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Five Guidelines for Speaking Truth to Power

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— Paul Grossgold and Ritch Eich

Imagine you're a mid-level engineer for a multi-national construction management firm. You love your job, so you read highly regarded industry publications and keep your ear to the ground at conferences to ensure you're on top of emerging business opportunities.

So, when you hear your divisional vice president announce a new initiative at a group meeting that contradicts everything you have read and heard, you panic. What should you do? Should you say something now or try to catch the VP after the meeting? Either way, it's a risk since you know the VP has previously made it clear he believes everyone in the organization should "stay in their lanes" and focus on their own work.

To a greater or lesser degree, we suspect most of us have been in some version of this fictional scenario. Whether your dilemma was to speak up or not about a business strategy you disagreed with, or to point out inappropriate behavior of a leader, or perhaps even suspected criminal or corporate malfeasance, the decision choices you face are the same – you can either find the courage to speak up or remain silent and hope for the best. Sadly, many people due to a variety of factors including fear of job loss, career retribution, or cultural factors within their organization, choose to remain silent.

The price companies pay for this silence is often devastating and costly. For example, what might have been avoided if even one Wells Fargo employee had refused to create the fake accounts designed to cheat their customers. Or what if one software engineer at Volkswagen had refused to participate in a scheme to fool both U.S. regulators and their customers?

This article offers five guidelines that will help you speak truth to power. The actions of Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Advisor to President George H. W. Bush, help us understand the effectiveness of these guidelines. Each guideline is followed by a specific action taken by Scowcroft.

Shortly after Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in August of 1990, President Bush held an emergency Cabinet meeting to discuss possible U.S. responses. No consensus emerged from that meeting. The president's team initially seemed resigned to accept the occupation. Let's examine how Scowcroft spoke truth to power at that critical moment.

1. *BE GUIDED BY YOUR INNER COMPASS* – Your personal values and deep understanding of your own goals and those of your organization will provide the foundation on which to rest your recommendations.

This above all, to thine own self be true.
— Shakespeare

Scowcroft understood the deeper geopolitical significance of Saddam's invasion and why allowing it to stand unchallenged ran counter to the national security interests of the United States. [*Scowcroft regarded Saddam's invasion as the first test of a new era's possibilities and the pattern of global behavior one needed to establish* (Kempe & Lightfoot).]

2. _PICK YOUR SPOTS_ – Be strategic about the decisions or issues you challenge. Question only decisions that you can clearly dispute with hard data, emerging trends, or facts. Just because you think something is true is not a reason to challenge a decision.

A long-time friend of President Bush, Scowcroft knew his boss well and was able to create a compelling narrative that placed Saddam's actions in historical terms. [*Bush, a decorated World War II fighter pilot, was the last of a series of American Presidents who would come of age during the war and would be defined intellectually by the lessons from the West's appeasement of Adolf Hitler's aggression at Munich in 1938* (Kempe & Lightfoot).]

3. _OFFER A CLEAR ALTERNATIVE_ – Once you've got the leader's attention, it's essential to have a cogent new strategy, course of action or specific recommendation.

Based on his significant military and national security experience, Scowcroft knew that nothing short of a military response would succeed in evicting Saddam from Kuwait. [*...at the next NSC meeting Scowcroft strongly and forcefully made the case that Saddam's aggression was of paramount importance to US interests and that it must be met with a direct and strong response* (Kempe & Lightfoot).]

4. _RESPECTFULLY DISAGREE_ –The competition for ideas should never become a competition of egos. There is great risk in allowing a debate with your seniors to escalate into an argument.

It's not personal, it's strictly business.
— The Godfather

Although he did not agree with the initial NSC meeting consensus, Scowcroft did not open the debate in that forum. Arguments in a group that large could easily have devolved into unproductive bickering, and may even have backed Bush 41 into a corner. He chose instead to approach the president following the meeting to have a more controlled, respectful, one-on-one discussion.

5. _STRENGTH IN NUMBERS_ – Remember, a small group of your associates who agree with you often has more influence than just your single objection. The term "leading from below" includes attempting to steer decision-making in the right direction by group consensus.

The results of the second meeting suggest that Scowcroft likely made his case privately to other Cabinet members. [*At the conclusion of his intervention, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger pounded the table and proclaimed, "Absolutely right!" The discussion that followed Scowcroft's intervention took on a more practical nature and put the President's team in the proper frame of mind for a meeting the next day at Camp David, where military options would be debated for the first time* (Kempe & Lightfoot).]

In closing, we recognize that speaking truth to power does involve career risk, but it can also involve great personal reward when seniors appreciate the considered advice of their juniors. The tools described here will hopefully minimize risk while maximizing the potential benefit.

> *"Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing."*
> — John Stuart Mill

Reference: Kempe, F. and Lightfoot, J. (2015), *Brent Scowcroft: An Enlightened Realist*, New Atlanticist, Atlantic Council, March 19, 2015

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