

# LEADERSHIP Excellence



*Warren Bennis*

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## Beyond Negotiation



*The time for talking is over. It's now time for immediate, innovative and incisive action, as evident in the gestures and facial expressions—the warriors' clear response to the last proposal.*

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# Speak Truth to Power

*Silence is not as golden as candor.*



by Barbara Kaufman

THE TERM *speaking truth to power* started with the American Friends Service Committee's 1955 publication *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence*. Focused on the question of what stance to take with those in power in the face of evil, the booklet sought a nonviolent way to deal with inevitable conflict and a "way to meet that which threatens us, without relying on our ability to cause pain."

Beyond its moral and political relevance, *speaking truth to power* is highly applicable to operations. During layoffs, people tend to *maintain the status quo*, keep their heads down and mouths shut to avoid being shot as a bearer of bad news or to avoid offending bosses or colleagues with an assertive point of view about an alternative solution. Sadly, the reluctance to *speak truth to power* deprives executives of vital information and innovative ideas they need to make sound strategic choices.

In their book *Transparency*, Bennis, Goleman, O'Toole and Biederman discuss the responsibilities of messengers. They argue that when one reports to an emperor, the temptation is to *avoid bearing bad news*. "Good news and bad news need to travel at the same speed. Unfortunately, bad news tends to travel at the speed of a turtle," says **Denise Morrison**, EVP and COO of Campbell Soup Co. Worse, leaders often reward flatterers and those who appeal to their vanity. So, people *suck up* rather than contribute ideas. Innovation is stifled when the best concepts go unspoken.

**Unwritten norms may also inhibit speaking truth to power.** These include preconceived notions about position power or the faulty assumption that a leader knows all the answers, has a crystal ball, and has thought of everything. Gatekeepers often view their role as *protecting leaders* from bad news, while some leaders value collegiality and teamwork so highly that disagreement or bad news are suppressed.

The consequences of not *speaking truth to power* are serious: Issues and alternatives are not fully examined;

projects fail, strategies can't be effectively implemented; status quo prevails; the enterprise loses its competitive edge; people don't stretch beyond current thinking; they can't test their experience or hone leadership skills such as conflict management and negotiation; creative, innovative people are lost by attrition because they feel stifled in an environment where they can't contribute to making the best decisions.

**Why encourage candor?** "*Speaking truth to power* is key to high-performing teams," says Morrison. "Such teams allow for differences of opinion." Her style fosters open dialogue and encourages debate and healthy conflict. Campbell's *employee engagement survey* shows high scores on "*my opinion counts*." Town-hall style leadership meetings enable employees to ask questions, express opinions, and drive honest dialogue.



**Frank Balog**, former SVP/GM for ADP Western Region, now a consultant, recalls using *push-back* to encourage workers to speak truth to power. "The chairman modeled the behavior to let everyone know that it was *okay to disagree*, so long as you were respectful, did not make it personal, and did not whine. It was an unwritten norm."

For example, when Balog visited a shop floor, an employee asked, "Are you Frank Balog?" When he said yes, he was asked, "Who made the decision about packaging this product?" Balog replied, "That would be me." He asked the worker to describe the problem. "After listening, I realized that we had *added hours* of time to the process," says Balog. "If this person had not come forward, we would have piloted the *streamlined* process in 10 regions with big increases in cost, negative client feedback, and low morale."

## Learning Curve

To ensure that the use of candor is appropriate and effective, leaders and followers need six competencies:

- **Strategic thinking**, *considering and weighing all the options*. "In staff meetings, if someone suggests a solution, they know that they need a well conceived proposal because it will be challenged," says Balog. "We come away with better solutions. We foster dialogue that helps us refine our decisions. New managers are shocked at the level of candor. I hire the best and want them to give me their best input. *Speaking up* is imperative in addressing ethical issues and making decisions. People need to be reassured that there won't be retribution for *speaking truth to power*."

- **Interpersonal savvy**, an understanding of your impact on people and situations. Bennis argues, "It's not easy to know when to speak out and when to hold one's tongue." People need to learn to deliver negative messages constructively, without offending.

- **Ability to reframe issues** (or look at them through multiple lenses) to guide a discussion beyond an initial concept or one-size-fits-all solution.

- **Skill to work toward consensus**, keeping conflict at a task level, not letting it bleed into the interpersonal realm.

- **Courage and integrity**. "As leaders we must be role models, inspire trust, and hear challenges," says Morrison. "It takes courage to hear bad news. Employees need to know that *constructive criticism* is not an indictment of an idea or a decision. Every firm has its challenges and developing solutions is everyone's job."

- **Recognition that leaders are fallible people** who depend on others to fill in the gaps. "Leaders need to feel comfortable with themselves and their ability to accept feedback, admit mistakes and make course corrections that are best for their companies," says Balog.

*Ineffective leadership* revolves around *ego*. "If leaders don't leave their egos at the door and model the desired behavior, efforts to encourage *speaking truth to power* will fail," says Balog.

Leaders need to make it is safe to speak truth to power by creating a *culture of transparency* and championing *processes and programs* to encourage people to practice candor. This requires leadership, education, training, and a time commitment for people to learn to *speak truth to power* effectively. Excellent leadership depends on it. LE

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**ACTION:** Make it safe to speak truth to power.