

DOUG CRANDALL AND MATT KINCAID, PhD

Foreword by SHANN RAY FERCH, PhD, Author of *American Masculine*,
winner of the American Book Award

**PERMISSION TO
SPEAK
FREELY**

HOW THE BEST LEADERS
CULTIVATE A **CULTURE OF CANDOR**

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Permission to Speak Freely

PERMISSION TO SPEAK FREELY

How the Best Leaders
Cultivate a Culture of Candor

**DOUG CRANDALL and
MATT KINCAID, PhD**



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Permission to Speak Freely

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Foreword

One Saturday at the kitchen table, one of my early leadership mentors sat down with me, and what he said changed me for good. I'd been having difficulties understanding why I kept getting into relational conflicts that seemed to go from bad to worse, from calm to chaos, and from what I saw as logic to what I and others experienced as shame. He had watched me work, he'd seen me in my most beloved relationships, he had witnessed me on the continuum from my best to my worst. I knew he loved me and cared for me, and as I look back on that time, I remember how fortified I was with regard to others. I wanted to ward off all circumstances in which someone might speak of my faults. When it came to my own weaknesses, I was a fortress. I let no one in. Thankfully he had the courage to speak to me anyway.

He started with grace, describing how he valued our relationship, highlighting a few personal traits he saw as my strengths. He then spoke of his own weaknesses in a way that was both sincere and authentically transparent. Then he asked if I'd be willing to hear a few observations he'd made of the ways I handled conflict. I said yes, and as he proceeded I thought I'd hear him out fully and try to respond well. However, when he said, "When you get into conflict with others, you get extremely defensive," my face flushed and I felt a pit in my stomach. "No, I don't," I said.

Incredibly, despite the obvious hypocrisy of my response, I truly believed I was not defensive, and even more, I was

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willing to defend my truth to the grave! Unfortunately, sometimes what we call our own truths are actually false, and often they keep us from living a more whole, free, loving, and discerning life.

Do you remember a time in your life when a necessary, if uncomfortable, conversation changed you? If you do or if you don't, *Permission to Speak Freely*, the new book by cutting-edge leadership consultants Doug Crandall and Matt Kincaid, can help you generate the highest levels of personal and collective leadership: leadership that encourages the individual, the organization, the community, the family, and the nation to speak what needs to be spoken.

I grew up in Montana, land of one hundred mountain ranges. For a moment, picture walking along a high mountain plateau in the Beartooth Range along the southern border of Montana. Peaks rise over twelve thousand feet. But on the plateau below the tree line, the land contains multitudes: wildflowers like glacier lily and shooting star, animals like wolverine and what research biologists call *Ursus arctos horribilis*, the grizzly bear, humpbacked and powerful. Mountain swifts play the wind as if caught in an aerial symphony. At the summit, the land appears to kiss the sky. Here, all is visible for hundreds of miles, undulations of mountain ranges, valleys of great depth, rivers like silver ore running west to the Pacific and east to the Gulf. If you stay through the darkness, dawn is a new creation, spilling over the mountains, turning your face gold. In leadership, as in personal life, some understandings are this crystalline, this capable of helping us transcend ourselves, find humility, and live a more true existence. In *Permission to Speak Freely*, Matt and Doug

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give us a new vista and greater vision. They help us weather some of the most entangled and dangerous landscapes of humanity. By not only listening deeply, but encouraging those around us to speak freely, leaders can create organizations and communities that transcend the status quo and lead us into a future that is inspired, profound, and beautiful.

Give this book a transformative read. Let this book transform you.

See this book transform those around you with a new vision, far-reaching and filled with the kind of legitimate power that creates rather than degrades, and sees us through the darkness to the light of a new dawn.

Shann Ray Ferch, PhD

Professor, Leadership Studies

Gonzaga University

Author, *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity: Servant Leadership as a Way of Life*, and *American Masculine: Stories*

INTRODUCTION

HOW SPEAKING FREELY HELPED BRING A CHAMPIONSHIP TO SEATTLE

Multipliers . . . don't focus on what they know but on how to know what others know. . . . They are interested in every relevant insight people can offer.¹

—LIZ WISEMAN, MULTIPLIERS

During the 2013 National Football League season, the Seattle Seahawks paid Steven Hauschka \$715,000 to kick a football through the uprights when the team needed three points. Hauschka was a worthy employee, successfully converting thirty-three of his thirty-five three-point attempts during the sixteen-game campaign. His success rate in 2013 placed him second in NFL field goal accuracy.

Hauschka had never even kicked a football in a competitive setting until fall 2004—his third semester at Vermont’s Middlebury College. He was cut from the varsity soccer team as a freshman, so at the outset of sophomore year, his roommate urged him to try out for the football team. Middlebury desperately needed a kicker. Hauschka made the team and went on to set numerous records over three years. After finishing up at Middlebury with a degree in neuroscience, he went on to a year of graduate school at North Carolina State, where he also served as the Wolfpack’s field goal kicker.

Hauschka’s successful season kicking for a Division I college football program caught the attention of the Minnesota Vikings, who signed him to their preseason squad as an undrafted free agent. He didn’t make the team, however, and spent the next three years wandering the NFL.

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Hauschka's success with the Seahawks continued into 2014 as the team made a run toward the Super Bowl. Early in the fourth quarter of the NFC Championship game versus the San Francisco 49ers, Pete Carroll called on his kicker for a fourth-down, fifty-three-yard field goal that would bring the Seahawks within one point of the lead. The importance of the moment was not lost on any Seattle fan. It had been thirty-five years since any major, professional sports team had won a championship for the city. The 2013–14 Seahawks had a chance to not only win the Super Bowl but end the long suffering for the sports fans of an entire region.

Steven Hauschka—the wanderer who had finally found some job security with the Seahawks—was about to trot on the field for one of the most important kicks of his career. But as he passed by Pete Carroll, Hauschka noticed the wind marker at the top of the north upright whipping swiftly in the southerly direction. He gave it a quick thought and decided that the field goal attempt was not the right decision. This guy, whom Seahawks owner Paul Allen was paying three quarters of a million dollars per year to kick a football, didn't want to do it. So what did Hauschka do? He buckled down, thought positive, and made the kick . . .

No. That is *not* what Steven Hauschka did in that moment. Instead, he turned to his coach and stated plainly, “We shouldn't kick this.” He then ran onto the turf and stared at the spot where the football was to be placed. A few second later, Carroll called time-out. From the stands, or the comfort of a living room, it was a curious scene. The kicker had taken his spot on the field and waited for the snap and placement of the ball, only to be called back to the sideline.

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Carroll had listened. The Seahawks would not have Hauschka attempt a field goal, in this moment. A series of events that appeared puzzling to fans would make perfect sense after the game: an employee had provided input into a decision and his leader had adjusted course. Hauschka's journey from Middlebury College to undrafted free agent to wanderer to somewhat-stable Seahawks employee undoubtedly hovered over his relationship with his boss. He likely felt fortunate to have any job at all. His status as lowly kicker also weighed in. While important at critical times, field goal specialists are usually low-status members of any NFL team. Pete Carroll's expected response to Steven Hauschka's input?

"I made the call. Just do your job, kicker."

In fact, direct reports of Carroll standing in earshot of the head coach could hardly believe that Hauschka would even open his mouth. Carroll, on the other hand, welcomed the candor, especially from the guy who knew this part of the "business" better than anyone else on the team: "I love the honesty. Most guys say, 'I can make it and go out there and plunk it down at the goal line.' I thought it was a great moment for us, and it was a great decision."²

Doug's wife recommended that we not begin this book with the Hauschka example. Thousands of San Francisco 49er fans would be bound to stop reading, she warned. Many college football enthusiasts hate Pete Carroll and think he cheated as a college coach at USC. People in New York and Boston remember his failed tenures with the Jets and

Patriots. But the fact remains: In 2014, Pete Carroll was the overwhelming winner when ESPN asked 230 NFL players, “Which head coach would you most like to play for?” Carroll garnered 23 percent of the votes, far outpacing Mike Tomlin of the Pittsburgh Steelers, who received 14 percent. No other head coach reached double digits.

Reflecting on the survey results, Carroll observed, “We’re open around here. We’re honest enough and straightforward enough that we can talk right to our guys about any issue in front of the rest of the team.”³ Honest enough and open enough that when Steven Hauschka didn’t think he would convert a critical field goal attempt, he was willing to say so.

“I didn’t think it was the right decision,
and I let Coach Carroll know that.”

Carroll called a time-out; the offense went back on the field. Many thousands of fans turned to each other and wondered what was going on. Moments later, Russell Wilson threw a thirty-six-yard touchdown strike that gave the Seahawks the lead in the fourth quarter—a lead they would not relinquish. Seahawks fans went wild. 49ers fans shook their heads. Steven Hauschka, lowly kicker—at one of the most critical moments of his career—felt empowered to question his coach’s decision. In fact, he didn’t just question the decision; he told Pete Carroll that it was not a good one. Equally important, Carroll listened.

The Seattle Seahawks won Super Bowl XLVIII in resounding fashion, bringing the Emerald City its first title in thirty-five years. Just a few days later, over a half a million people lined the streets from KeyArena to CenturyLink Field. Riding

on a Washington National Guard cargo truck, waving to fans stacked ten deep on the sidewalks, Hauschka celebrated with his teammates. He had made nine kicks in nine attempts in the playoffs. But the most important one of the season was probably the one he didn't take. The Seattle Seahawks were Super Bowl champions—in part—because of Hauschka's willingness to speak freely to his head coach. And Pete Carroll was the most popular coach among NFL players—in part—because of the culture he had forged: one of openness, where he valued the input of every member of the team—even the journeyman kicker.

This book is for leaders of any kind. If you are a leader, people will hesitate to tell you what they're truly thinking. They will hesitate to question—especially your ideas. They will hesitate to share their own ideas. They will hesitate to ask for help. They will hesitate to point out mistakes and admit mistakes. They will hesitate to call out lapses of integrity. And in many organizations, the hesitation will become suffocation and no one will say anything at all. Yet study after study finds that candid communication enhances innovation, ownership, engagement, and overall performance. As Jim Collins observes in his best-selling classic *Good to Great*, “Leadership is about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts are confronted.”⁴

Therein lies the opportunity of this book and a new way of thinking about the valuable insights of those we serve as leaders. Within a Speak Freely culture, ideas thrive, sacred cows die, and decisions improve. Anesthetic soft talk is the archenemy of true leadership. Typically we envision ourselves—the leaders—as the ones who must talk straight. We're

not arguing against that. But flip that notion upside down and focus on those you lead speaking candidly to you. Everything you hear will make your organization and you better. It may sting at first, but the advantages of open communication previously mentioned—greater innovation, ownership, engagement, and overall performance—are beyond debate.

Counterexamples litter the leadership landscape in iconic form: Watergate, the space shuttle disasters, Quaker's \$1.4 billion loss on the purchase of Snapple, Jerry Sandusky's crimes at Penn State, a problematic launch of the Obamacare website: in each of these examples, someone failed to speak up, failed to listen, or both. Silence, or at best timid suggestion, is the norm in most organizations. So how do leaders create an environment where people will speak freely to each other without fear of reprisal, embarrassment, condemnation, or even rolling eyeballs? How do leaders create a place where team members speak openly, anytime, and all the time?

This book seeks to provide answers to these questions and offers tools for leaders who want to build flourishing organizations where there is ample room and encouragement for every voice. Part 1 outlines the three key things that leaders hear from their employees, their players, or anyone they're leading in a culture where everyone has permission to speak freely. Part 2 provides a research-backed case illustrating the barriers to open communication and gives cautionary warnings for conversation killers that leaders must be on the lookout for. The final section, part 3, offers practical tools for leaders to utilize in cultivating a culture of candor and concludes with a depiction of a tremendous organization reaping its benefits.

PART ONE

**WHAT LEADERS
NEED TO HEAR**



QUESTIONS AND UNCERTAINTIES

There are naïve questions, tedious questions, ill-phrased questions. . . . But every question is a cry to understand the world. There is no such thing as a dumb question.

—CARL SAGAN, THE DEMON-HAUNTED WORLD

We had a student, Paul, who was investigating a given career path and needed some help. One of us reached out to Micah—a friend in that field. Micah suggested that our student talk to a woman named Lisa, and we passed this info on to Paul via email. Shortly after, a text exchange followed:

PAUL: So email both of those two people?

US: Email Lisa and copy Micah.

PAUL: Like copy his email? Sorry I probably sound dumb.

US: When you send an email you can “copy” someone by putting them in the “cc” address. This means you’re sending it to Lisa but letting Micah know what’s going on.

PAUL: Oh, okay.

US: You don’t sound dumb.

When people expose themselves as unknowing, they immediately feel vulnerable. If they speak up and ask a question, they will search for the right way to ask—a way that doesn’t sound “dumb.” The leader’s response to their

questions will have a significant impact on whether or not they ask again. And a culture of candor or a culture of silence will have been reinforced. It happens that quickly.

As leader developers, we've seen the boundless benefits of people speaking freely—and embracing a culture of candor. It happens when you release people from the burden of saying things the *right* way. As leaders, we should be cultivating questions, doubts, uncertainties, and other variations of not knowing. When people have permission to speak freely, they will put forth their perspectives, ask when they don't understand, and seek guidance when they need help. So ask yourself:

Do I welcome a spirit of speaking freely?

Do I *really* welcome it?

Let those questions echo within you for a few seconds. Do you want to hear the questions and uncertainties that the people you lead wish they could say, want to say, aren't sure they should say, feel vulnerable saying, and hold back from bringing up simply because they can't find the *right* words? We believe all leaders need to hear the unfiltered thoughts and ideas from their people. What we're proposing in this book is that you hear everything. Literally everything. You may be thinking, "I don't want to hear everything. I don't have time." We hope this book will change your mind. The benefits of candid communication are immense and often life altering. Let's look at a simple example of speaking up in confusion.

One Sunday afternoon, ten-year-old Timmy appeared to halfheartedly play through the first two quarters of a youth basketball game. He was jogging up and down the court, and

his defense lacked intensity. Few things will accelerate the pulse of a basketball coach (or an overbearing father) more quickly than lackadaisical defense. In this case, the spectating father turned to his daughter midway through the first half and grumbled, “What’s the deal with your brother? Look at him. He has his back to the ball and he’s completely lost his man.” If you’re unfamiliar with basketball, one of the most important defensive principles is that every player should have his or her “head on a swivel” and be able to see both the person he or she is guarding and the basketball, at the same time, at all times. Timmy wasn’t doing this.

On the way home from the game, Timmy’s father broached the subject of proper defensive technique. His sermon lasted for about three minutes, during which he told Timmy, “Don’t turn your back to the ball,” six or seven times. “It’s about giving it 100 percent. You’re capable of playing great defense. Stuff like turning your back to the ball is all about effort,” huffed his father. The conversation stifled, and Timmy slowly grew more and more agitated. Finally his anger and frustration boiled over and he screamed out with tears in his eyes, “I don’t even know what you mean! I don’t know what you’re talking about when you say ‘Don’t turn your back on the ball!’”

There’s so much power in speaking freely, whether it’s a ten-year-old after a basketball game, a school janitor, a new manager, a rookie baseball player, a private first class in the military, or a commercial airline copilot. If Timmy doesn’t speak up in that moment, his dad assumes that he got the message. And because he had no idea what his father meant, his silence means that everything his dad said has been lost

on him. Nobody benefits. The next time his father sees Timmy turn his back to the ball, he will assume that Timmy blew him off. And because he told Timmy six or seven times during the car ride, he concludes that his son lacks respect or just doesn't care. The situation spirals downward at an accelerated rate. Three months later, he fires him. And while a dad can't fire a son from the family, you get the point—this isn't just a youth basketball story. It's a story about leadership and communication. Leaders often mistake a lack of clarity for defiance. Timmy was confused, but his willingness to speak up saved the moment.

The reason that a *permission to speak freely* leadership orientation is so critical is because it's so different. We all recognize organizational silence as a problem. It's not a novel idea. But collectively, we've attempted to solve this problem in the wrong way. There are a handful of best-selling books aimed at teaching followers how to articulate their thoughts effectively, or how to speak courageously, or how to speak persuasively in an upward direction. Millions of dollars are spent on communication training each year. Timmy had neither read any of these books nor been trained in how to see things from his dad's perspective. He just boiled over and spoke freely: "I don't even know what you mean!" And truthfully, his dad was lucky that he spoke up at all. As leaders, we can't rely on luck. It's our job to initiate these conversations and build a culture where speaking freely is the norm and where people never ask for permission to speak freely—they simply know it's been granted.

Dan Lovallo, from the University of Sydney, and Olivier Sibony, from McKinsey and Company—who've done

extensive research on the role of inclusion and voice in decision-making—observe, “The culture of many organizations suppresses uncertainty and rewards behavior that ignores it . . . seldom do we see confidence as a warning sign—a hint that overconfidence, overoptimism, and other action-oriented biases may be at work.”¹ Whether because of culture, incentive structures, insecurity, or inexperience, Jeff Gaines found himself in a situation where he needed help but forged on with “confidence.”

Gaines started out as an hourly associate at one of the world’s largest retailers. He earned a college degree on the side and then rapidly worked his way through the company’s merchandising ranks to become one of its youngest directors. Identified as “top talent,” Gaines earned a nomination to the company’s high-potential leadership program and a promotion to senior director. The original pilot of the leadership development course included an exercise designed to place front-line leaders and headquarters executives in the shoes of their own constituents: the Core Customer Challenge. Because of the emotional impact of the event, it has maintained its place in the curriculum through multiple years of revisions.

Per the challenge, Gaines and his cohort of eight colleagues set out one afternoon to purchase a week’s worth of groceries for a family of four living just above the poverty line. The budget was just under \$70 (yes, for the entire week). Thirty minutes later, with milk, breakfast cereal, and a loaf of bread loaded in their shopping cart, Gaines and his group stood in front of the canned vegetables looking for the least expensive offering of green beans. Situated prominently on

the middle shelf, the company's private label was the best bargain at \$0.68. A woman on Gaines's team grabbed two cans and tossed them in the cart. Gaines, though, stopped the group before they could move on. "Just a second," he murmured, "there are some cheaper ones down there."

"Down there" was on the bottom right, out of the sight line of the average-sized human. Jeff spotted the Three Charms-brand beans—priced at \$0.52 per can—because he had put them on the bottom shelf two years earlier while fighting his way up the merchandising ranks as a canned-vegetable buyer.* When Three Charms came to Jeff with their original pitch, he was hesitant to make the beans part of his assortment. Although doing so would be consistent with company strategy (offering the lowest price point of any retailer), the company's mission (helping people save money), and Gaines's own values, it conflicted with his incentive structure. His target for the year was a 4 percent revenue increase in his category. His performance review and bonus depended on it. At the point when he met Three Charms, he was trending just above 3 percent growth and working hard to improve. Placing Three Charms beans on the shelf—in a prominent position—would reduce sales of more expensive beans, slowing Gaines's revenue growth. In the end, it wasn't his conscience or his concern for the customer that put those beans on the shelf. From a strategy standpoint, he simply knew that he needed to introduce the lowest-priced option. So if he had to do it, he'd protect his

* We've omitted the company's name and changed the brand to "Three Charms" on the advice of counsel (their counsel).

revenues in the process. Hiding Three Charms in the bottom right solved the problem. Gaines never shared his concerns with his boss. When the two of them went through his display plan, he justified the placement of Three Charms beans through a number of logical arguments. None of them included what he was really thinking: *I'm trying to hide them.*

Most will empathize with the push and pull of Gaines's competing interests: customers, strategy, and his own job performance. In his mid-twenties, trying to launch a long-term career with the company, he had three reasonable options:

1. reject Three Charms;
2. put the new brand of beans on the shelf; or
3. make Three Charms available, but in a place where customers probably wouldn't see the beans.

In the world in which many of us reside—the one where people measure their words, hide their thoughts, and speak only when they know it's safe—Gaines settled on the hide-and-see-the-beans option. Speak Freely leadership creates a fourth possibility: Jeff Gaines shares his uncertainty with his leader and asks for help:

You know, boss, if I put the Three Charms beans right in the middle, it will cannibalize my other sales. My revenues will drop below target, and I won't get my bonus. I'll look like I'm failing. But I can't *not* offer them. They are the lowest price on the market. I want to do what's right for the customer and company, but

I'm not going to make 4 percent if I do that. I don't know what to do. I need your help.

We've queried thousands of leaders regarding scenarios similar to Three Charms beans. Literally *no one* has ever stood up in one of our classrooms and suggested that they wouldn't want to hear Gaines's vulnerable admission and request for guidance. The benefits of this type of candor are immediate and self-evident: instead of his placing the product below the normal customer's sight line, he uncovers a different solution with his boss. The company benefits. The customer benefits. Gaines does the right thing. Trust ensues, and he opens up a little more confidently the next time he faces a dilemma. And to be clear, this story is not about retail strategy, Jeff Gaines, beans, or even values and mission. It's simpler than that. It's about open communication in an upward direction. If you're Gaines's leader, you should want to know what he's *actually* thinking. You should want him to come to you for help if he needs it. You should want him to speak freely.

Permission to speak freely means, first and foremost, that the people you lead trust you enough to tell you they need help, to ask when they don't understand, and to be bold with their lack of clarity. When these thoughts start to pour out, others will follow.

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