

Being able to speak the truth to those in power has never been more important, particularly with increased scrutiny of businesses and the need for cyber resilience. And this is without even mentioning GDPR, Brexit and the advent of open banking.

The news has provided plenty of examples where silence has not been golden and voices have been ignored. It is alleged that Oxfam workers repeatedly tried to tell managers about sexual misconduct, but their voices fell on deaf ears.

Back in 2015, when Volkswagen came under fire for its so-called “emissions dupe”, it was revealed that some employees knew about the issue but had not spoken up or been listened to properly. That same year, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos pleaded ignorance to the “bruising culture” portrayed by his staff in a *New York Times* article. Could these situations have been

## SPEAK UP

**Megan Reitz** explains how managers can cultivate an open and honest environment in the workplace

avoided had leaders understood just how difficult it is for employees to tell them the things they need to hear?

Our recent research report *Being Silenced and Silencing Others: Developing the Capacity to Speak Truth to Power* (Megan Reitz and John Higgins for Ashridge Executive Education, March 2017) explores the cultures of silence that are prevalent in so many organisations today, and what is behind them. We found that leaders are unaware of just how difficult it is for their employees to speak up. Managers will tell you (and indeed often genuinely believe) that they are very approachable. They use phrases like “my door is always open” and hold ‘leadership lunches’ that aim to show just how accessible the leadership team is.

But creating the right environment for people to speak up is about more than just propping the door open or sharing a lunchtime doughnut. If leaders are sincere in wanting to hear what others know, then they have to understand how

everything that is said to them is said through the lens of their relatively higher power. Truth and power are inextricably linked. For example, just the simple phrase “my door is always open” conveys the message that, first of all, you are important enough to have a door of your own, and that secondly, you expect people to come and speak to you on your territory.

### CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Leaders who want to create a more open environment need to consider what type of culture (or ‘rules’) currently exist within their organisation and how easy (or difficult) that prevailing culture makes it for people to share what they know. What pattern of behaviour has become the norm, what gets spoken about and what doesn’t; whose opinion counts and whose doesn’t. Being aware of these ‘rules’, questioning them and forming new ‘rules’ can be vital in terms of enabling people to speak up.

Our research identifies four archetypes of organisational culture: empowering, adjudicated, directive and dialogic. We use these archetypes to engage groups in conversation about their particular ways of working and how they may serve them or hinder them.

In an empowering culture, there is often a clearly identified leader who makes the big important decisions, while still allowing scope for employees to make contributions within set boundaries. Meanwhile, in an adjudicated culture, the leader takes on the persona of the ‘wise owl’ who listens to opposing points of view and then makes a decision about the way forward.

As you would expect, in a directive culture there is a single, all-powerful, ‘heroic’ leader who expects people to follow his or her lead without challenge. By contrast, in a dialogic culture, there is little formal hierarchy and often no obvious chain of command. The leader typically sees their role as bringing a group of people together to discuss issues and make decisions.

It is important to note that none of these “truth to power” cultures are right or wrong. Each presents its own challenges and opportunities. The key for managers is to understand the cultural backdrop they are working in and how to influence the conversations they are part of in a way that develops the most conducive and productive culture, given the priorities of the organisation at the time.

## There are ways to make it easier for people to speak up, whether it’s a small idea or highlighting a serious wrongdoing

### UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS

It’s a complex balancing act, which requires leaders to have a sophisticated understanding of the factors that can get in the way of speaking up. Our research uncovered five aspects of silencing self and silencing others:

- **Personal conviction:** How strongly people believe in their own and others’ opinion.
- **Risk awareness:** How well people understand the likely consequences of speaking up.
- **Political awareness:** How savvy they are about the internal politics that might get in the way of speaking and listening up.
- **Social awareness:** How aware they are of the labels that are attached to them and others (man, woman, young, old) and how this affects how they will be heard and how they listen.
- **Judgement:** How well they understand what to say and how to say it to give themselves the best chance of being listened to and to give others the best chance of being heard.

Being fully aware of these factors is an important first step for leaders who want to encourage a more open dialogue in their organisations. Key questions to ask yourself are: whose opinion counts to you (who do you prefer to listen to and who do you dismiss out of hand)?

When have you encouraged others to speak up to you and how have you treated

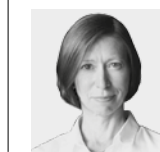
those who have? To what extent do people challenge you currently and in what forums? How do you make others feel important, comfortable and significant?

There are also practical actions you can take to make it easier for people to speak up, whether they are putting forward a small idea about how to improve customer service or highlighting a serious issue of professional wrongdoing:

- **Meet people on their turf,** not yours, or find somewhere neutral.
- **Understand that your status creates distance.** Be aware, for example, that it may be intimidating for a young employee to speak honestly to a senior manager, or that some female employees may find a very vocal, opinionated male difficult to approach.
- **Appreciate how risky it is for others to speak up to you.** The personal stakes for an employee can be high if, for example, they decide to expose some kind of wrongdoing by people in the organisation more senior to them. Employees also worry that if they challenge the status quo, they will be perceived as someone who doesn’t ‘fit’ and could be managed out.
- **Make it a dialogue:** Be curious about what people have to say and accept that there are always multiple perspectives on how things should be done – none of which are necessarily right. Be open to discussion rather than shutting the conversation down immediately if you don’t agree with others’ ideas. Notice what you do in the conversation that allows others to open up, and equally what you do that shuts them down.

Our research suggests that if the executive team demands that people speak up or tell managers that they need to be better at listening it is unlikely, in isolation, to make a difference – it will probably be met with cynicism.

Instead, we have found that encouraging inquiry-based conversations and bringing a range of people together from across the organisation to discuss their experiences and work on ‘live’ issues is much more sustainable and productive. This may help you shift from a ‘shut up’ to a ‘speak up’ culture – one conversation at a time. ●



**Megan Reitz**, associate professor of leadership and dialogue at Ashridge Executive Education - Hult International Business School

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