

# BEING SILENCED AND SILENCING OTHERS: developing the capacity to speak truth to power

A report by Megan Reitz and John Higgins,  
for Ashridge Executive Education, March 2017

*"I don't want any yes-men around me. I want everybody to tell me the truth even if it costs them their job"*

*Sam Goldwyn*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report is based on nearly three years worth of research into how senior people in organizations cut themselves off from useful and/or uncomfortable truths about reality. It explores head-on the role power plays in creating disconnected fantasies, as the report puts it:

*"When dominant leaders begin to see themselves as unquestionably right, when those around them feel they can only say what is safe to say, then we have a perfect storm in which leaders who are disconnected from the day-to-day can persuade others... that their perspective of the world is reality".*

Much of what is recommended to organizations to address this won't work:

*"Simply asking people to 'speak-up' and encouraging leaders to 'engage in conversation' without thoroughly appreciating the impact that power differences – and prevailing social and cultural norms – have on what can be spoken and what is heard is naïve at best".*

From both the perspective of what enables people to speak-up and what gets the powerful to listen-up five inter-twined perspectives were identified:

*"The first two, the 'conviction' to speak or listen and 'risk awareness', the awareness of the consequences of speaking up (or being spoken up to) decide... 'Am I going to move or not move?' The latter three, 'political awareness,' 'social awareness' and 'judgement' relate to the skill of assessing the political and social conditions in a specific context, and then having the... 'nous' to judge how to say things, or invite things to be said".*

*"The world may admire the truth-tellers, but few will want to employ them" Charles Handy*

## FROM THE BODY OF THE REPORT

*"When leaders are disconnected, see themselves as greater than they are, when those around them feel they can only tell the powerful what is safe to tell them, we create a culture in which speaking truth to those in power is the act of a madman (or one with nothing to lose)".* And it is very hard for leaders to stay grounded when nearly everything about organizational life tends to inflate their sense of self-importance. Acknowledging this becomes hard to do, especially when some basic truths of how humans are with each other is ignored: *"... we note that interest in 'conversational leadership' and the fashion for the 'flat organization'... has created a dangerous belief in some quarters that social and organizational hierarchy can be 'disappeared' and that speaking up is unproblematic".*

The report also identifies that we need to let go of the inappropriate use of the scientific method into areas of life it doesn't apply to: *"... our research is underpinned by an assumption that organizational truth is different from laboratory truth. Organizational truth... doesn't exist in one definitive version... [and] if 'truth' is understood in this way it puts significant demands on senior people to live and sustain cultures of transparency – and to understand that collective truth making is an inclusive, rather the exclusive, process".*

The work of developing a transparent culture starts with the senior leaders: *"If a leader within an organization is sincere in wanting to hear what others know, or what others consider as 'truth', then*



they have to understand how everything that is said to them is said through the lens of their relatively higher power". Admitting to having power in the eyes of others can be deeply uncomfortable, as it can evoke imposter syndrome as well as its opposite – delusional narcissism.

Some quotes from the report about speaking up or being silenced.

*"I feel silenced by him... It's a gender thing... the way he leans in, towers over me... I wonder what would happen if I shared how our meetings make me feel?... I have a deep suspicion he wouldn't give a toss"*

*"A colleague only felt safe to challenge the authorized and positive version when, suffering from a terminal illness, she was a few weeks from death"*

*"I'm quite Machiavellian about speaking truth... I worry less about long term relationships because they are so governed by role"*

*"I've been in situations where I realize I'm not absolutely sure what the agendas are, or what the political environment is... on the whole [that] makes me silent"*

*"I was hauled before the District Medical Officer... that's me at 21 and him fifty-odd: 'Young man, if you think you have any future in this career, you'll desist from this [questioning of current practice] immediately.' So I did desist"*

Some quotes from the report about enabling others to speak up or silencing others.

*"You need a desire to find out what people are saying... I think the key thing when it comes to speaking truth to power is safety... do people really make their subordinates and colleagues feel safe?"*

*"I expect that my ego sometimes prevents me hearing stuff I should be listening to"*

*"People who are part of cultural in-groups find it very hard to see how they are seen by those who are not part of the in-group"*

*"I get driven around by the most junior guys... it's amazing what they'll tell you... if you're sitting in the car together for two and a half hours or so... I always have a contract with the driver: 'What's said in the car, stays in the car'"*

*"A statement such as: 'My door is always open' when spoken by a boss may be... a double signal. It sounds open and inviting, while making clear the rank dynamics ('I'm important, so you come to me') – if I was really interested I wouldn't wait for you to come to me, I'd come to where you work and ask"*

## WHAT NEXT

The report provides a number of diagnostic frameworks and reflective questions that enable people to explore their own experience of speaking and listening to truth from a personal, inter-personal and organizational perspective. It highlights the importance of self-awareness and of noticing patterns in the moment – reported patterns being always tidier and less contentious than the rawer and more nuanced ones that play out in real time. Workshops and leadership keynote addresses that explicitly explore what it takes to create a 'Speak-up, Listen-up' culture have been developed by The Right Conversation on the back of the research. Please get in touch if you are interested in finding out more.

