
Can I Really Speak Truth to Power?

Notes for Remarks by James R. Mitchell
at the
CBSA Strategy and Coordination Branch Retreat

Montebello
June 14, 2007

Check against delivery

Introduction

- Thank you for your kind introduction, Mary. It's a pleasure to be here with you today in this beautiful setting. I am delighted to have this chance to speak to you on a subject that I think is important to every executive and every manager in government.
- I am also flattered that the idea of having me as your speaker came not from my long-time friend and colleague Mary Zamparo, but from others on the organizing committee for this event who heard me talk about this subject a few months back, at a gathering of new EXs.
- The question that frames my remarks this afternoon is "*Can I really speak truth to power?*"
- I told the EXs that this question, and this issue, are relevant to every executive and manager serving a new government that is still getting used to working with the Public Service.
- But they are especially important to you as managers and leaders in the corporate centre of CBSA.
- After all, you serve not just your Vice-President, but the President and the Agency as a whole. You have to engage – and often challenge – program managers from other Branches who in many cases are more senior than you are.
- In the current environment of intense concern over 'doing the right thing' and increased accountability, knowing when and how to speak up is a not just a desirable skill – it's a necessity.
- So just in case you're wondering, there is an easy answer to my question. The answer is "yes" – you can speak truth to power, and you should. It is one of the most fundamental duties of a public service manager.
- Answering the question is the easy part. What is harder, and much more interesting, 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.
- 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, the origins of the phrase 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 “speak truth to power” 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 three 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 forth in the quotations I gave you.
 - 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 public service manager – indeed as a public servant – namely to provide information and honest, 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 the facts run counter to received wisdom, or someone's preferred course of action;
 - Not to make your boss or another senior manager 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 Vice-President, the President 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 managers and executives. You are paid to speak up. If you're not prepared to do that, you shouldn't have taken a management position.

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 six things to remember about speaking truth to power. 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 public service manager.*
 - Speaking truth to power is about the facts, and it can be about ideas, but it's 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 much 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 here about "revealed truth". We're talking about:*
- *what you know (i.e., the facts);*
 - *about the lessons you have learned from experience;*
 - *about your best judgment on what to do, in light of the facts and all that experience.*

It is not your duty as a manager 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. Indeed, 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. *This brings me to my third point – be sure of your facts!*
- The credibility of your message – indeed your credibility as an advisor – will be undercut completely if you don't have your facts correct.
 - Take the time and make the effort to gather the facts and double-check them. The VP and the President will thank you, and the other executives with whom you deal will respect you. If they know you always have your facts straight, they will always listen when you speak up.
4. *Fourth point -- there is a time and a place to speak up.*
- There is a chain of command, and as managers in CBSA, you're part of it. You need to respect the chain of command – speak up to your boss, not to the President or the Minister directly.
 - As a manager, you have to accept that your advice may not make it all the way up the chain of command. That's life.
5. *Fifth, you need to know how to speak up – verbally and in writing. Those of you who are new to management may need to develop your skills in giving tough advice (though doubtless many of you are skilled already).*

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

6. *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 VP.
- 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 you will be 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 it is a joy it is for officials to work in an environment like that.
- What is even more regrettable than Ministers not listening to advice 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 their best 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 managers and executives in CBSA.