

Can I Really Speak Truth to Power?

Practical Advice for New Executives

Notes for Remarks by James R. Mitchell
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Introduction

- Thank you for that very kind introduction, Peter. It really is a pleasure to be here with this group today. I think the idea of bringing you all together like this to celebrate your appointment as executives in the Public Service is a terrific idea.
- It's worthwhile not just for the celebration, but more importantly because it gives you an opportunity to reflect, together, on what it means to be an executive in the Public Service.
- For becoming an EX does mean something special. It means, above all, different kinds of responsibilities than you have carried to this point. It means different expectations from your superiors. It means new obligations and, we hope, a different understanding of your duty as a public servant.
- That's what I want to talk about this morning – your duty to “speak truth to power”.
- Actually, my title is *“Can I really speak truth to power? Practical advice for new executives”*. It was Peter who suggested both the topic and the title, and it was a very timely suggestion.
- This topic is important to you as new executives, and it is important for every executive serving a relatively new government that is still getting used to working with the Public Service.
- Just in case you're wondering, there is an easy answer to my question. The answer is “yes” – it is your duty to speak truth to power, and it is one of the most fundamental duties of a senior public servant. You can, and you should.
- That's the easy part. The harder, and much more interesting part, is to understand:
 - what it means to speak truth to power,
 - why it is your duty, and
 - how you should do it (and how you shouldn't)

What's the Concept?

- “Speak truth to power”. We have all heard the phrase a thousand times.

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- Just out of curiosity, I googled the phrase “speak truth to power” and got 390,000 hits. That’s almost 100,000 more hits than another famous phrase, “love thy neighbour”. And about 100,000 fewer than “the sky is blue”.
 - So for most people, the phrase “speak truth to power” falls somewhere between a moral dictum and a platitude. But it’s much more than that for people in the Public Service, as I will show in a minute.
 - I learned something else in my modest researches on the origins of the phrase ‘speak truth to power’. I learned that, while it seems to us closely associated with government and the duties of public servants, its origins run far deeper than that.
 - In fact, a simple internet search shows that members of three of the world’s great religions each claim the phrase as part of their own contribution to thought:
 - For example, the editors of a Quaker on-line journal titled, *Speak Truth to Power*, say that the phrase is taken from a charge given to Eighteenth Century Friends, exhorting them to be fearless in expressing their truth to the powerful.
 - An Islamic source, going back even farther, says “*Prophet Muhammad said that the best form of jihad is to speak truth to power*”.
 - And a Jewish source says “*We are commanded by Torah to speak truth to power*”.
 - Now, I can’t tell you exactly who has the trademark on the phrase “speak truth to power” but, like many concepts taken for granted in our largely secular society, it clearly goes back a long way in moral and theological history.
 - The phrase is there in religious tradition because it captures something important about the duty of the believer to express, to those who stand in authority over him, what the believer knows to be true – even if doing so has painful consequences.
 - That’s the origin, clearly, but I don’t want to carry this analogy too far. Our interest today is in public service, not religion, and there is a very important sense in which what these religious traditions have meant by the phrase “speak truth to power” is very different from what we mean in the government context.
 - It is worth taking a minute or two to explain why.
 - For one thing, people in the religious context are usually speaking about revealed truth – they are referring to what their doctrine commands them to believe, or what they simply hold fast to in their hearts. It is the unshakeable truth of religious conviction that is being called for in the quotations I gave you.

What does it mean for the public servant?

- That's not what we're talking about in government. For you, "speaking truth to power" expresses one of your most fundamental obligations as a senior public servant, which is to provide information and honest – and fearless – advice to your superiors.
- That's what you're paid to do:
 - Not to tell people what they want to hear, but rather what they *need* to hear;
 - Not to hide the facts but to bring them forward, even if they run counter to received wisdom, or someone's preferred course of action;
 - Not to make your boss comfortable, but to equip him or her to do the right thing even if that makes them uncomfortable.
- This is true whether your boss is the Director General, the ADM, the Deputy or the Minister. Your duty is to give your superiors the information and the advice they are entitled to expect from you as a professional.
- That's why you're an executive. You are paid to speak up. If you're not prepared to do that, you shouldn't have become an EX.

So, can you really speak truth to power?

- As I said, you can, and you should – but it's not as simple as that.
- You have to remember a few things first. In fact, I'm going to give you five things to remember. If you have questions about any of these propositions, we can talk about them at the end of my presentation.
 1. *The first thing to remember is that this whole business of speaking truth to power is not about you; it's about your duty as a senior public servant.*
 - It's about the facts, and it can be about ideas, but not about you, and not your ideas.
 - It's not about opinions, or your right to an opinion. (I hate to tell you this, but nobody other than your spouse or your best friend cares about your opinions; we all, however, care about your professional judgment.)
 2. *The second point is that 'truth', in this context, is a complicated business. As I said, we're not talking about revealed truth. We're talking about:*
 - *what you know (i.e., the facts);*

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- *about the lessons you have learned from experience;*
 - *about your best judgment about what to do, in light of the facts and all that experience.*

It is not your duty as an executive to trade your “truth” with that of the politicians or to substitute your agenda, or your beliefs, for those of the government. Ministers know what they believe in. They know what they want to achieve, and it is not your business to argue with them over that.

For you there is no “truth”, in the sense the Quakers meant by the term. There is no revealed wisdom for people in government – there are only the facts, as best we know them, and the professional judgment and experience you bring to the facts.

3. *Third point – there is a time and a place to speak up.*

- There is a chain of command, and as an executive, you’re part of it. You need to respect it – speak up to your boss, not to the Deputy directly.
- It also means accepting that your advice may not make it all the way up the chain of command.

4. *Fourth, you need to know how to speak up – verbally and in writing. As new EX’s, you need to develop your skills in giving tough advice (and doubtless many of you are skilled already).*

- This can be a matter of simple tact, or careful expression in a memorandum, or simply that of showing respect to the boss even while you’re disagreeing with him or her.
- Remember – the higher your credibility as a person and as a manager, the easier it will be to speak up and to have your advice considered and accepted.

5. *Finally, you have to learn how to recognize when the argument is over.*

- Don’t forget, this is a team game. Your advice is one input among many, whether you’re a Director or a Deputy.
- Take the opportunity to be heard, and then live with the decision. If you keep on fighting after the issue has been decided, you will find that you are left out of the discussion next time, because people will see you as someone who cannot separate themselves from their point of view.

Bottom Line

- The duty to speak truth to power is what in philosophy we call a 'positive obligation' – a duty to do the right thing, and not simply to refrain from doing the wrong thing.
- I think we need to pay much more attention to these positive obligations when we talk about the values of the Public Service. What can make it a challenge to fulfill this particular duty is that, sadly, not everyone appreciates it.
- In a new Government, not all Ministers are yet accustomed to looking for frank and fearless advice, or listening when it is offered. But the best ones do – and those of you are working for that sort of Minister know what a joy it is for officials to work in an environment like that.
- What is even more regrettable is that even some experienced senior officials do not encourage this kind of professional behaviour in their subordinates. They don't welcome dissenting views, and they are reluctant to convey them up the chain of command.
- That's too bad, because in the end it is Ministers who suffer when officials don't give them the full benefit of their information and advice.
- A colleague of mine said recently that the real integrity deficit in government lies not in wrongdoing by officials, but rather in what too often is not done – that is, in officials not speaking up when it is their duty to do so.
- Remember this most fundamental duty, and you'll do well as executives in Canada's Public Service.

Thank you.