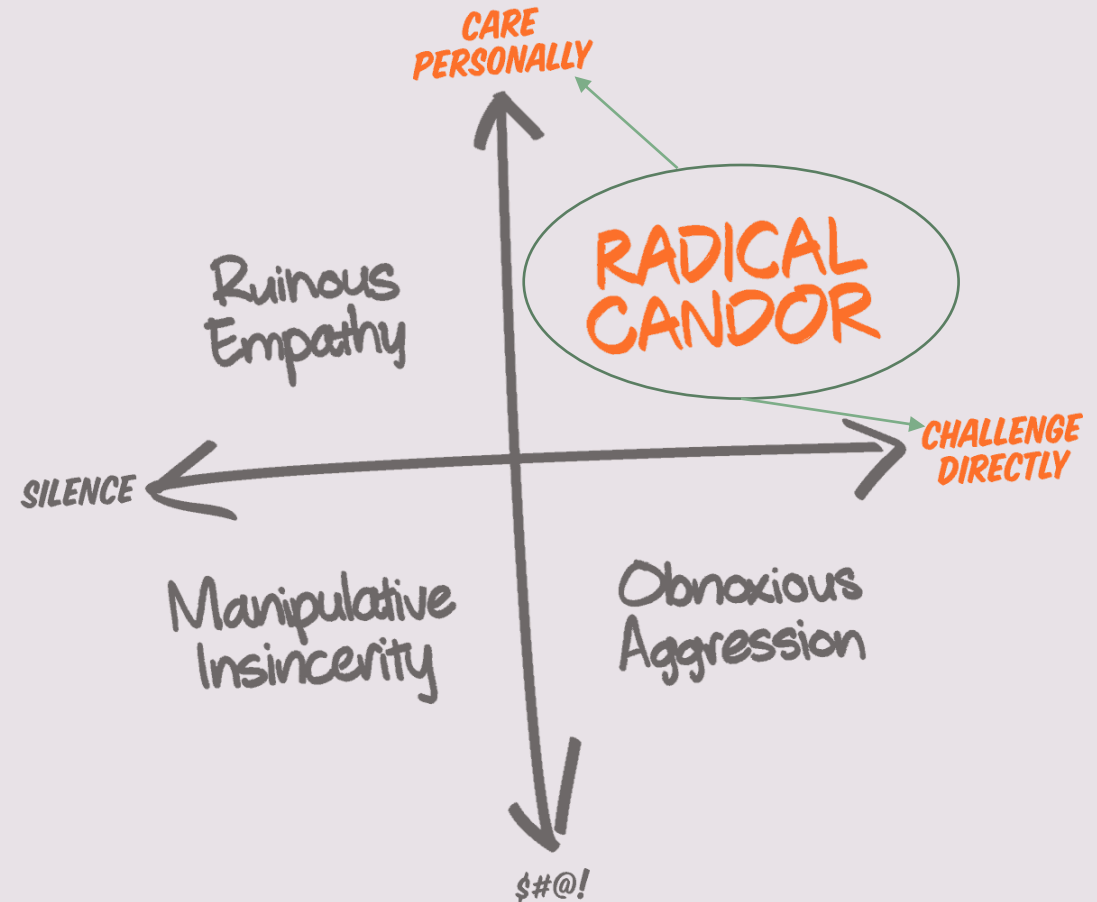
OBNOXIOUS AGGRESSION

- Tends to be “the jerk”
- Commonly mistaken for being radically candid because you “don’t have a filter”
- You might say something because:
 - Something needs to happen rapidly
 - “It’s just a job”
- Key Feature: You challenge directly regardless of personal relationships or feelings



RADICAL CANDOR

- The sweet spot
- You care about what you're saying enough to say something
- Challenges are not EASIER, but they are more caring
- You might say something because:
 - You care about what is happening with that person
- Key Feature: You challenge directly while showing that you care about the person



“YOUR ZIPPER IS
DOWN...”



LET'S TIE IT TOGETHER

- We need to have a difficult situation, probably because someone has done something that we either disagree with or that's been hurtful/harmful to us.
- We tend to focus on how WE are going to respond, but we often forget to evaluate why THEY may have responded
 - Not making EXCUSES, but identifying CIRCUMSTANCES
- We may toss and turn and turn over the scenario multiple times before we decide to have the conversation.
 - But how do we make it go well?

THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

- Recently, a team held an annual IEP meeting for a learner you've worked with for the past several years. Historically, these meetings have been productive and while there have been disagreements, the team works well together overall. During this meeting, one of the team members, David, got visibly agitated and snapped at the teacher (you) who was discussing academic goals. David said some pretty harsh things to the you and stormed out of the room. David's supervisor, you has to have a discussion with him since this behavior is clearly unacceptable.
- Quick note: I want you to register and attend to how this would make you feel in the situation.

WHY DID DAVID “SNAP?”

- He has personal issues going on at home
- He is not feeling well
- He was mad at the teacher for some specific reason
- He already got another job and was planning on leaving anyway
- He hates meetings and couldn't take it anymore
- He hadn't eaten yet (someone get this man a Snickers!)
- He recently started grad school (and that turns us all into monsters)
- He felt that the information in the meeting was repetitive
- He cares so much about his learner and felt the goals weren't good for him

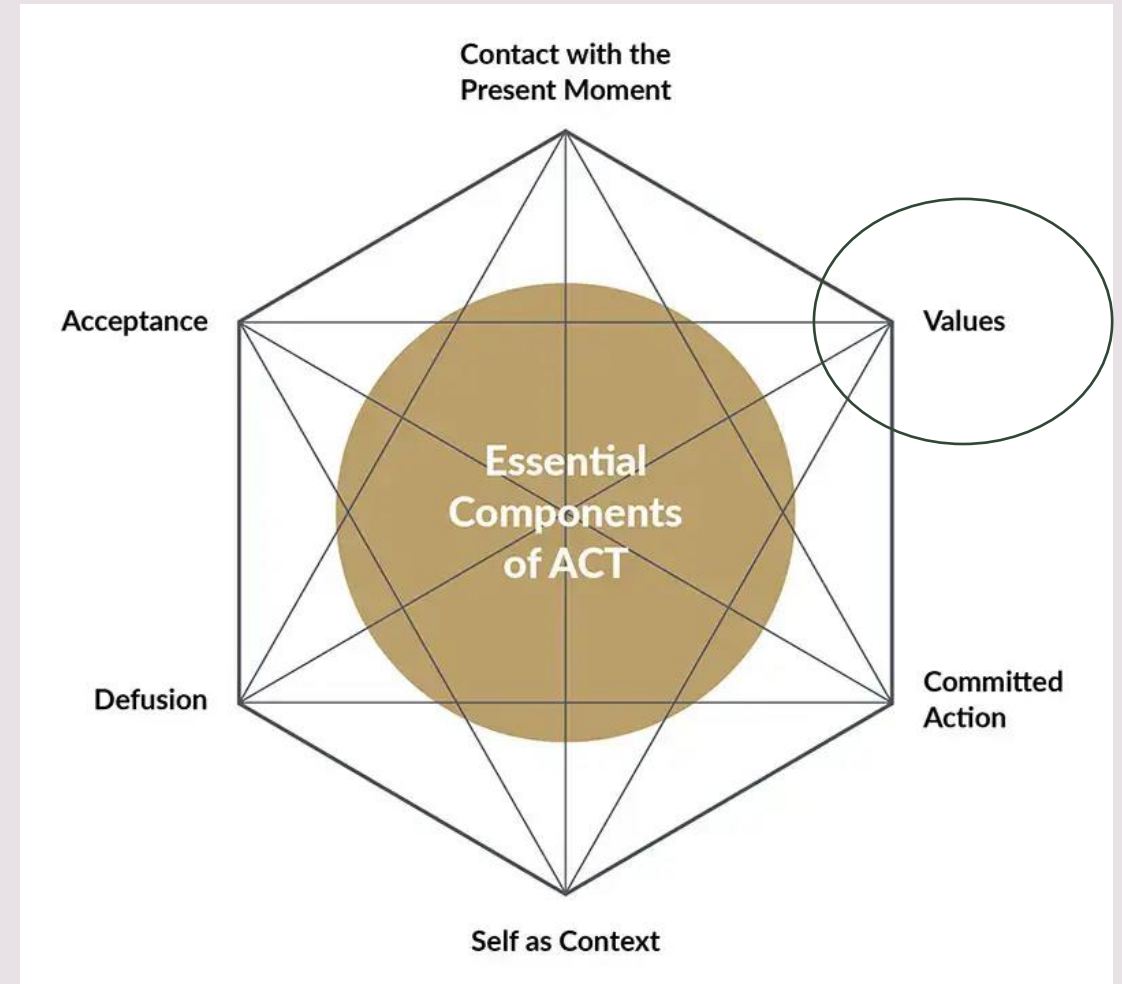
Note: How do you feel now that you've taken time to analyze David's situation? Are you as mad at him?

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

- Well, if we approach this scenario with a “circumstantial view” we might do some of the following things:
 - 1. Before addressing the behavior, let’s ask David what’s going on and whether he’s ok (once he’s “cooled down” a bit).
 - We don’t want to assume he’s just being a jerk.
 - 2. If David opens up about some circumstances or issues going on, listen to what might be going on in his world.
 - 3. After David has expressed what’s going on (or if he hasn’t), it’s time to consider being radically candid about what happened.
 - “David, we’ve got to address what happened in there. I care about you and want to make sure you’re ok, but that was hurtful and embarrassing to me.”

UNDERSTANDING VALUES

- One thing to be mindful of as we explore possibilities; our Values
- Values refer to our overall beliefs or views of the world, including what is “right” or “how things should be”
- We all have unique values:
 - Do no harm
 - Help the community
 - Be kind to others
 - Advocate for those who need it

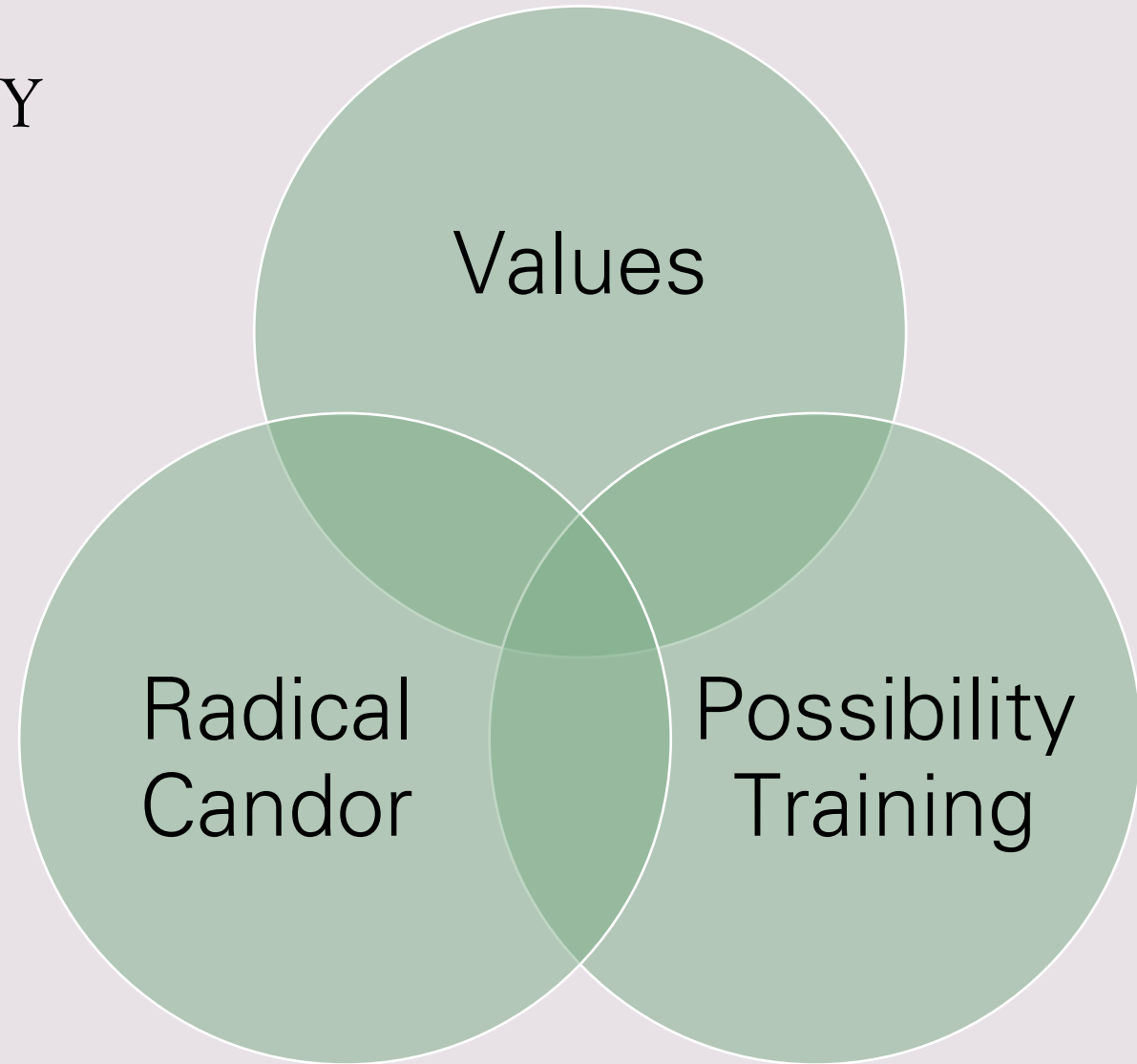


IMPOSING VALUES

- When we begin possibility training and have to enter into difficult conversations, it's easy to reframe our discussion as "well, I would have done it THIS way"
- We have to be careful to remember that our VALUES differ from others, so our MOTIVATIONS and ACTIONS will also differ
 - We cannot impose or expect others to adhere to our values in circumstances
- In the stealing scenario, you may have the value that stealing is wrong no matter what, so you never would
 - Which in turn makes the woman WRONG for stealing
- In the David scenario, you may have the value of always being kind (or maintaining professional relationships), so you would NEVER yell at someone in a meeting
 - Which, again, makes David WRONG in the scenario

VALUES IN POSSIBILITY TRAINING

- Your VALUES create a singular perspective
- Possibility training helps you create a NEW perspective
- Radical Candor allows you to seek information and adequately address a concern that's arisen
- Addressing difficult discussions or circumstances requires all three



OUTCOME EXPECTATIONS

- It is important to remember that in a difficult circumstance, THE solution may not be YOUR expected solution
 - The woman may not get arrested
 - David may not get fired
- How do we cope with that?
- Well, let's start with managing expectations...

OUTCOME EXPECTATIONS (CON'T)

- Addressing a difficult situation is NOT about winning, but coming to some kind of solution
- People around you might not have the same VALUES, but they may be engaging in behaviors toward THEIR values (don't try to change values)
- Use I language and remember that you cannot manage how someone else feels about a situation
 - But you can offer clarity
- Approach from a place of caring, not correction
- Before entering ANY of these discussions, take a moment to do some possibility training

TAKE HOME POINTS

- When we attribute behavior to TRAITS, we can't solve the issue
- When we attribute behavior to CONTEXT, we've got something to work with
- Any difficult conversation should be approached from a caring place, with the value of sustaining the relationship going forward
- Values sometimes influence how we address circumstances, so be mindful of what your values are
- Not every discussion will result in a "win" so manage expectations prior to entering into these difficult discussions

THANK
YOU!



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