

How to speak truth to power

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Barry Quirk

For council officers, speaking truth to power demands less heroic confrontation than the phrase implies, writes the former chief executive of Kensington & Chelsea RBC.

*“The truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell, and broke into pieces.
Everybody took a piece of it, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth.”*

Mawlana Jalal-al-Din Rumi

Whenever I consider the phrase ‘speaking truth to power’ I step back and think: who has the power, and what is the truth?

Is the power with those professionals who interpret, and sometimes over-interpret, the council’s challenges? Is power captured by a small faction within one party, or is it negotiated weekly between several councillors in different parties. And where sits the public in defining the truth?

For just as there may be several perspectives on ‘the truth’ so there are several combinations of how power is wielded. And so “speaking truth to power” is a more complex and contested act than the phrase implies.

Challenging members

As a chief executive trying to orchestrate best professional advice across a range of functions, I would advise officers to be careful about challenging elected members’ perspective on ‘the truth’.

They may be right, and officers may be wrong - and on many occasions both would be partly right. Elected members may start from a different value base, or they may actually be more connected to the social and economic problems of the local area.

Many times I’ve discovered officers peddling a national policy agenda because it aligns with some prevailing professional orthodoxy, and yet it was not especially relevant to the specific challenges of our particular local circumstance. Shoe-horning national or fashionable policies into local circumstances is one of the continual errors made by local government.

Some problems may be genuinely caused locally, while others may be local illustrations of a national problem. Differentiating the two is vital. It's important that councils do what's right in their circumstances.

Perhaps the sharp edges between truth and power come when the facts of an issue clash with political assumptions about what should be done. Chief planning officers have been central to this challenge - as were some public health directors during covid.

Duty of candour

At budget setting there are usually clashing views between what's politically desirable and what's financially feasible. But the overarching pragmatism of local government usually navigates a compromised way forward.

But from time to time there are truths that need to be spoken. And some may be uncomfortable, inconvenient and even unwelcome. Senior officers are paid to give best professional advice as subject experts and as members of a corporate management team.

Decisions need to be made in the round - and so advice giving needs to be given in the round. Advice needs to be impartial, objectively accurate and sincerely presented.

Local government officers are subject to a duty of candour, but until very recently it has derived from common law and professional/ethical obligations rather than statute - and that is precisely what the forthcoming legislation is designed to change. That noted, it is entirely feasible to speak sincerely and candidly about something and yet still be wrong.

Officials are generally expected to hold moderate opinions strongly, not strong opinions weakly. But it is their role to advise elected members how best to achieve their goals and objectives, and then to proceed to deliver them. That is why the trend of 'authenticity' can present problems.

It is the politicians whose leadership rests on authenticity. Officers may find they are implementing policies and projects they don't privately agree with. Indeed, if they agreed with the last council's priorities and now agree with the new council's priorities they face the challenge of being described, at best, as being sincere chameleons.

Personal and professional integrity

The important point in this regard is that several officers in each council have a 'constitutional personality' in ways that simply do not exist in the senior civil service. It is their duty and obligation to put their advice in writing and for this advice to be considered in meetings that are held in public.

And all officers are employed by the council not by the political executive. They must help the executive carry out its agenda but their fidelity is to the whole council.

By contrast senior civil servants are covered by both the Armstrong Memoranda (1985, revised in 1996) and the Osmotherly Rules (1980, revised 2014) which reinforce the point that ministers, not civil servants, are accountable to Parliament. The guidance details what information officials must provide, exemptions for sensitive material, and situations where civil servants are permitted to decline answering.

Of course there are dark arts and not so dark arts in advice giving - of concealment and partial revelation. Thomas More famously developed a method of providing indirect political advice and oblique counsel rather than blunt exhortation - *obliquus ductus*.

For local government officers, the line between legitimate oblique counsel and culpable dissimulation is precisely where personal and professional integrity is tested.

Something quieter and harder

The phrase 'speaking truth to power' has moral roots in the confluence of Quaker pacifism and the American civil rights movement. It was Bayard Rustin who popularised the phrase - and who was subsequently the key organiser of the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the occasion of Dr King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

The advice I received from two inspirational political leaders (in two different parties) was to provide advice that was relevant, reasoned and delivered with care and kindness. Shrill and bombastic advice quickly finds its way to the gutter. As Coleridge allegedly said, "advice is like snow, the softer it falls, the longer it dwells upon, and the deeper it sinks into the mind."

So what does 'speaking truth to power' actually demand of a local government officer? It demands less heroic confrontation than the phrase implies, and more of something quieter and harder: the disciplined, persistent offering of honest professional judgement to people who may not want to hear it, in a democratic setting where truth itself is genuinely contested and power is genuinely distributed.

The officer who understands that - and who can do it with impartiality, consistency and a degree of grace - is worth more to a council than any number of bold truth-tellers.

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