

Home truths

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The term 'speaking truth to power' stems from the American civil rights movement in the 1960s. It was coined by Bayard Rustin and referred to the highly visible and public stand taken by black activists to speak the truth about the extreme racial injustice they experienced in their everyday life. Since then, the term has been used in very many different circumstances: from standing up to powerful forces, to speaking truthfully to powerful individuals.

It has also been misused by Whitehall commentators about how senior civil servants should proffer advice in private to their political masters. And following this, the term has been further misappropriated to apply to how senior local managers should advise locally elected politicians.

But being truthful in private is easy. And it is particularly easy to be truthful when there's little at stake for the truthsayer. It is the public nature of that truth telling, against the grain of what the powerful want to hear and sometimes even against their interests, that gives it force and moral imperative.

Speaking truth to power is the duty that one feels to speak up and against injustice and/or the abuse of authority. Injustice can arise from structural or institutional biases; whereas abuse of authority arises from the personal actions of those in power. That is why context is (nearly) everything when it comes to truth telling. You have to know what the truths are and who's interests are served by the public revelation of these truths.

The fundamental question is this: why is it that we seem prone to falsehoods and want to hide truths?

There are two main reasons. First, many people actively want to cloak their intentions and actions. And unfortunately some of these people are driven by a need to dominate others. These people seek positions of authority so that they can abuse others in direct or indirect ways. These positions of authority can be intimate and close or they can be institutional and impersonal.

Speaking up against these personal or systemic modes of domination need to be confronted. This happens when people speak up against the direct abuse of children or adults. And it happens when people speak up against closed minded systems that corrupt or deliver unjust outcomes.

The job of public servants is not just to build the public good; it is also to reduce public harms. That is why senior public servants themselves need to speak up.

Speaking up seems a simple task but it is one that is often avoided. Whistle blowing is a long standing practice but it is one that is too seldom used. Procedures and practices help, but culture is key.

Most of the major inquiries into the worst human errors of the past 50 years put as the top recommendation the creation of an open culture of internal criticism and challenge. Indeed, the exhaustive investigations into the tragic loss of the NASA Challenger crew, which exploded during its launch in 1986, recommended that NASA adopted 'improved communication through open-door policies and a culture that encourages diverse opinions'.

The second reason why it is difficult for the truth to emerge, is that it may help us keep sane. It may be cognitively helpful for us to keep consistent in our view of the world.

Five hundred years ago, Francis Bacon said that, 'man prefers to believe, what he prefers to be true'. And 50 years ago, behavioural scientists discovered the so-called 'confirmation bias', where we seem to be cognitively attuned to finding facts that confirm our prior beliefs. Only recently psychologists have coined the phrase 'socially motivated reasoning' to describe how people seem to adopt ways of thinking and acting to attune to the social networks in which they operate.

Of course, objective knowledge is rarely uncontested. But just because very many things can be argued to be true, it doesn't mean that everything is therefore false.

If the truth about something is understood using seven shades of grey, it is best if it is not debated as though it is either black or white.

It is easy to describe the pattern of something. It is more difficult to explain the pattern; and it is even more difficult to understand the causation of the pattern. Some 'truths' about the pattern will inevitably be less false than others.

This nuanced interpretation of 'the truth' is what senior public servants face every day, in every domain. And yet we unfortunately appear to be descending into a post-rational realm of public discourse where the truth of a public problem is not sought as people have 'had enough of experts'.

That is why it is all the more important for senior public servants to acknowledge that part of their core role is to bring reason to bear upon public problems.

The age old requirement for public servants to act and behave reasonably and with reason is arguably being eroded. We have to appreciate the emotional content and public messaging of issues.

But public institutions still need to make decisions on reasonable bases. And then they have to explain their reasoning to the wider public. The demands of public reason are dynamic. And so elected politicians and appointed public servants need to move with the times.

Chief executives in local government have to fight verisimilitude - the appearance of truth. The professionals that they lead perpetually harvest new 'truths' about the world. And the politicians to whom they are accountable may regularly affix on some new generalisation about how public betterment is best advanced.

Our role is to help our organisations reveal the best understanding of the problems that need to be solved, and to open them up to diverse and external challenges to truth seeking

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