

Q&A

Interview by:
Helen Trinca

Megan Reitz is a UK management academic who has researched and written extensively on “speaking truth to power”. As she says, she is “examining the consequences of staying silent on matters of misconduct as well as the need for people ... to speak up with disruptive, innovative ideas”. She has recently launched a global survey to investigate the issues at a worldwide level – and is looking for Australians to take part. At its core, says Reitz, who is professor of leadership and dialogue at Hult International Business School, failure to speak out is deeply connected to power.

You write that bosses can have an open-door policy but still not get honest feedback from employees. But why don't CEOs understand how difficult it is to overcome the power gap between them and their staff?
One of our biggest findings is that there is a huge blind spot. CEOs complain that “they” are not speaking up enough. “They” are usually the middle managers, who in turn say that if they speak up they are not listened to and not at all rewarded. I think part of it is that people feel that they are generally lovely and approachable. Not everyone, but a lot of people think well, I am a nice person and when I joined 15 years ago I was lovely, and I am still the same person and I am still lovely. What they fail to recognise is that over the past 15 years they have been given various promotions and titles and labels, and even if they are lovely and approachable, the titles inevitably mean that they are a little bit scary to some others.
We just wrote an article for *Harvard Business Review* on “advantage blindness”. This is to do with the situation that when we are perceived to have power through our title or through being a white male, or through having a confident personality or a politically



valuable network, it is really tricky [for us] to see that. It's like a fish in water. We can't understand what it would be like to not have it and it takes real, conscious effort to imagine yourself in the other's position. We know it is very hard for a white male to contemplate what it would be like to be stared at if you were holding hands with your partner in the street; or what it would be like to get out of a car late at night to worry about safety; or to be in a meeting and to not really be listened to. And when we have these forms of advantage it can be very difficult to remember that.
What is the general reaction of people without power to those in power?
It depends a lot on culture as well as the individual – on national cultures and the rules of the game within organisational cultures. We write about the truth framework, which explores issues we navigate when we decide whether we should speak out. What have I got to say and is it valuable? What are the consequences of speaking up, what are the political circumstances, the agenda, the

games people play in this organisation? What are the labels that I have? If I have the label of sales in an organisation where sales is king, I may feel more confident speaking out than if I had the label of HR and in my organisation HR is not taken seriously. Finally, do people feel equipped to speak up in the right way?
What should a boss do to reduce the power gap?
We forget how scary we are, so the first thing a person needs to do is stop denying their power. Unless you understand that, you can't diminish the power gap. A chief executive we interviewed said some great stuff about diversity and the fact that everyone's opinions count, and the phrase about employees bringing their whole selves to work. Then he paused and said, “but I do have my little lists of those people who fit and those people who don't”. The lists are about unconscious bias. The lists are also helpful, because there is a reality in wanting to listen to some people more than others. But we have to be able to spot which lists we are using in our heads

There's more. Take part in the survey:

hultbusinessschool.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_a9uXunK7VUx0Yst

TEDx talk: youtube.com/watch?v=Sq475Us1KXg

Harvard Business Review articles:
hbr.org/2017/03/the-problem-with-saying-my-door-is-always-open

hbr.org/2017/04/5-questions-to-ask-before-you-call-out-someone-powerful

hbr.org/2018/04/do-you-have-advantage-blindness

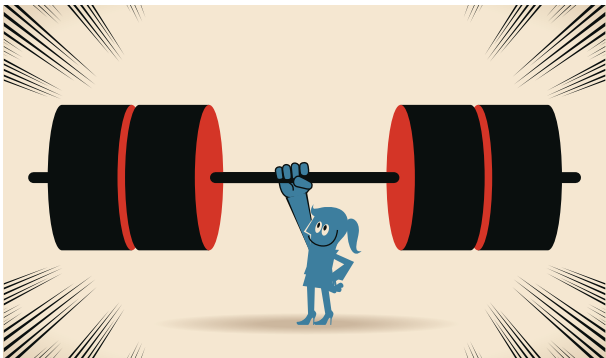
because leaders can get caught into seeking the same opinions from the same people. That is what we counsel against – what is the consequence of only speaking to these people? Also, we can send out more shut-up signals than speak-up ones. A colleague of mine, Nancy Kline, who wrote the book *Time to Think*, says to ‘know your face’. Do you have an awareness of what your face looks like now and what it is conveying? People in positions of influence need self-awareness of what signals they are sending.

Why is silence in organisations dangerous?
I have to say one of the driving forces in the past year [to encourage employees to speak up] has been around scandal. And the other massive force for clients is the much talked-about age of disruption. We live in a volatile and ambiguous world and the story goes that we are in different territory now with tech. We can't survive unless we innovate fast, and if there's one thing innovations can't do without it's the capacity for people to put their hand up and say, “I have a really stupid idea”. There is also a moral case around our individual capacity to find our voice and be heard and to listen and learn from other people. It's a fundamental part of being human.

Is the power gap bigger than it was 20 years ago?
I think there is a transition around the paradigm of leadership, which is desperately trying to move from a more hierarchical structure to a flatter one. I see many people moving towards that – which implies a desire for a reduced power difference. But the reality is that many organisations are finding it hard to do that in practice. When you get rid of job titles, it still doesn't get rid of the human capacity to create hierarchies in different ways, and different levels of status and authority. You are never going to disappear the trickiness around speaking up. **D**

Everything old How we will redefine employees

Phil Ruthven, one of the nation's most astute futurists, reckons that one of the “most profound changes we can expect in the workplace this century is that the term ‘employee’ is likely to begin to fade into history by the 2050s”.
In a new book, *The Future for our Kids*, Ruthven writes: “Back in history, the notion of an ‘employee’ didn't exist. Small tribes simply shared the necessary tasks to survive,



travel and entertain themselves. The concept of employees emerged with the aggregation of tribes into larger communities within territories, and eventually, sovereign states. As often as not, hegemony was the order of the day, taking the form of master-servant or owner-slave dynamics.”
Logically, he argues, “employee” will fade from the lexicon as we continue to progress from slavery to freedom to self-reliance.
For centuries, employees have been rewarded on the hours they put in but we are now entering the age of rewarding employees for their outputs. Younger generations are adapting readily to these types of contractual relationships, but baby boomers find it more difficult because they have had such certainty in their employment

arrangements. They see the trend to pay on outputs as retrograde and evil but, says Ruthven, they are wrong.
“It's progress and it will involve yet another habit change – not a value change in our lives,” he writes.
The Future for our Kids, by Phil Ruthven, Wilkinson Publishing, \$39.99
Helen Trinca