Being silenced and silencing others;

Developing the capacity to speak truth to power

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Abstract

Recent corporate scandals, which may have been avoided if those with knowledge had spoken up, alongside the need to generate the next big idea for competitive advantage, have led to calls for improved dialogue up and down hierarchies. This has led to the proliferation of ‘conversational leadership’, encouraging leaders to be more accessible and relationally oriented towards employees. While signalling a valuable addition to modern leadership capacities, we argue there is a danger of ‘disappearing’ the complexities and consequences of the social construction of power and truth. This paper presents findings from a year-long project into ‘speaking truth to power’ in organisations. Through interviews, a co-operative inquiry, first person inquiry and organisational ethnography we have identified issues relevant in the moment when an individual chooses whether to speak up or stay silent, or when they enable others to speak up or not. We propose a framework to aid inquiry into different ‘truth to power’ cultures and discuss what may assist in developing more conscious, choiceful action.

Key words: truth, power, voice, dialogue, leadership, leadership development

Introduction:

In September 2015 Volkswagen was shamed by something known by employees, but not spoken up about effectively. The previous month an animated CEO announced that he did ‘not recognise’ the ‘bruising culture’ reported in a New York Times article (see Fitzgerald 2015); the CEO was Jeff Bezos of Amazon. Over the last two years there has been the humbling of organisations from Toshiba to
Tesco who have suffered the consequences of employees staying silent or speaking up but not being heard.

In a world where the next challenge is unknown and often unpredictable, where mistakes and wrong doings can be communicated to stakeholders instantly and where the competitive environment is unsparing, leadership theorists have advocated the need for senior leaders to develop new skills. One is the capacity to facilitate conversations and learning, enabling ideas and challenge to be voiced freely, so more of an organisation’s knowledge can be harnessed (see Isaacs 2001, Raelin 2013).

In our experience of working with leaders, most see why this is essential. They agree that ‘management by walking about’, ‘having their door always open’ and ‘meet the Directors Friday lunches’ are part of their role. Groysberg and Slind’s claim (2012) that ‘by talking with employees, rather than simply issuing orders, leaders can retain or recapture [the qualities of] operational flexibility, high levels of employee engagement, tight strategic alignment’ (p 78), is all but unquestioned. However, interest in ‘conversational leadership’ (Groysberg and Slind 2012) and the fashion for the ‘flat organisation’ as described by Ghiselli & Siegel (1972) has created a dangerous belief in some quarters that social hierarchy can be ‘disappeared’.

Following our major multi-methods study into ‘speaking truth to power’ we argue that such claims and activities could be dangerously simplistic and misguiding. We counter the belief promulgated by some (for example Caldwell and Dixon 2010) that mutual exchange of ideas and ‘empowerment’ of ‘followers’ occurs mainly by having leaders who hold ‘authentic’ positive intent. We suggest that, in concurrence with Tourish and Robson (2006), this interpretation understates the presence and consequences of power in organisations and its impact on the likelihood of openness and transparency across the hierarchy.

This paper starts by exploring the context for conversational leadership, and an explanation of our research aims and methodology. We then describe our key findings and a framework we suggest might aid inquiry into ‘organisational truth-telling cultures’. We discuss pragmatic responses to the question of ‘...so what do I / we do?’, conclude by summarising the contribution this research makes to the leadership and leadership development fields and recommend areas for further research.

**The rise of ‘conversational leadership’; ‘disappearing’ constructions of truth and power**

Much as Stacey (1993) and others (for example Marion and Uhl-Bien 2001) have been advocating the need for leaders to adopt the insights of complexity into their strategic planning and operational
processes, the established discourse around control and predictability has continued to privilege a mechanistic, engineered vision of organisational reality (Morgan 2006). Similarly conversation, often subsumed under the category of ‘communication’, continues to be seen as an activity that can be managed and controlled by formal processes with the ‘leader’ or ‘manager’ possessing significant agency in contrast to a relatively passive workforce. An example is the perseverance of ‘management cascades’; messages developed by senior leaders are sent downwards one management layer at a time, on the assumption that the message can be controlled and is predominately one-way (see Slotte 2006 commenting on the ‘conduit metaphor’).

Over twenty years ago, Senge’s The Fifth Discipline (1994) identified the need to establish a ‘learning organisation’, a movement that coincided with a focus on the creation of knowledge and intellectual capital management (see Stewart 1999). Organisational leaders were alert to the value of what existed in people’s heads, but tended to emphasise its management as a process of extraction and storage. The idea that knowledge and insight might also exist as a potential within living conversational exchange between ‘tops, middles and bottoms’ (Oshry 1986), as they go about their work perhaps felt too intangible to be practicable. However various academics have been privileging an emergent and multi-voiced world-view and addressing the practice of organisational conversation. For example, Shotter (1993) writes of the manager as practical author orchestrating conversations for action while Isaacs (1999) draws on the work of Bohm (1996) for insights into how organisations could move beyond simple notions of managed communication and embrace the disciplines of dialogue. Notions of power are integral in such dialogue according to feminist writers such as Gilligan (1993), Belenky et al. (1997) and Robb (2007), who have long been arguing about the consequences that a gendered form of language has on how the world gets known and leadership framed.

While conversation, knowledge and power are regarded as intertwined within certain areas of academic literature, within the corporate world the focus has remained limited. Leadership development programmes focus on developing specific skills to address conversational situations experienced as problematic, for instance training for ‘difficult conversations’. Meanwhile whistleblowing procedures show continuing attempts to control certain conversations through formal processes.

Although references to conversational leadership continue to populate organisational discourse, they have been fitted within the established view, where power and hierarchy are variables to be managed rather than determining qualities of how conversation take place. Simple solutions are offered, for example Wiseman (2014) can be seen as advocating that senior teams need to become
better at giving inexperienced people the benefit of the doubt. The way that an organisation’s unique conversational culture legitimises who can say what to who is ‘disappeared’, instead there is a straightforward focus on apparently universal or generic skills such as influencing or listening.

Our intention in this paper is to share rigorous insights into the lived, in-the-moment practice, of how people speak up and don’t speak up in truth telling settings that are better understood as truth-power cultures. The guiding research questions we address in this paper are therefore: ‘What happens in the moment of choice of whether to speak up or stay silent?’ and ‘How does an appreciation of the complexities of this moment inform effective leadership?’ The next section details our choices regarding how best to study these questions.

**Methodological choices and attending to the ironies of researching speaking truth to power with others**

Our epistemological perspective is one of social constructionism, our broad methodological orientation is that of action research (Reason and Bradbury 2001, 2008) and our practices include first- and second-person inquiry. Over the period of a year we have both journaled and helped each other to inquire robustly into our first person experiences. We have interviewed over 50 individuals who hold senior positions, typically CEO and Chair, about their experiences of speaking up and enabling others to speak to them. With eight of these we conducted a co-operative inquiry (CI) (Heron 1996) that met four times over a year, exploring stories of speaking truth to power ‘out there’ as well as pausing to consider how speaking truth to power was being navigated in the moment ‘in here’. This, alongside one-to-one discussions after each meeting, gave us insight into how perspectives deepened and changed over time according to contextual factors and how experiments in action were made sense of. Finally we engaged with four organisations more deeply, interviewing people at the top, middle and bottom (Oshry 1986) and undertaking ethnographic study alongside specific inquiry interventions, exploring the multitude of different perspectives coexisting within the same system.

During this process, rather than set-up a specific definition of the terms ‘truth’, ‘power’ and ‘leader’/‘leading’/‘leadership’, we were interested in how our research participants’ interpretation showed up in their practice, how they talked about their practice of ‘speaking truth to power’ and how this played out within the CI meetings. Consequently in the review of our findings there is an inevitable definitional drift, allowing for people’s lived experience to be foregrounded over a pre-thought framing.
We were not oblivious to the irony of inviting others to speak openly to us about their experiences of speaking up. To mitigate this we chose not to record most of the interviews (which we felt may be intimidating) and instead wrote-up and anonymised our notes after the meetings, before returning them to those interviewed to review and amend. We drew on personal connections to access some of our interviewees in the understanding that this brought with it a pre-existing level of trust in how we would respect confidentiality and helpful in inviting open conversation. Strict contracting in relation to organisational interventions was also employed; the anonymity of those we spoke to was assured and the possible consequences of inviting inquiry into this area were discussed with senior leaders. Finally we attended supervision throughout the project to explore and understand how we ourselves were navigating speaking truth to power within our own research relationship.

Notes from the interviews and ethnographic studies and recordings from the co-operative inquiry process were transcribed and collated alongside first-person inquiry notes and through a grounded theory approach we identified, with our research participants, key themes to which we now turn.

Findings; being silenced and silencing others

From the beginning of our inquiry we discovered that ‘speaking truth to power’ stimulated people to reflect on experience from two different perspectives. The first perspective related to times where the individual had themselves made a choice to speak up to others they regarded as more powerful, or had remained silent. The second perspective related to times when individuals, recognising they may be perceived as being more powerful in the eye and experience of others, had attempted to enable others to speak up to them, or had inadvertently or purposefully acted to keep others silent.

Across both of these perspectives we identified five intertwined themes. The first two, ‘conviction’ and ‘risk awareness’ may be foregrounded as they decide, as one CI participant noted: “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 the capacity for judging how to say things, or invite things to be said, in a way that encourages safe transparency. As another CI member summarised:

“... There’s a balance between conviction and the risk... that balance determines the question of what you’re prepared to say... then the other three elements are tactics... they’re about how you arm yourself and do it in the best possible way”.

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These themes are detailed below, first exploring things from the perspective of the person choosing whether to speak up, and second, from the perspective of someone, perceived as more powerful, attempting (or not) to encourage others to speak up.

**Perspective 1: Being silenced or speaking up**

Table 1 summarises the five themes and gives two statements alongside each that form a ‘diagnostic’. We developed it as an aid to our inquiry and now use with individuals and organisations interested in exploring this subject. As an Action Inquiry informed diagnostic it is intended to stimulate reflection and insight into specific personal practice, rather than being used as a device for categorisation and abstract definition.

**Table 1: Being silenced and speaking up: A diagnostic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Statements</th>
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| **Conviction** - A belief in the value of my own opinion | 1. I believe I have a genuine contribution to make  
2. I know what I feel strongly enough about to speak up about |
| **Risk Awareness** - A realistic grasp of the consequences of speaking up to my boss/ organisation | 1. I am good at judging the scale of personal risk associated with speaking up  
2. I am good at knowing how to manage that risk |
| **Political Awareness** – Awareness of the political games that are played in the organisation | 1. I know who has what type of power and influence in the organization  
2. I can assess what their agenda and priorities are |
| **Social Awareness** - Awareness of how to work with the social rules present in this conversation so that people will listen to me | 1. I understand how the ‘labels’ (e.g. my role, gender, ethnicity, personality, age) people attach to me affect how I will be heard  
2. I understand how I am expected to behave given the context within which this conversation is occurring |
Judgement - The skill of knowing what to say, who to say it to, when to say it and how to say it

1. I know when I need to take care with what I want to say
2. I know how to communicate to a more powerful person in a way he/she can hear

Conviction covers the belief a person has in the value of their own opinion. When it comes to speaking up to power this reflects the motivating force behind the need to speak. Risk Awareness focuses on having a realistic grasp of the consequences of speaking up to powerful others. It is a subjective and often ambiguous experience and not simply negative; the felt awareness of risk can indicate a conversation is touching on something that matters. While an individual might feel strongly about an issue, they may also perceive it to be risky to challenge the personality or status of a person perceived as being more powerful in the moment, or to be seen to support or challenge the agendas of powerful external bodies such as the press or regulator. A CI member spoke of a colleague who only felt safe to challenge the authorised and positive version of the effectiveness of the new health commissioning regime when, suffering from a terminal illness, she was a few weeks from death and took to a public platform in a wheelchair, accompanied by an oxygen tank and mask. Another CI member commented that: “Most of the people I’m dealing with, in powerful positions, their real fear is the Press”.

Together Conviction and Risk Awareness provide a measure of how much potential for speaking up exists within a specific group or organisational setting. Many interviewees were concerned that speaking up might result in questions being raised about whether they ‘belonged’ in the organisation and/or whether they were ‘fit’ for their job. These themes therefore might touch on identity, self-esteem and financial security. A CI member explains the interplay between conviction and risk awareness: “I want to take a read of my conviction and then I want to think about: ‘Am I going to say something… what’s the ripple effect?’ And is my conviction still the same at the end”. In the CI group, particularly at the beginning, participants reflected on their constant assessments of riskiness in speaking up, for example:

[Participant]: “I was reflecting on... the number of times I’d said something like ‘between these four walls’... because I was slightly new to the group... I was needing to reinforce to myself that I could say things that [I] wouldn’t necessarily want to go much further”
“... What we’re doing all the time is we’re calibrating what’s okay here, what’s not okay... it happens... around jeopardy, those very human fragilities around being accepted or being liked or being respected or... belonging”.

The level of conviction needs to overcome the resistance to speak up arising from the perceived level of risk. Perceptions of riskiness can be difficult to regulate, especially where the felt presence of power differences are hard to gauge, as one interviewee commented: “There’s a tension in me between wanting to be brave and speak truth... but also wanting to be invisible because the power I am up against is scary and insidious”. Even when risk is contained in one area it doesn’t always apply across the board, as one interviewee noted about his boss and bosses: “[She’s] incredibly accepting and warm... [about] emotional things affecting my work [but talking about] not feeling sure about staying with the firm... I feel treacherous... I’ve felt shot down by some senior leaders before now”.

In conjunction with these two, the three remaining themes of Political Awareness, Social Awareness and Judgement might also be considered by the individual in their moment of choice.

Political Awareness refers to how alert a person is of the political games being played within the context in which they act. In many organisational settings personal competition is encouraged and promoting a truth that serves a personal agenda is part of reality, as one interviewee acknowledged: “I’m quite Machiavellian about speaking truth... I worry less about long term relationships because they are so governed by role”. It was considered wise, when contemplating speaking up, to attempt to interpret and navigate the agendas of powerful others, as one interviewee stated: “I wouldn’t speak openly to [my boss] because I don’t trust him... it’s all about him and him being the person that saves the day”.

Political gaming can be difficult to spot and interpret, which has consequences on an individual’s capacity to speak up. In the CI we likened our experience to “being back in the school playground”. One participant commented that: “Truth to power in the playground... is subtle... we haven’t got teacher to turn to... we’re negotiating the rules”. Another CI member explained: “I’ve been in situations where I realise I’m not absolutely sure what the agendas are, or what the political environment is... on the whole [that] makes me silent”. Conversely it seems that the agendas involved in the budgeting process, described by one CI member as the: “Organisation’s biggest lie”, are more obvious but no less impactful. One now ex-CEO from the NHS was determined not to go along with the: “budgeting game”, that had been played for years, instead committing to go public from the start of the financial year with what he believed to be an honest, deficit budget. As the year unfolded he went on standing his ground in the face of mounting risk, refusing to play into what he saw as the political agendas of the regulators, pushing him to agree with what he considered an
impossible combination of accountabilities and targets. Finally he chose to step into retirement having been told that he now led a: “failing organisation”, and that he: “lacked the necessary will and ambition”.

Other references to political agendas include one interviewee reporting: “It’s very easy for the personalities to dominate and for the numbers to get ignored and the facts to remain un-discussed”. Similarly another interviewee explained: “When doing a speech for Sue I understand the need for media attention and demand for policy action... Sue likes data to be interrogated until ‘it yields what I need it to yield’”. Truth, power and information are inextricably linked with powerful individuals deciding on how data is to be used in accordance with various political agendas.

Social Awareness encompasses the social rules present in the conversation. It requires an individual to pay attention to the conscious and unconscious effects of ‘labels’ that are applied to them and that they apply to others, which impact on the decision to speak up. This includes acknowledging the existence of personal and group bias, however much it is legally banished or publicly disapproved of, associated with gender, age and ethnicity. These labels are markers of socio-historical context and they evoke assumptions about who has a right to be heard. In our research participants spoke of navigating the meaning of such labels in particular contexts and the effect of these on their decisions on whether and how to speak up. In the CI group we noticed in one meeting the gender imbalance in the room and one participant asked: “I wonder if [it] matters?” To which another male participant responded: “When I’m in mixed [gender] groups... the motivation to move to consensus feels a bit greater”. Still on the ‘label’ of gender, another opportunity for reflection arose in the CI group when one participant asked another male participant “Did you feel aggravated when I had an opposing view?” To which he responded: “I don’t think at that point I could think how to engage because you’d offered... an adversarial... counter... I think I just shut down...I find it very difficult to engage with a strongly expressed oppositional male voice”.

We interviewed Dr Rowan Williams, previously Archbishop of Canterbury, who described his experience of confronting President Mugabe with a dossier of human rights violations and his awareness, given the socio-historical context, of the ‘label’ Mugabe would apply to him of ‘colonialist’:

“I knew that I would have a lecture on what my business was lecturing him about injustice when we had a history of colonialism and all the rest of it... [But] one of the people that went into the meeting with me was the Archbishop of South Africa... at one point, when the conversation was stalling, [he] came in to say ‘Look, Mr. President, you call yourself a Christian, what do you think you’re doing?’ Which he could say. I couldn’t, from within the dynamic”.

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Interviewees also explained the decisions they faced on whether to challenge the labels or conform and the consequential implications on truth-telling, for example in relation to the label of ‘young’:

“I was hauled before the District Medical Officer... there’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”

The labels people wear and give others and the way that power gets socialised and legitimised, creates and maintains specific patterns of interaction that can create truth impoverishing cultures. As one interviewee explained: “… the truth you get within the formal systems and titles is hugely influenced by the system and its habits that create the ritual of power... the higher up you get, the less truth you get... and as I got told less truth so I told less truth”.

The final theme is Judgement, which is applied at the moment of speaking truth to power. It covers the skill of knowing what to say, who to say it to, when to say it and how to say it so it can be heard. Interviewees spoke of what triggered them to react rather than choicefully respond, alongside their capacity for verbal competence and congruent body language. The deputy chairman of a global media organisation we interviewed explained:

“Well, if I have something difficult to say [to the Chair], I would never say it at work and would never say it with other people present. I wait until [we’re] travelling, and he and I are staying in a hotel. And then I wait until we’ve both got a glass of wine in our hands and we’re sitting in one of our hotel rooms. And then I can say whatever I like! And I know how to say it”.

Part of judgement is working with the world as it is, and not as an individual would like it to be and determining the extent to which one colludes in sustaining a pattern that doesn’t serve the individual well. As one interviewee noted: “I’m a great builder of alliances to effect change... no good is done by being outraged and angry... maybe because I’m a woman in the world as it is I have to be more collaborative in how I confront people because then I am less dismissable”. Similarly, as one CI participant observed: “We create the system, especially when we get into positions where we could just change the system, we don’t”.

Judgement is unlikely to be well exercised if a person is not fully present to themselves and their context in the moment. At the same time an individual needs the skills to work with this insight, while acknowledging that they do not own or control the relational and conversational space within which speaking up does and doesn’t happen.
**Perspective 2: Silencing others or enabling others to speak up**

Table 2 explores the five themes from the alternative perspective of one wishing to enable others to speak up, or deliberately or inadvertently putting others on their guard or silencing them.

**Table 2: Silencing others or enabling others to speak up**

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<thead>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Statements</th>
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| Conviction - The belief in the value of others’ contribution | 1. I am known to be open to having my own opinion changed  
2. I know what things I am likely to be deaf to |
| Risk Awareness - The capacity to empathise with how risky people might find it to speak up to me | 1. I am aware of and accept the impact of my relatively powerful position  
2. I know how to convene forums that help people speak safely to me |
| Political Awareness - Knowing why people are telling me what they are and what they expect me to do with it | 1. I can judge when people are telling me what they think I want to hear  
2. I know when people are telling me something they want me to pass on |
| Social Awareness - The awareness of how to work with the social rules present in a conversation so that people will speak to me | 1. I understand how the labels (e.g. my role, gender, ethnicity, personality, age) people attach to me affect how they will speak to me  
2. I understand how, as a more powerful person, I am expected to behave given the context within which a conversation is occurring (e.g. organisational and national cultures, history, relationships, financial situation) |
| Judgement - The skill of knowing what to do in order to encourage people to be prepared to speak up to me | 1. I know how to make it easier for people to open up to me  
2. I know who will tell me the truth |
**Conviction** and **Risk Awareness** cover how much desire exists to hear others and how much the person in a more powerful role appreciates the risk that might be experienced by those wishing to speak.

The belief in others opinions and the desire to really value these appears paramount, as interviewees explained: “You need to bring a desire to find out what people are saying... you need leaders to show they want to hear what people are saying and thinking”... “I think the key thing when it comes to speaking truth to power is safety... do people make their subordinates and colleagues feel safe? ... When my senior colleagues have their defences up, they don’t hear what the [younger staff] are saying”.

A key aspect in relation to conviction and risk relates to the more powerful individual’s capacity for humility, a rare skill explored by one interviewee: “We don’t get lessons in humility... it’s not valued in our culture... and collective intelligence depends on humility”. To begin engaging with humility requires those who see themselves as knowledgeable and powerful to consider that others, who they might see as being significantly less powerful, might have important insights. As one interviewee explained: “I expect that ego sometimes prevents me hearing stuff I should be listening to”. The phenomenon of hubris increasing as one becomes more powerful is summarised by one investor we spoke to: “I’m so struck by how cut-off executive leaders are from the day-to-day... the next generation of leaders really do need to take seriously the need to ride the subway”, a reference signalling the need to access the everyday understandings of those in less privileged positions.

The themes of **Political Awareness**, **Social Awareness** and **Judgement** relate to how skilled those in positions of power are at assessing the contextual political and social reality and then judging how to invite things to be said, or influencing them to not be said. In relation to political awareness a more powerful individual needs to understand that, as one interviewee put it: “People do a lot of genuflecting when they hear you’re the CEO... they say what they think you want to hear, which can be very frustrating”. Awareness of how formal organisational position influences what is said was drawn out by another interviewee: “I was working... with the CEO... she was not aware that she held people to account in a way that encouraged them to be deferent towards her and keep their distance”. This CEO was at risk of only hearing what fitted with her established understanding.

There may indeed be reason for those ‘below you’ to choose words appropriate to political agendas, as an open admission from one interviewee illustrates: “I want people to be who they are... but the
risk, the fear is, that by being who they are it might show they are not the person who fits here... and I do have a little list in my head of people who don’t fit...

Social Awareness covers the awareness of how to work with the social rules present in the conversation. The impact of social awareness became very apparent when an interviewee told us the story of one well-intentioned FTSE Chair attending a diversity workshop to: “show his support”, for the programme. The diversity exercise, based on exploring what gave people advantage within the organisation outside of technical or professional competence, highlighted the role of age and gender, alongside type of schooling as well as features such as height and accent. As our interviewee explained:

“Everyone stood in a line, shoulder to shoulder and the facilitator then asked them to take a step forward when she called out each ['social advantage']... At the end, the Chair was way ahead of the rest of the group, having taken a step forward for every one of the advantages. In conversation at a later date he was able to reflect that before this exercise he’d always thought that he’d got to where he had through hard work and talent - but now he knew that he had every advantage stacked in his favour and this was a factor in his rise to the top”.

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. Yet the capacity to see the power of ‘labels’ and the influence of context is exactly what many of our interviewees suggest is imperative in enabling others to speak up. Seeing social advantage in action is not straightforward, as one business advisor told us when reflecting on the culture of the senior executives they engage with: “It’s still a boys club... I was a... fool for thinking diversity mattered... They wouldn’t recognise their behaviours as sexist... they are so out of touch with the standards of the world”.

The final theme is Judgement, the skill of the more powerful person knowing what they can do in order to have people speak up to them. This can involve a very explicit pattern of contracting, with the powerful person establishing boundaries of confidentiality that will then be evaluated by the less powerful in terms of personal and organisational history (Is this person trustworthy? Are people who have power trustworthy?). An interviewee from the military explained: “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 member of the CI group reported: “The number of times, the conversation I’ve had is: ‘Are you saying this to [me, as Jeff] over coffee, or [to me as] the Chief Operating [Officer] who wants to run the Bank... Are you asking me for informal and personal advice or a professional thing? Because I’ll
have to act if it’s the latter”. It becomes necessary to navigate the tensions between role, responsibility and promises of confidentiality, doing this in a way that encourages others to speak while retaining one’s credibility and agency.

Judgement includes tactics, built on a foundation of self-awareness, which those in powerful positions apply in order to help others speak up. One interviewee explained: “I get pissed off, but I know that it’s my immediate reaction and I’ve learnt to keep it inside me, because I never want people not to come to me”. One CI participant reflected on how they might be inadvertently silencing others in the group through their preference for extroversion: “One of the things I’ve found myself doing... is jumping in quickly... not giving time for other comments to settle”.

All five themes work together in the moment, there is no simple catchall that can guide behaviour for people with power when it comes to encouraging and enabling others to speak up. This is illustrated by an interviewee who explained the contextual messaging that the less powerful player in a conversation might well be constructing, as they hear an invitation to speak up from a more powerful other: “You’re always on the lookout for the double signal... A statement such as: ‘My door is always open’ when spoken by a boss may be such 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”.

To summarise, we suggest that the five themes (and no doubt many others we have not highlighted) intertwine in the space between the more powerful and the less powerful, as people construct those labels in the moment. The co-operative inquiry group, discussing whether it was the job of the junior person: “To be bright, be quick, be gone”, as one member put it, or whether it was the job of the senior person to value spending time with the more junior person and ensure they were comfortable to speak, concluded that responsibility could not be apportioned so simply onto ‘one side’ or collapsed into a single encounter. The outcome, i.e. whether someone speaks up or not, is determined relationally and systemically. Viewing these relational interactions at a macro scale we begin to see how organisational ‘truth-telling cultures’ take shape, become stuck, or change. This is the topic of the next section.

Organisational truth-telling cultures

There are many examples of practitioner literature taking an unproblematic view of the relationship between truth and power, resulting in recommendations for action being seductively simple, but of limited practical value. The focus, for example, on advocating the need for moral courage, or the
‘moral imperative to act’ (see Bennis et al. 2010 p48-49), locates the solution to speaking truth to power within ‘the behaviour of leaders towards followers’ (p67).

In analysing the five aspects of silencing-self and silencing others, we have looked to pay attention to the contextual dynamics largely taken for granted when considering exchanges between leader and follower. In working with a Foucauldian (Foucault 2002) perspective on truth-power, where each organisation ‘has its regime of truth’ (p131), where “Truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it’ (p132) and can be seen as ‘the final vocabulary of power’ (Haugaard 2012 p90), we seek to create a more insightful, and useful, contextual perspective for understanding different truth-power regimes and their implications for leading and organisational development. In this way the ‘moral imperative’ of Bennis et al. (2010) is positioned within a specific context, rather than existing as some axiomatic norm.

In order to find some anchoring points within the flux of the truth-power field, we have created a practice-focused grid, illustrated in Figure 1, separating out this inter-connected concept into two constituent dimensions of Power and Truth.

**Figure 1: Organisational ‘truth-telling’ cultures**

In temporarily splitting Truth and Power along separate axis, we have chosen to work with different ways of distinguishing between the qualities of Truth and Power. In terms of ‘Power’ we have chosen ‘power with’ and ‘power over’ (see Fletcher 2003, p6), where ‘power with’ is focused on organisational leaders exercising their authority in order to facilitate collective agency, and ‘power over’ is focused on imposing an external authority over the agency of others.
For ‘Truth’ we have worked with the well-established ontological divide between a positivist world view based on Truth having a fixed and singular quality and an interpretivist world view in which Truth is a dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon, emerging in a context of multiple, competing discourses (see Burr, 2003).

Given this framing, the four truth-power cultural ‘ideals’ can be seen in Figure 1 as being:

- **Directive**, where Truth has a singular/fixed quality and the Power orientation is towards “Power Over”, with authority being exercised (or imposed) over one group by another. In the directive form, it is very clear who needs to be spoken up to, but the quality of what gets heard, or is invited to be heard, is bound up with the character of those in power and the relationship they have with their direct reports.

- **Empowering** – where Truth has a singular/fixed quality and the Power orientation is towards “Power With”, with authority being used to facilitate collective agency. With the empowering ideal it is very clear what counts as useful knowledge, and what ‘the answer’ is, and people can exercise personal and collective agency within clearly defined boundaries set by those in authority.

- **Refereed** – where Truth has a multiple/fluid quality and where the Power orientation is towards “Power Over”. This is a context where the role of authority figures and groups is to arbitrate and choose between conflicting ‘truth camps’, when those who hold different truth perspectives do not see themselves as responsible for resolving differences.

- **Dialogic** – where Truth is multiple and fluid and the Power orientation is towards “Power With”. This is a context where the role of authority is to convene meetings and spaces where people can come together to explore differences and find new ways of knowing the world and what needs to be done.

There is no ‘right place’ to be on this framework; each truth-power culture can be seen to have its challenges and its opportunities. Each culture might also be seen to have its own ‘development edge’ depending on whether the intention is to ‘become better’ at being in the same place or to move towards a different position on the framework. For example, the leader of the directive or empowerment culture may attempt to improve their skills in communication and strategic visioning so that their ‘single truth’ is understood deeply. They may also want to improve performance management processes to ensure that their ‘single truth’ remains ‘on track’ for delivery. If that leader however wanted to influence a move towards hearing multiple ‘truths’ a path for
development might be in instigating appropriate forums to voice difference or developing a personal skill in coaching and questioning to elicit the views of others.

‘Great…but what do I/we do?’

On the one hand our findings point to the complexity of the contextual moment of speaking truth to power, on the other we are encouraged to come up with specific, quick and easy to take actions to assure speaking up (a challenge referred to in Reitz 2015). Here our social constructionist orientation collides with the predominant post-positivist, structuralist perspective manifest inside many organisational systems and leadership development interventions. We attempt to navigate this tension now.

We offer five suggestions for individuals and organisations wishing to become more effective in speaking truth to power. They assume that, wherever you are on the framework of truth-power cultures, it is useful to enable more conscious, choice-full and transparent decisions to be made about speaking up and hearing others. These are discussed in more depth in Reitz and Higgins (forthcoming):

1. Experimenting with and inquiring into the five themes in this paper might assist those wishing to speak up to broaden their awareness of their choices and help those in powerful roles develop sensitivity for the implications of their power on what they get to hear. Although juggling five themes (ten if you happen to be considering both perspectives) might appear at first unwieldy, first person experiences indicate that over time ‘conscious incompetence’ can be developed towards ‘unconscious competence’; we found ourselves having developed a tacit capacity to navigate through the themes when speaking up and enabling others to do the same.

2. The act of inquiring into this area is in itself a change intervention. For those wishing to learn more, the process of holding disciplined attention (Moustakas 1990) to a question and then developing cycles of action and reflection in relation to that question, may well, over time, change understanding and behaviour.

3. There are advantages in developing the metacognitive capacity to consciously observe one’s own thoughts, feelings and assumptions while also observing and analysing the field within which one is intervening. A number of our interviewees appreciated how their mindfulness practice (encompassing Buddhist or secular meditations and Christian prayer) helped develop this capacity and ‘grounded’ them, enabling them to spot when they began to be
driven by their egotistical needs. Metacognition can be learnt through mindfulness training (see Chaskalson 2014 and Reitz et al. 2016).

4. There may be ways in which organisations can nurture diversity of voice and individuals can encourage others to challenge them. Specifically, we found that recruitment and talent management processes often encourage ‘sameness’, where those in powerful positions seek to increase the power of those similar to themselves. Packer (2015) comments on this phenomenon and suggests ways of mitigating this risk.

5. Even if recruitment processes successfully ensure diversity of voice ‘on paper’, groups naturally revert to sameness and group-think (Janis 1972) over time, a phenomenon explored in terms of group dynamics by Smith & Berg (1987). Facilitating ‘assisted curiosity’ interventions may seek to address this creep towards intellectual sameness. This could involve the capacity to see and question the framing of leadership, organising and strategy so that decisions and choices become more transparent and therefore the subject of more critical reflection.

Conclusion

In this paper we have illustrated the complex and dynamic experience of speaking up and of enabling others to speak up by reflecting on five themes; conviction, risk awareness, political awareness, social awareness and judgement. We have provided a framework to better understand the qualities of specific truth-power cultures and the implications this may have for leading and for organisational development.

While we have illustrated the limitations of the more superficial and simplistic approach to enabling ‘speak-up cultures’ we recognise a number of limitations in our own work. Firstly, we note the paradox of using categories in the form of themes and frameworks in order to identify and illustrate complexity. The themes are our own and our research participants’ subjective impression of experience and are inevitably partial. We would invite researchers to explore further salient issues apparent in the moment of speaking up and convey the richness of that moment of choice.

Secondly, our attempt at conveying the in-the-moment-ness of the choice of speaking up was aided through co-operative and first person inquiry. However we recognise the interviews, and to some extent the ethnographic studies, we undertook positioned us as more detached researchers and explored the subject in hindsight rather than in the present. We are interested in furthering our
research into ‘real-time’ processes of speaking up and would welcome researchers to also embark on this way of studying the subject.

Thirdly, a limitation (or opportunity) is that truth and power are always being navigated and their presence in our work is noted. Although we were able to be cognisant that our research participants might limit what they say to us, we simply cannot know how this may have affected the ‘truth’ that they told to us. Further ideas on how to craft ‘safer’ methodological approaches would be welcome.

Finally, the research was biased towards the insights, perspectives and experiences of those with greater formal authority, even though these individuals were often initially focused upon their own issues of speaking up to others. We will be broadening our research to encompass more ‘middles’ and ‘bottoms’ (Oshry 1986) and would encourage other researchers to do similarly.

In conclusion, the capacity for relationally situated individuals to construct opportunities for voicing ideas and challenges can be regarded as vital to an organisations ability to thrive and survive. We have illustrated the limitations of approaches that ‘disappear’ power and truth dynamics, suggesting that the complexities of truth and power must be acknowledged, and mindful action and inquiry undertaken, if organisations are to develop a healthy capacity for ‘speaking truth to power’.

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