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Being silenced and
silencing others:
developing the capacity
to speak truth to power

Authors & Contributors

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Executive summary



SILENCE

Executive summary

“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
(American film producer)

The imperative for transparency that drove this report was initially twofold. Firstly, from 2014 to 2016, the world watched as a number of corporate scandals brought household names into disrepute and in some cases to their knees. Examples included emissions at VW, accounting at Toshiba and doping at the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF). In all these cases individuals inside these organizations had information that, if it had been told to and listened to by those in leadership positions, might have mitigated the negative consequences, if not eliminated them altogether.

Undoubtedly the next few years will see more organizations failing through falling into the trap of someone knowing something but not speaking up about it, or not getting heard. Within the finance and health sectors in particular, the issues of transparency and improved connection up, down and across organizational hierarchies are being explicitly highlighted as being of critical importance.

Secondly, competitive pressures are leading to an ever-growing need to innovate quickly and harness the ‘collective intelligence’ of employees. Yet those at the ‘top’ of organizations might be the least able and / or willing to hear the opportunities. They are inevitably isolated since they are in positions where people often report to them only what they think will be politically acceptable.

Those in the ‘middle’ and at the ‘bottom’ of organizations will often stifle their ideas to avoid risking their career prospects or their sense of fitting in and being accepted by colleagues. The result? Organizations working at a fraction of their capabilities.

Adding to these two issues is the current debate on the ‘post-truth’ society. There are mounting concerns about ‘post-truth’ political and corporate realities being shaped by the emotional appeals and personal beliefs espoused by powerful and charismatic individuals. This triumph of the will undermines truth that is grounded in reality, which can only be achieved through rigorous debate and the search for perspectives that challenge the consensus of the powerful.

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 through their own powerful rhetoric that their perspective of the world is reality. Alternative understandings and experiences are stifled with potentially disastrous consequences, as robust and informed decision-making becomes impossible. This is publicly visible in politics across the world right now and it is of equal relevance in the corporate world.

“The world may admire the truth-tellers, but few will want to employ them.”
Charles Handy

Addressing all three of these issues lies in the ability of people in positions of power and authority to make it easy for people to speak to them. Effective dialogue is a critical organizational capacity if ideas and challenges are to flow freely up and down hierarchies and across organizational siloes, none of which can be achieved by executive decree. This need for dialogue has led to the proliferation, in management books and training programs, of ‘conversational leadership’, encouraging leaders to be more accessible and relationally oriented towards employees.

While signaling a valuable addition to modern leadership capacities, we argue in this report that there is a danger of underestimating (or deliberately ignoring) the complexities and consequences of how truth gets spoken to those in power – and how different forms of power determine what counts as truth. 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. At worst it leads to organizational cynicism, as an issue of critical practical importance becomes trivialized into ritualized listening, consultation and training exercises.

This report presents findings from a two-year project into ‘speaking truth to power’ in organizations. We

discovered, through our interviews, organizational studies, workshops with groups of senior executives and our comprehensive research into our own experiences, that ‘speaking truth to power’ stimulated people to reflect on experience from two perspectives. The first 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 related to times when individuals, recognizing 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 issues, which are all navigated together when speaking up (or staying silent). 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), are put first as they decide, as one research 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 having the capacity, or ‘nous’, to judge how to say things, or invite things to be said.

We have developed, and present in this report, a practical diagnostic that allows

individuals and groups to explore their capacities in each of these areas as they relate to the specifics of their organizational and personal context.

But these issues do not exist in a vacuum and we have also identified a framework for exploring an organization's overall truth-to-power culture (or cultures), which sets the context within which voicing ideas and challenge takes place. The four 'archetypal' cultures (directive, empowering, adjudicated and dialogic) are presented according to two perspectives, firstly whether power is exercised 'over' others or 'with' others, and secondly whether 'truth' is considered to be singular, i.e. there is one view of the way forward, or whether it is accepted that there are multiple ways of perceiving what should be done, none of which are

'right' in any objective sense. More than one of the four cultures may exist within an organization and each of them has its own developmental priorities and opportunities.

Finally, while not wanting to trivialize or over-simplify the highly situation specific reality of speaking or not speaking truth to power, we identify a number of distinct areas of development activity for both individuals and organizations. Through continuous learning from our consulting practice, along with ideas generated from those we interviewed, we suggest these activities may enable more conscious, choiceful and transparent decisions to be made about speaking up and hearing others.

This has never been a more pressing imperative.

Introduction



Introduction

The problem with silence and the need to ‘speak up’

In September 2015 the leadership team at Volkswagen was shamed by an issue regarding emissions that was known about by some employees, but not spoken up about (or listened to) effectively. The previous month an animated Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, announced that he did ‘not recognize’ the ‘bruising culture’ and the consequent accusations voiced against his organization by employees and reported in a New York Times article¹. Over the last few years there has been the humbling of organizations from Toshiba to FIFA and Tesco to the IAAF, who have suffered the consequences of employees staying silent or speaking up but not being heard by those powerful enough to bring about changes.

As well as the imperative to speak up in order to challenge wrong-doing, there is the imperative to speak up with ideas about doing things better (or better things). As our organizations compete in a breathtakingly fast paced, networked and unpredictable world it has been argued that the paradigm of the ‘heroic leader’, where the charismatic person at the top sets the vision single-handedly and then sells it to a passive workforce, is outdated. It has become much more pressing to tap into the collective intelligence of the whole organization, rather than rely on the ideas generated from an often isolated senior leader or executive team.

Within both the Financial and Health communities the need to pay attention

to organizational culture and its impact on organizational transparency is being given particularly serious consideration. In the July 2016 report by the UK Financial Reporting Council, ‘Corporate Culture and the Role of Boards’, the following observations and recommendations were made that directly address the issue of speaking truth to power:

“Good governance means a focus on how [openness and accountability at every level] takes place throughout the company... A healthy ‘speak up’ culture breaks down the barriers that can often exist between the workforce and the board... A key ingredient of a healthy culture is a willingness on the part of senior management to listen to their employees... Employees usually want their organization to succeed, and have good ideas about how to make this happen... A culture of engagement and ‘permission’ is required for employees to feel able to voice their ideas and concerns.”

The recent scandal at Wells Fargo, and its target driven mistreatment of retail customers, gives another illustration of the consequences of a failure to report in the financial sector. Meanwhile within the UK National Health Service a new statutory duty of candor was introduced from November 2014, while in July 2016 a new National Guardian was appointed to lead the NHS in supporting all in speaking up freely and safely.

If these imperatives to avoid corporate wrongdoing and the need to tap into collective intelligence were not sufficient impetus to examine the topic of speaking up, there are the recent concerns raised about the consequences of a 'post-truth society'. 'Post-truth' was the Oxford Dictionary's 2016 word of the year, reflecting its usage in the coverage of both the Brexit and US elections.

It is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Influential leaders are seen to persuade their followers that their view of reality is unquestionably right through their effective use of rhetoric, based on emotional conviction and their personal beliefs. In politics the risk is that decisions are made without rigorous debate, inclusion of alternative perspectives and therefore a wider understanding of 'truth'.

This 'post-truth' world is nothing new – leaders in all walks of life have always been invited to see themselves as being more powerful, more capable of shaping events, than is often the case – the cult of the leader is intimately bound-up with a post-truth universe. 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).

Given the context described above, leadership theorists have, unsurprisingly, advocated the need for senior leaders to develop new skills. A proliferation of new leadership theories have emerged such as 'complexity', 'authentic', 'relational', 'servant', 'quiet' and even 'ordinary', all of which downplay the benefits of the singular, positional and heroic leader, emphasizing rather a model of distributed leadership which is only possible through a less hubristic, more relationally astute and conversational approachⁱⁱ.

In our experience of working with leaders, most see why this approach is essential. They agree that 'management by walking about', 'having their door always open' and attending the 'meet the Directors Friday lunches' is all now an inevitable part of their role. Indeed, Groysberg and Slind's claim 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 [and] tight strategic alignment'ⁱⁱⁱ is all but unquestioned. "Of course I need to be having good conversations with my team" leaders assert. However, we note that interest in 'conversational leadership' and the fashion for the 'flat organization', as described by Ghiselli & Siegel^{iv}, has created a dangerous belief in some quarters that social and organizational hierarchy can be 'disappeared' and that speaking up is unproblematic.

‘Speaking up’ and ‘listening up’ is not straight- forward

While conversation, knowledge and power are regarded as intertwined within certain areas of academic literature^v, within the corporate world this view has remained limited. Leadership development programs focus on developing specific skills to address conversational situations experienced as problematic, for instance training for ‘difficult conversations’. They train leaders to be ‘impactful’ in what they say, valiantly attempting to introduce coaching skills to executives who have paradoxically been promoted thus far based on their individual capacity to ‘know answers’. Meanwhile the issue of challenging authority is increasingly addressed through whistleblowing procedures, part of continuing attempts to control certain conversations through formal processes.

It seems that much as various leadership theorists^{vi} have been advocating the need for leaders to adopt the insights of complexity and relationality into their strategic planning, operational processes and methods of communication, little has changed. The established discourse around control and predictability has continued to privilege the mechanistic, engineered vision of organizational reality. Initiatives including self-managed teams, open space forums for employees and holacracy have often been no more than brief flings into the world of complexity. Enthusiastic sponsors of these initiatives have tended to get cold feet as soon as times get tough, swiftly moving

back into the familiar comfort of restructuring, senior team strategy off-sites and top-down budgeting enforcement. Similarly conversation, often subsumed under the category of ‘communication’, continues to be seen as an activity that is best 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 continued perseverance of ‘management cascades’; messages developed by senior leaders sent downwards one management layer at a time, on the assumption that the message and the meaning people make of it can be controlled and is a predominately one-way^{vii} process.

A compromise is attempted by making reference to the methods of conversational leadership but leaving them within an established mechanistic view, so power and hierarchy are treated as variables to be managed rather than determining qualities of how conversation takes place. Simple solutions are offered, for example advocating that senior teams need to become better at giving inexperienced people the benefit of the doubt^{viii}.

The way that an organization’s unique conversational culture legitimizes who can say what to whom is ‘disappeared’, instead there is a straightforward focus on apparently universal or generic skills such as influencing or listening which, in a mechanical and predictive manner, will lead unproblematically to people speaking up.

The research questions

As a result of questioning this simplistic approach, our research project, lasting nearly two years and drawing on years of previous experience, aimed to explore the lived, in-the-moment, practice of how people speak up and don't speak up in truth-telling settings, better understood in our view as truth-power cultures. Our guiding research questions were:

‘What happens in the moment of choice of whether to speak up or stay silent?’

‘How does an appreciation of the complexities of this moment inform effective leadership?’

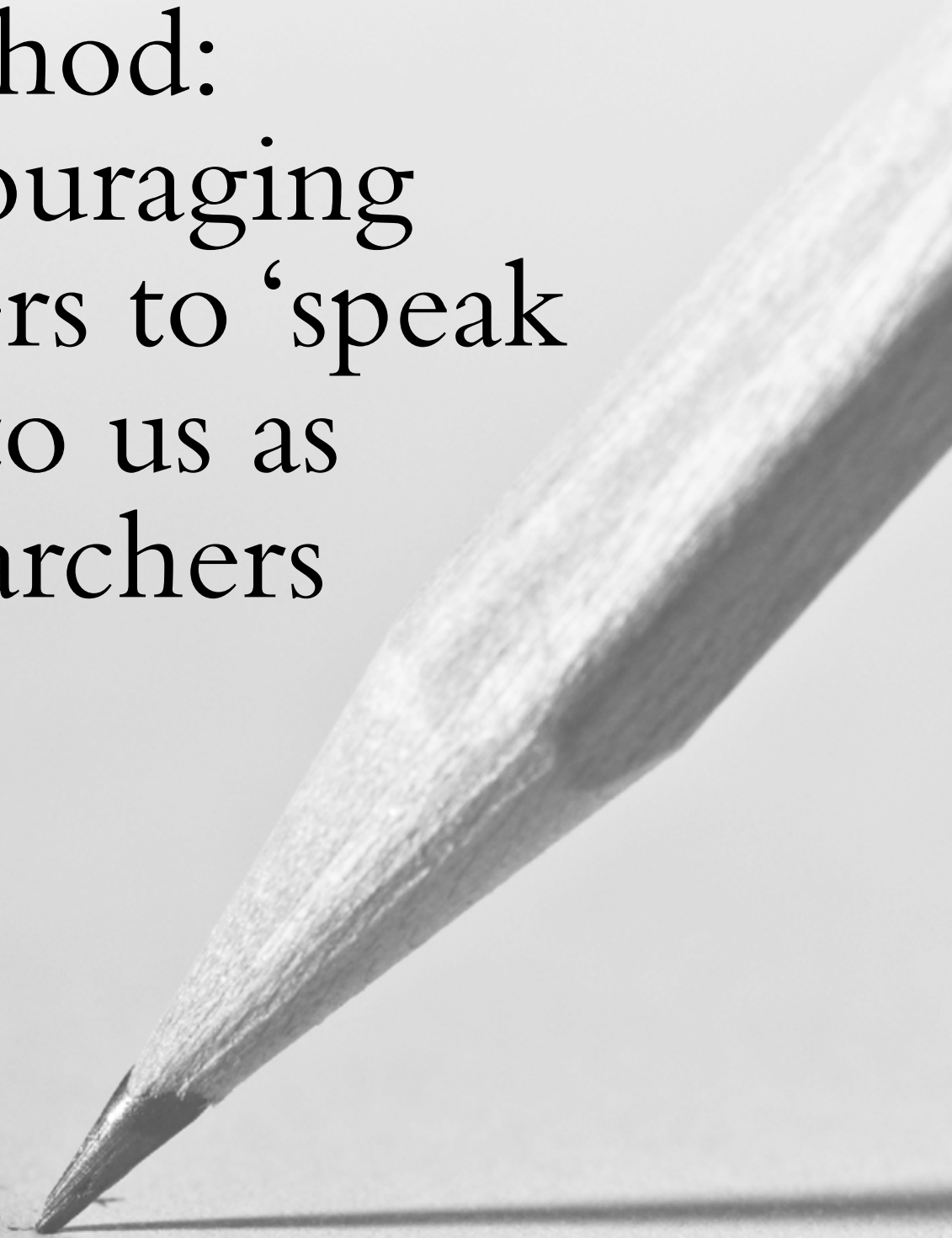
‘How might individuals make more informed choices regarding speaking up?’

The structure of this report

We begin by introducing you to the diverse methods we used in our research – and how we encountered and navigated our own challenges around enabling our research subjects to speak up to us. We detail our findings from two perspectives – that of the person considering whether to speak up and that of the powerful individual considering whether to enable others to speak up to them. We then propose four ‘truth-telling cultures’ that provide the contextual backdrop for decisions regarding speaking up. In both these latter two sections we include a number of quotes as well as longer case studies taken from our research.

Then we provide some recommendations and ideas for those wishing to speak up, those wishing others to speak up to them, and those responsible for developing a ‘better’ speak-up culture in their organizations. Finally, after a brief summary, we list some detailed coaching questions relevant to speaking truth to power in the appendices, along with references and more information about the authors of this report.

Method:
encouraging
others to 'speak
up' to us as
researchers



Method: encouraging others to ‘speak up’ to us as researchers

Our inquiry into truth and power in organizations engages with others in dialogue in order to explore how they make sense of the moment of ‘truth telling’. We understand these moments to be contextual, therefore we are not attempting to unearth a lawful relationship between discrete factors that will predict whether truth is spoken or not. We are not measuring ‘the amount’ of truth or power in a system or person. Rather our project is to understand the complexities inherent in these moments and through that more holistic understanding we suggest that individuals might be better equipped to contemplate a situationally specific response.

It follows that our chosen methods seek depth and richness and they acknowledge that it is inevitable that the challenges of speaking truth to power will be present between us as researchers, as well as between us and those who we are interviewing or researching with. This provides us with an opportunity to understand the phenomena from this ‘insider’ (or ‘withness’^{xix}) perspective. We consider that our research may alter the way those party to it understand their world and therefore inevitably lead to changes in the way they relate with others in dialogue, that might then in turn alter the system. Research in this way becomes an intervention in its own right and requires robust consideration of the corresponding ethical issues^x.

Our broad methodological orientation is that of action research^{xi} and our practices include first- and second-person inquiry.

First-person inquiry^{xii} requires us (the authors) each to look at our own experience, experiment in action and reflect upon that robustly. Second-person inquiry involves us researching with (not ‘on’) others who are also interested in the research subject.

Over the period of nearly two years we have both journaled and helped each other to inquire robustly into our first person experiences. We have interviewed over 60 individuals who hold senior positions, typically CEO and Chair, in industries as diverse as the NHS, banking, military and media, about their experiences of speaking up and enabling others to speak to them. With eight of these we conducted a co-operative inquiry^{xiii} (CI) – a group meeting held 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’, during the CI meetings.

This, alongside one-to-one discussions with each CI member 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 six organizations more deeply, interviewing people at the top, middle and bottom^{xiv} and undertaking ethnographic study (observation and interviews inside the organization) alongside specific inquiry interventions, exploring the multitude of different perspectives coexisting within the same system.

Defining ‘truth’ and ‘power’

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 restrict conversation) and instead wrote-up and anonymized 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, as well as being helpful in inviting open conversation. Strict contracting in relation to organizational interventions was also employed; the anonymity of those we spoke to was assured and the possible consequences

During our research, rather than set-up precise definitions of the terms ‘truth’, ‘power’ and ‘leader’/‘leading’/‘leadership’ for our research participants, we were interested in how their interpretation showed up in their work, how they talked about their practice of ‘speaking truth to power’ and in how this played out within the CI meetings. In our findings therefore you will observe an inevitable definitional drift. As researchers however we do have our own perspective on these terms and it is important to make these clear.

In relation to ‘truth’, our research is underpinned by an assumption that organizational truth is different from

of inviting inquiry into this area discussed with senior leaders. Finally we, as authors, attended supervision throughout the project to explore and understand how we were navigating speaking truth to power within our own research relationship.

Notes from the interviews and ethnographic studies along with the recordings from the co-operative inquiry process (which were transcribed), were collated alongside first-person inquiry notes and using a grounded theory approach (noting themes in our data, coding them, categorizing and then theorizing) we identified, with our research participants, key issues that we will introduce after a note on definitions.

laboratory truth. Organizational truth can’t be neatly pinned down and doesn’t exist in one definitive version – and it certainly doesn’t solely exist in spreadsheet form, as presented to the Senior Executive in the politically approved management information reports. It can be thought of as influential narratives and perspectives. Individuals will have their own evolving stories or ‘truth’ about reality that will rarely be universally shared. If ‘truth’ is understood in this way it puts significant demands on senior people to live and sustain cultures of transparency – and to know that collective truth making is an inclusive, rather than exclusive, process.

In relation to 'power', we assume that it is an essential and pervasive aspect of organizational life. Power is not an objective possession to be measured. Rather it refers to dynamic and subjective perceptions that develop in relationship and change as a result of perceived status differences. These differences might relate to a combination of features such as hierarchical position, expertise, social connections – or simply because of gender, age, ethnicity or physical appearance. Power is a quality of how human beings relate to each other.

We are constantly developing and negotiating power – and power has a major influence in determining who or what gets said to who.

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.

Truth telling and power are inextricably intertwined.

Our findings



Our findings

Introduction

Early in 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, recognizing 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 issues. 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 summarized:

“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.”

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

How people notice their own silence – but not how they silence others

SofaOrg collected data from over 75 people’s experience of speaking up and being silenced during a recent phase of organizational restructuring. Two findings stand out, firstly people feel strongly that they have a contribution to make with their insights and opinion BUT they feel that speaking up would be too risky. Secondly managers/leaders are just about open to hearing from others BUT they don’t consider the risks that those others may experience in speaking up to them.

SofaOrg’s people find it hard to read the political game in order to know who it is safe to say what to. Exacerbating this is the persistent retelling of an incident involving the CEO soon after she joined, when she reportedly lost her temper when something unwelcome was said to her.

A mood of skepticism, even cynicism, has emerged towards people further up the hierarchy – with those lower down living with a strongly felt belief in the value of their insights, which are in practice undeliverable/unsayable because of the perceived risk and relative indifference of those in senior positions. To begin to address this the organization is looking to draw attention to, and turn into exemplars, those managers who have a recognized track record for seeking out and valuing the contribution of those that report to them.

Speaking up or being silenced

“I feel silenced by him... no... what I mean is I silence myself. It’s a gender thing... the way he leans in, towers over me... having to defend myself... so much machismo. He’s my boss’s boss and I have a powerful physical reaction to the way he is... I keep my mouth shut and hate our encounters. I wonder what would happen if I shared how our meetings make me feel? The problem is I have a deep suspicion he wouldn’t give a toss.”

Table 1 summarizes the five issues and gives two statements alongside each which illustrate a couple of salient themes associated with each. It is however in no way intended to be an exhaustive list of all the relevant dimensions which arose in our analysis.

We now use Table 1 as a diagnostic to aid our inquiry with individuals and

organizations interested in exploring this subject. To reiterate however, this is an action inquiry informed diagnostic and is intended to stimulate reflection and insight into specific personal practice, rather than being used as a device for categorization and measurement.

Table 1: Speaking up and being silenced: Key issues

ISSUE	STATEMENTS
Conviction – A belief in the value of my own opinion	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 organization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 (e.g. organizational and national cultures, history, relationships, financial situation)
Judgement – The skill of knowing what to say, who to say it to, when to say it and how to say it	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 and Risk Awareness

"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."

According to those with whom we researched, **Conviction** referred to the belief they had in the value of their own opinion. When it comes to speaking up to power they felt that this reflected the motivating force behind their need to speak. **Risk Awareness** included having a realistic grasp of the consequences of speaking up to powerful others. From our data it seems to be a subjective and often ambiguous experience and not simply negative; the felt awareness of risk for some indicated a conversation was touching on something that mattered. While some of those we spoke with felt strongly about an issue, they also told us that they perceived 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:

"The real fear of most of the people I'm dealing with, in powerful positions, is the Press."

A CI member spoke of a colleague who only felt safe to challenge the authorized 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.

Together Conviction and Risk Awareness provide an indication of how much potential for speaking up exists within a specific group

or organizational setting. Many interviewees were concerned that speaking up might result in questions being raised about whether they 'belonged' in the organization and/or whether they were 'fit' for their job. These themes therefore might touch on identity, self-esteem and financial security:

"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:

[Participant 1]: "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."

[Participant 2]: "What we're doing all the time is we're calibrating what's okay here, what's not okay... those very human fragilities around being accepted or being liked or being respected or belonging."

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

Political Awareness

“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.”

Political Awareness refers to how alert a person is to the political games being played within the context in which they act. In many organizational settings personal competition is encouraged and promoting a truth that serves a personal agenda is part of reality. It was considered wise, when contemplating speaking up, to attempt to interpret and navigate the agendas of powerful others:

“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:

“Truth to power in the playground... is subtle... we haven’t got teacher to turn to... we’re negotiating the rules.”

Conversely it seems that the agendas involved in the budgeting process, described by one CI member as the ‘organization’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 organization’ and that he ‘lacked the necessary will and ambition’.

Truth, power and information are inextricably linked with powerful individuals deciding on how data is to be used in accordance with various political agendas:

“When doing a speech for Sue [not her real name] 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’.”

Social Awareness

“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 issue of **Social Awareness** encompasses the references our research subjects made to the social rules present in a conversation. We were told by those we spoke with that they felt they needed to pay attention to the ‘labels’ that were applied to them and the ‘labels’ that they applied to others, both of which impacted their decision to speak up. This included 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 were seen to evoke assumptions about who had a right to be heard. On the ‘label’ of gender, an 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 [opinion]... I think I just shut down... I find it very difficult to engage with a strongly expressed oppositional male voice”.

In relation to a different label and culture, 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... [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.”

The labels people wear and give others and the way that power gets socialized and legitimized across different contexts and cultures, creates and maintains specific patterns of interaction that can weaken the capacity to speak up. 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.”

Judgement

The final issue 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 choicefully respond rather than react, alongside their capacity for verbal competence and congruent body language. The deputy chairman of a global media organization 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. 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. 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:

“I’m a great builder of alliances to effect change... no good is done by being outraged and angry... 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 dismissible.”

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.

Enabling others to speak up or silencing others

Exploring different versions of truth in the moment

In the morning I [John] ran a session for a Swiss based brand into what it takes for people to speak truth to power in their world famous organization. In the afternoon, as a close to an 18 month program, the participants set about creating an expressive representation of their development edge – what it was they felt they needed to step into if they were to develop as leaders.

Midway through the CFO comes in and I assume he'll be interested in what these significant voices in the organization see as their leadership mantle. A couple of whispered instructions from the participants warn me against this path. They don't want to be seen by him in the way they'd been invited to show up in the exercise.

We convened to hear what he understands being a senior leader is all about. The whole session is set up so he feels he has to advocate his reality; it would be very hard for him to notice and step out of the invitation for him to talk at this group of people.

After he left I asked the group: "What was it you felt unable to say?" People spoke readily now, before they had been guarded. They'd wanted to challenge one story he interpreted as positive: how people now made eye contact with him in the corridors because, he believed, they now respected him. A group interpretation was people were now too scared to turn their faces away from him. Reflecting on this encounter a few days later I regretted that I hadn't contracted with the CFO and with the Group to act as a conduit to connect up different organizational narratives – and so make it possible for something to shift in the 'truth-to-power' connectivity between different levels of the organization.

Table 2 explores the five issues 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: Key issues

ISSUE	STATEMENTS
Conviction - The belief in the value of others' contribution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 empathize with how risky people might find it to speak up to me	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I understand how the labels people attach to me (e.g. my role, gender, ethnicity, personality, age) 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. organizational 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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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

“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 make their subordinates and colleagues feel safe?”

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. A key aspect in relation to conviction and risk relates to the more powerful individual's capacity for humility, a rare skill according to 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. The phenomenon of hubris increasing as one becomes more powerful was summarized 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'.”

Here, the reference to 'riding the subway' signaled the need to access the everyday understandings of those in less privileged positions.

The issues 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.

Political Awareness

“I expect that my ego sometimes prevents me hearing stuff I should be listening to.”

In relation to **Political Awareness**, a more powerful individual needs to understand that formal organizational position influences what is said:

“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.”

There may indeed be good reason for

those 'below you' to choose words appropriate to political agendas, as an open admission from one rather senior interviewee illustrates:

“I want people to be who they are... but 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

“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.”

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 program. The diversity exercise, based on exploring what gave people advantage within the organization 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 favor 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 recognize their behaviors as sexist... they are so out of touch with the standards of the world.”

Judgement

“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.’”

The final issue is **Judgement**, the skill of the more powerful person knowing what they can do in order to encourage people to 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 organizational history (is this person trustworthy? Are people who have power trustworthy?)

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.

“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.”

Judgement includes tactics, built on a foundation of self-awareness, which those in powerful positions apply in order to help others speak up.

“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 and how they intended to try to allow more spaces for others to think and speak:

“One of the things I’ve found myself doing... is jumping in quickly... not giving time for other comments to settle.”

To summarize, we suggest that the five issues (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. 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’^{xv}, locates the solution to speaking truth to power within ‘the behavior of leaders towards followers’^{xvi}.

The CI 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, dynamically and systemically. Viewing these relational interactions at a macro scale we begin to see how organizational ‘truth-telling cultures’ take shape, become stuck, or change. This is the next topic.

Marrying individual and systemic responsibility for transparency and truth telling

'KidCo' works with young adults to keep them out of the criminal justice system. Without robust transparency about what is going on in the delivery of support to these people, the organization is in danger because it has the potential to put the communities it operates in at risk. Without a culture of rigorous individual and systemic truth telling, its operating model can't function – and so its viability as a business fails.

At a recent Board Meeting, the COO shared what he saw as habits that could lead to KidCo developing a collective sense of complacency. Support workers are rigorously assessed and trained to start with, but they can then become unhelpfully attached to the young person they're supporting – diverting from proven best practice with seemingly minor deviations from development plans. This is then exacerbated when support workers are ignored by managers caught up in their own busyness. Everyone begins to believe the story they want to believe – that the organization must be doing great, since there's no bad news in circulation, which must mean there is no bad news!

In the case of KidCo the organization can only thrive and survive if it maintains itself in a state of constant vigilance, where people expect to hold themselves to account and be supported in holding themselves to account. Truth doesn't get spoken to power when powerful others, in the form of managers, fail to prioritize the time they spend supervising people. KidCo has taken the first step to challenge systemic complacency – the Board has, for the first time, really heard that the organization is far from perfect. The fantasy has been pricked making a more complicated organizational truth discussable.

Proposing four organizational truth-telling cultures



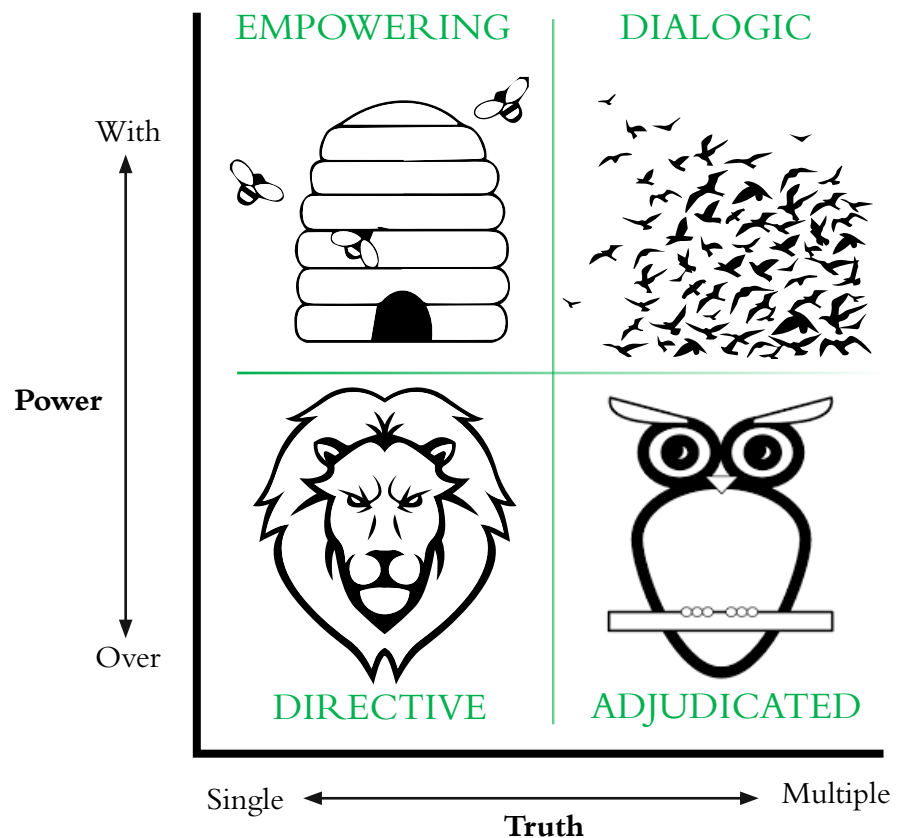
Proposing four organizational truth-telling cultures

In analyzing 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. We have been working with a perspective on truth-power following the French philosopher Michel Foucault^{xvii}, where each organization 'has its regime of truth'^{xviii}, where 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it^{xix} and where 'Truth' can be seen as 'the final vocabulary of power'^{xx}. In recognizing the inexorable links between truth

and power we seek to create a more insightful, and useful, contextual perspective for understanding different truth-power regimes, the resulting effects on speaking up and the implications for leading and organizational development.

In order to find some anchoring points within the flux of this 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: Organizational 'truth-telling' cultures



In temporarily splitting Truth and Power along separate axes, 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'^{xxi}, where 'power with' is focused on organizational 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 philosophical divide between a world view based on 'truth' having a fixed and singular quality ('there is an objective 'right' way of doing this') and a world view in which 'truths' are a dynamic phenomenon that get made within specific social settings emerging in a context of multiple, competing points of view – or discourses^{xxii} ('there are many ways of doing this, many perspectives all of which are subjective').

Given this framing, the four truth-power cultural 'ideals' can be seen in Figure 1. We have identified a metaphoric shorthand for referring to these cultures that speaks to the felt qualities of each cultural 'ideal':

- **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. We refer to this as the LION culture. This metaphor seeks to evoke the sense of an organization (or sub-grouping) where there is a clear, single King – an all-powerful ruler and decider in chief. To challenge the King, to tell him something he might not want to hear or isn't in the mood for could be a dangerous act. The Directive culture is associated with sayings such as: 'My way or the highway' or more generally 'Might is Right'. However this is not pre-ordained; it is influenced by the King's ability to navigate the themes we refer to above in the section on enabling others to speak.

- **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; these are defined by those in power. People can exercise personal and collective agency within these clearly defined boundaries set by those in authority. We refer to this as the

BEES culture. This one speaks to an organizational culture that exists to serve the needs of a dominant power. In the case of Bees this is the Queen Bee. In order to serve the Queen, however, the workers are allowed to self-organize to best effect and share wisdom and speak up. In the end the Bees see themselves as expendable, secondary, to the interests of the Queen (and there can never be more than one Queen). As with the Directive culture, quite how much speaking-up is allowed/ encouraged is influenced by the Queen's character and skill at working with the established conversational habits.

- **Adjudicated** – 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. We refer to this as the OWL culture. This metaphor connects with a world where there is a wise and trusted other who will adjudicate over who is right and wrong, what choice is best, or who is to be crowned the winner. The Owl does not take part in any contest, but the contestants will expect the

Owl to decide on their behalf. As the Owl is a singular source of judgement there is no appeal or anywhere else to turn to, so their judgement is absolute and final. Speaking up may well have a tribal quality, with people becoming invested in their own (or their groups) singular truth. People may well become very skilled prisoners of the tyranny of the single, fixed position – where there will be little interest in making sense of the reality of others, outside of judging it to be wrong.

- **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. We refer to this as the STARLINGS culture. At dusk starlings form into large coordinated groups, with no obvious leader – and yet they are in a process of constant ordering and re-ordering. This metaphor speaks to an organizational culture that could be capable of continuous, self-directed organizing, operating without any obvious hierarchy or chain of command, but held together by some well-established and collectively followed organizing principles.

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.

The first step is to acknowledge the current reality of an organization's truth-to-power culture and what is available to be built on:

a. The orientation to power. Is power, in all of its forms (e.g. positional/personal, technical/social), used to establish dominance over people, or is it used to enable others? Inquiring into this reality will raise challenging issues for senior people around their own self-awareness and how they relate to

their own authority and the authority of others.

b. The orientation to truth. Is the world seen as consisting of single or multiple truths? This touches on profound philosophical and psychological considerations. The single truth is often associated with people brought up to only know the scientific method – and it can be a surprise to them that there are aspects of human experience that don't fit with that way of knowing. From a psychological perspective, fear and anxiety often drive people to hanker after the comfort and certainty of a single truth – so development activity is likely to focus in the first place on creating conditions of psychological containment, if people are to explore the possibility of a more complex and nuanced universe.

Changing how truth speaks to power – a case study from PillCo

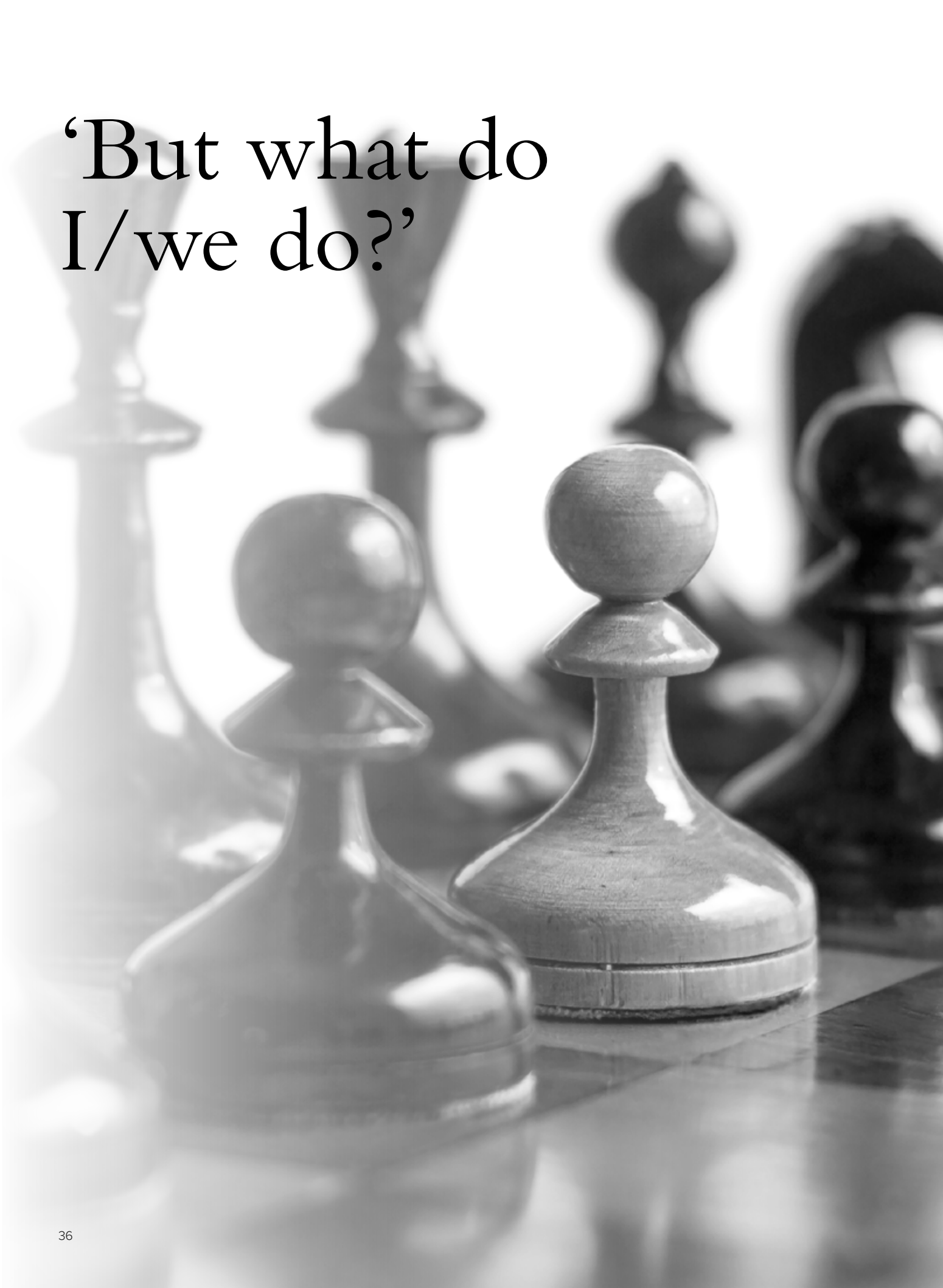
In 2014 ‘PillCo’, a health research organization wanted to address a growing inability to get enough good quality R&D studies up and running in a timely fashion. Among the issues that lay at the heart of this was the lack of a shared and explicit goal between the Project Managers and their Medical Directors – and the social and professional distance that existed between them, which actively hampered useful communication. This relational distance was further compounded by physical separation.

To address this the CEO of PillCo imposed an all but arbitrary target for how long it should take for an R&D study to get up and running – and a development program was created that explicitly brought together pairs of Medical Directors and Project Managers who were seen as jointly responsible for achieving this target. The program gave Directors and Managers the opportunity to spend time together, get to know and understand each other’s worlds and how to work together to achieve this common goal. The status and importance of the work, and achieving the target, was reinforced by the visible presence of senior PillCo leaders at regular points over the life of the program.

Looked at through a lens of speaking truth to power, this work can be seen as being anchored around a positionally powerful person establishing a single ‘truth’ i.e. a target set by this person that had to be met. A context was then created in which the people who made up the critical relationships for achieving this target/truth could come together to explore what they could do together. In terms of the truth-telling culture, it shifted people from an Adjudicated culture, where multiple truths co-existed and people had limited responsibility for mediating between conflicting priorities, to an Empowering culture, where a single truth was imposed and then people from across the social and professional hierarchy were given a context within which to identify how they would make the target/truth real.

The program was expanded in 2015 and 2016, incorporating more and more pairs of business critical Medical Directors and Project Managers, with the emphasis increasingly on convening conversational spaces where people could learn to be with each other and work with each other to achieve outcomes in volatile and unpredictable settings. The business outcomes in terms of numbers, quality and timeliness of studies have been outstanding.

‘But what do
I/we do?’



‘But what do I/we do?’

Recommendations for individuals wishing to speak up more effectively

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 by convention and the habits of the business school/consulting world to come up with specific, quick and easy-to-take actions to assure speaking up^{xxiii}. Here our ‘social constructionist’ orientation collides with the predominant ‘post-positivist, structuralist’ perspective manifest inside many organizational systems and leadership development interventions. In other words, although we assert that the issues around speaking truth to power are contextual and dynamic and defy any simple attempt to invent ‘levers’ which could influence them in

For those individuals who want to speak up in a more informed way (not necessarily ‘more’), we offer the following advice from our findings:

1. Experimenting with and inquiring into the five issues in this paper might assist the individual in broadening their awareness of their choices. Although juggling these five themes might appear at first unwieldy, our first- and second-person research indicates that over time ‘conscious incompetence’ can be developed towards ‘unconscious competence’; we found ourselves and those we researched with developed a tacit capacity to navigate through the issues whilst considering speaking up.

any generic way, we also realize that the reader will nevertheless expect ‘some answers’. We attempt to navigate this tension now.

We offer suggestions for individuals, firstly who wish to speak up more effectively and secondly who wish to enable others to speak up more easily. Then we offer recommendations to organizations wishing to enable more effective speaking truth to power generally. These suggestions assume that, wherever you are on the framework of truth-power cultures, it is useful to enable more conscious, choiceful and transparent decisions to be made about speaking up and hearing others.

2. Alongside these issues and the diagnostic, the following is a short checklist of questions the individual can work through when looking at how they can become more skilled at speaking up to others. A more comprehensive list of coaching questions can be found in the appendices:

- What’s the one message (in a single sentence) you want to be heard?
- Why should you be the one to speak up? Is there someone better?
- What is the realistic level of personal risk of you speaking up?

Recommendations for individuals wishing to enable others to speak up more effectively

- Given your intention and desired outcome from speaking up, who needs to hear you and who can hear you?
 - What’s the best way of expressing your insight? What language do you need to use to be heard?
 - What level of emotion is useful for you to express?
 - What experience do you have to draw on of successfully speaking up? What were you telling yourself? How did you feel? What did you learn?
3. If speaking up is an important area for the individual to develop, we recommend they take an ‘inquiry approach’ towards it. This means that rather than ‘looking for an answer’ to ‘do it better’, or ‘going on a course’, they rather seek to explore their everyday experience over a period of time.

For those individuals wishing to enable others to speak up more effectively to them, we offer the following advice from our findings, some of which mirrors the advice above:

1. Experimenting with and inquiring into the five issues in this paper might assist in broadening one’s awareness of one’s gestures towards others and what they convey. Again, although juggling five

Through paying attention to their experience, questioning it and initiating small experiments where they try out strategies and learn from them, they will become gradually more adept. This process is called first-person inquiry and more can be learned from Judi Marshall’s book on the subject^{xxiv}.

4. Linked with the above point, we suggest that in choosing whether to speak up or stay silent, it helps to be able to pay attention to one’s experience, on purpose, in the present moment and to treat that experience in a compassionate manner. Knowing and observing what one is thinking, feeling and sensing in the moment and being aware what is going on internally and externally is paramount to responding in an informed way. This capacity is referred to as mindfulness and can be trained (as explained in a 2016 report by Reitz et al.^{xxv}).

dimensions might seem like a lot, over time it is possible to develop a tacit capacity to navigate through the issues whilst in relation with others.

2. Alongside these issues, the following is a short checklist of questions the individual can work through when looking at how they can become more skilled at enabling others to speak up.

A more comprehensive list of coaching questions is shown in the appendix:

- What are the consequences of people not speaking openly to you?
 - Whose opinion counts to you?
 - When have you encouraged others to speak up to you? How have you treated those who have spoken up?
 - To what extent do people challenge you currently and in what forums?
 - How do you make others feel important, comfortable and significant?
 - What sources of power are you seen to have by others? What are the implications of this for how they see your status and power?
 - What does it take for you to change your mind?
 - How does ‘not knowing’ make you feel as a leader?
3. Exactly as above in our advice for those wishing to speak up, if it is important for an individual to enable others to offer their ideas and challenge and they wish to become more effective in this, first and foremost we suggest they adopt an inquiring approach towards their experience. Over a period of time, they should rigorously examine and pay attention to their experiences of enabling others. They should notice what they do that seems to aid others and what shuts others down and experiment with that knowledge, taking time to reflect and learn. Again, see Judi Marshall’s book on developing this capacity^{xxvi}.
 4. Our findings show that small gestures and reactions offered by those perceived to be powerful are highly symbolic and influential to those deciding whether to speak up. This means that if an individual wishes to enable others to speak up, they need the capacity to be aware of their actions in the moment and have the ability to choose their response rather than react automatically. As mentioned above, this capacity is referred to as mindfulness. More mindful individuals are more effective at focusing, empathizing with others, seeing others’ perspectives and adapting to the situation – all extremely important skills for enabling others to speak up. Importantly, through training and practice you can become more mindful (as explained in the 2016 report by Reitz et al.^{xxvii}).
 5. Some of our interviewees referred to the vital role that a few ‘trusted advisors’ played. These advisors might be bosses, peers, direct

Recommendations for organizations wishing to enable speaking truth to power

reports or external coaches, family members or other connections but they are able to challenge an individual and offer alternative perspectives and feedback on their behavior and how they are perceived. As we mention in our findings in this report, the

more powerful an individual is, sometimes the more isolated they become with a smaller and smaller circle of people willing to challenge them, so knowing who they can trust to ‘say it as it is’ is vital whilst they develop their capacity to widen this circle.

We are currently working with a number of organizations exploring what steps you can take to make a tangible difference to organizational transparency – holding the tension between working with the unique nature of each organization’s specific situation and truth-to-power culture, whilst looking to identify more widely useful and sharable insights.

For organizations wishing to enable a ‘speak-up culture’ we offer the following suggestions. They pick up on the themes above:

1. Convening conversations about cultural norms of speaking truth to power, potentially using the list of issues and their corresponding statements as a diagnostic, will, through simply initiating processes of inquiry change the organizational system. How effectively however may depend on, amongst other things, whether there is a genuine appetite, particularly from those in positions of influence, to change ways of interaction. We strongly warn against ‘putting on sessions’ about
2. Rather than one-off presentations on the subject of speaking up, organizations might consider forming action learning sets which could bring together small groups of people from across the organization to discuss their experiences, work on ‘live’ issues and commit to experiments and disciplined learning over time. In our experience this process can be more fruitful in terms of leading to system change.
3. We suggest to individuals above that developing mindfulness is highly relevant to the capacity to speak up or enable others to. We therefore recommend that organizations offer opportunities to develop mindfulness, specifically developing the metacognitive capacity to consciously observe, in the moment, one’s own thoughts, feelings and assumptions while also

observing and analyzing the field within which one is intervening.

Again, however, we do not recommend one-off events on this subject as real behavioral change is likely only to be encouraged through sustained support and practice^{xxviii}.

4. There may be ways in which organizations can nurture diversity of voice and individuals can encourage others to challenge them. Specifically, we found that attention needs to be paid to recruitment and talent management processes that often encourage ‘sameness’, where those in powerful positions, often inadvertently, seek to increase

the power of those similar to themselves^{xxix}.

5. Even if recruitment processes successfully ensure diversity of voice ‘on paper’, groups naturally revert to sameness and group-think^{xxx} over time, a phenomenon explored in terms of group dynamics^{xxxi}. Facilitating ‘assisted curiosity’ interventions may seek to address this creep towards intellectual sameness. This could involve exercising the capacity to see and question the framing of leadership, organizing and strategy so that decisions and choices become more transparent and therefore the subject of more critical reflection.

A strategy process that values collective wisdom – a consumer goods company (ConGo)

‘ConGo’ has a culture that is doubtful of the value of external consultants, outside of very specific areas of technical knowledge. Some years ago it started a development process to turn its thirty or so senior managers, who reported directly to the Board, into a strategic consulting resource, ensuring they had the tools, frameworks and language to do the work well. As a resource they were expected to come up with critiques of, and recommendations for, takeover targets – as well as prepare scenarios and plans for integrating potential partner organizations.

Looked at through the lens of speaking truth to power, ConGo can be seen to be taking steps that should enhance its capacity to speak truth to power by:

- Seeking to harness its strategy process to the collective wisdom of the wider organization – rather than disconnect the strategy from this wisdom through outsourcing its strategy process to third party others.
- Creating lived experiences of connecting up the Board to the wider management community – rather than reinforcing the difference and specialness of the Board and the issues it has to deal with.

As with any initiative it has its risks – groupthink, complacency and the second-guessing of what the Board wants to hear are all present. But as a serious attempt to create a connected community, where creative and problematic truth has at least the possibility of speaking to power, it has much to recommend it.

A black and white photograph of an hourglass, tilted diagonally. The top bulb is mostly empty, while the bottom bulb is filled with sand, which is falling from the narrow neck. The sand has formed a small mound at the bottom. The background is dark and out of focus.

Conclusions, limitations and calls for further research

Conclusions, limitations and calls for further research

In this research report we have illustrated the complex and dynamic experience of speaking up and of enabling others to speak up by reflecting on five issues; 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 individuals and for organizational development.

While we have illustrated the limitations of the more superficial and simplistic approach to enabling 'speak-up cultures' we nevertheless recognize a number of limitations in our own work. Firstly, we note the paradox of using categories in the form of issues and frameworks in order to identify and illustrate complexity. The issues are drawn from our own and our research participants' subjective impression of experience and are inevitably partial. We would invite researchers to explore further salient aspects 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 recognize 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 cognizant 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 of those in the 'middle' and 'bottom' of organizations 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 organization's 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 organizations are to develop a healthy capacity for 'speaking truth to power'.

Never, we would argue, has this been more of a priority than it is today inside our organizations.

Appendices

I can't
do it

Coaching questions

Coaching questions

Coaching questions for those wishing to speak up:

a) **Outcome** – being clear about what outcome is intended/desired from speaking up

- What's the one message (in a single sentence) you want to be heard?
- What's the feeling you want the person you've spoken to, to be left with?
- What's the impression of you, you want to leave with the person you've spoken to?

b) **Energy & Intention** – being clear about your motivation for speaking up

- What's your intention in speaking up?
- How much do you care about speaking up or not?
- What agenda do you have? What can be acknowledged and what needs to remain private?
- Are you advocating or inquiring?
- What will be the counter-arguments?
- If asked, what solution/next step are you recommending?
- What level of emotion is useful for you to express?

c) **Consequences** – being clear about the consequences of speaking up

- What level of personal risk do you imagine comes with speaking up to this person on this topic?
- What is the realistic level of personal risk of you speaking up?
- How have people who have spoken up been treated in the past?
- Who is impacted by you speaking up?
- What are the implications of not speaking up?

d) **Responsibility** – being clear about why it needs to be you doing the speaking up

- Why should you be the one to speak up? Is there someone better?
- What sources of power do you have?
- Are you the only person saying this?
- Are you speaking for yourself or on behalf of many?

e) Who & How – being clear about who needs to be spoken to and how they need to be spoken to

- Given your intention and desired outcome from speaking up, who needs to hear you and who can hear you?
- Who do you want to speak to – and how is this different from who you need to speak to?
- What are the current preoccupations of the people you need to speak to – and how does what you want to say fit or not fit?
- What is it like to be the person you need to speak to?
- When and where is best to speak up? Is this a formal or informal conversation?
- What's the best way of expressing your insight? What language do you need to use to be heard?

f) Preparation & Support – being clear about how to get ready for the required conversation

- What experience do you have to draw on of successfully speaking up? What were you telling yourself? How did you feel? What did you learn?
- Whose and what support do you need?
- What evidence do you need and how does it need to be presented?
- Who will rehearse with you?

Coaching questions for those wishing to enable others to speak up to them

a) **So What?** – being clear about whether or not you value others speaking up to you

- What are the consequences of people not speaking openly to you?
- What are you missing by only listening to the people you do?
- What do others know more about than you? And do you care?

b) **Reputation** – being clear about your track record for openness

- Do you have a reputation for being open? How do you know this?
- How do you help people speak-up well?
- Reflecting on times you've been challenged in the past – how did you respond and how might you have left that person feeling and thinking?
- What is your spontaneous emotional response to being challenged and how do you manage it?

c) **Identity** – being aware of how much being right is part of who you are

- What assumptions do you hold about being a leader and how all knowing they need to be?
- How does 'not knowing' make you feel as a leader?
- How does 'making mistakes' fit with your version of being a leader?

d) **Truth Network** – identifying whether you have a social context that will help you stay open to others

- Whose opinion counts to you?
- Who do you need to bring in to help you hear?
- Who can speak truthfully to you, and what's their agenda?
- How will you know if people are being straight with you?

e) Current Practice – paying attention to how you expect people to speak to you

- Do you expect people to follow formal communications protocols when speaking up to you?
- How can people indirectly and/or informally communicate their views to you?
- To what extent do people challenge you currently and in what forums?
- What are the best forums for people to speak openly to you? Is this best from your perspective or theirs?

f) Levelling the Playing Field – taking steps to reduce differences in hierarchical status

- What do you do to make people feel at the same (or closer to the) status level as you?
- How do you make others feel important, comfortable and significant?
- How do you signal to others that you are open to what they have to say?
- How do you phrase your questions and invitations so that people feel able to open up to you?

g) Owning Status – being clear about what your status is and its implications for working with an organizational perspective

- What sources of power are you seen to have by others? What are the implications of this for how they see your status and power?
- What can and can't be said to you in confidence?
- Do you know how not to hear something?

h) Blindspots – being aware of who and what you find difficult to hear

- What sort of data are you open and not open to?
- What are the things that you have already made up your mind about and are not open to having changed?
- What does it take for you to change your mind?
- What's your professional bias in terms of what type of organizational information you value most highly (e.g. financial / operational / strategic / people information)?
- What's your personal bias in terms of what sorts of people you prefer to listen to?

About the authors

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Megan is Associate Professor of Leadership and Dialogue at Ashridge where she speaks, researches, consults and supervises on the intersection of leadership, change, dialogue and mindfulness. She has presented her research to audiences throughout the world and is the author of *Dialogue in Organizations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Her passion and curiosity centers around the quality of how we meet, see, hear, speak, learn with and encounter one another in organizational systems and how we might encourage dialogue which is more humane and opens the

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Before joining Ashridge, Megan was a consultant with Deloitte; surfed the dot-com boom with boo.com; and worked in strategy consulting for The Kalchas Group, now the strategic arm of Computer Science Corporation. She was educated at Cambridge University and has a PhD from Cranfield School of Management. She is mother to two wonderful daughters who test her regularly on her powers of mindfulness and dialogue.

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