

Talking truth to power for the Intelligence Professional – feeling the fear and doing it anyway!

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**Talking truth to power for the Intelligence Professional -
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Talking truth to power for the Intelligence Professional – feeling the fear and doing it anyway!

Janine McGruddy

The truth makes men free is for the most part the truth which men prefer not to hear.

Herbert Agar, *A Time for Greatness* (1942)

“At heart intelligence is rooted in the severest of all ethical principles: truth telling”¹

Introduction

This paper will explore the value that is placed by the intelligence community at the highest levels on the ability to talk “truth to power”, as well as the importance of this skill in avoiding intelligence failures. It will acknowledge how difficult this can be to do in reality, but insist that these skills need to be developed as part of the formative education of intelligence professionals. It will advise ways in which this skill development can be incorporated into intelligence education, and provide some tips and tools for ways to effectively talk truth to power. The goal of this is to encourage talking truth to power as a core part of the curriculum for intelligence education so that intelligence professionals given professional development in this area will encourage the relaxing of structural and cultural barriers to talking truth to power in intelligence agencies.

What value does the Intelligence Community place on the ability to “talk truth to power?”

One only has to scan the transcripts of Intelligence Select Committee hearings of nominees for major roles within the US intelligence agencies to see that the value placed on the ability to talk truth to power is high. The following excerpts from hearings have been provided in full as they are powerful examples of how expectations of talking truth power translate into job expectations:

“You are a man of the military. And my question is, what does that mean in respect to being the DNI? Having great respect for the military, at the same time it is a culture of saying yes. The military by its very culture says yes to the Commander in Chief. At the same time, the job of intelligence is to prevent terrible things from happening and also to prevent the United States from making terrible, reckless mistakes. In other words, speaking truth to power. Given your background and where you come from—your great diligence, dedication and achievement—my question to you is, tell me how we can count on you to speak truth to power? We have just gone through a terrible time of what I call the “gaga” factor, where those—before the DNI was created—the minute they walked into the Oval Office we heard, “we can slam-dunk this, Mr President.” Colin Powell was sent up by the Intel agencies to testify at the United Nations, the most esteemed man in America, and again with flawed intelligence. The information on Iraq was dangerously

¹ Drexel E. Godfrey, “Ethics and intelligence,” *Foreign Affairs* 56:3 (1978): 630.

incompetent. My question to you is that as you do the work of the DNI, how can we count on you to speak truth to power so these terrible and reckless mistakes won't happen again?"²

The question is very to the point, and the response from the nominee that follows is equally forthright:

"Senator, I believe that the first calling of an intelligence officer is to do just that—speak truth to power. In my career, I hope I have a reputation for having done just that. There have been many intelligence officers—I'll just use the Navy as an example—we're not combat arms, we don't command ships, we don't command airplanes, we don't have lots of resources. So if you're going to be relevant, you have to have something to say and you have to be able to stand on your own two feet. So there have been a number of occasions in my career where I had to not be popular, but speak truth to power. What I found is when I did that, and I did it forcefully and I did it well, my reputation grew."³

This is not a one-off instance of talking truth to power being raised in these hearings. The following statements are from two different Senators, from another hearing:

"For me, integrity and independence are closely tied. We are in need of independent voices at the ODNI, and not cheerleaders for the Administration. We need people at the ODNI who can speak truth to power, no matter who is President. We also need a commitment from the Intelligence Community leadership to provide timely and frequent notifications to the Intelligence Committees."⁴

"The two big issues that I see are, first, the issue of intelligence integrity. There have clearly been episodes in which the intelligence community or elements of the intelligence community have produced the intelligence that principals wanted to support the path that had already been chosen rather than what people might call speaking truth to power. In accounting, people often talk about a plug number that fits between—we don't want plug intelligence around here."⁵

These statements firmly support the premise that the ability to talk truth to power is highly valued by the intelligence community, as well as those who are responsible for its oversight. The fact is that intelligence analysts take professional pride in their analytical skills and willingness to talk truth to power—and are "offended when accused of using the mask of

² Nomination of Vice Admiral Michael McConnell to be Director of National Intelligence: hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, One Hundred Tenth Congress, first session, February 1, 2007, 18.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nomination of Dr. Donald M. Kerr to be Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence: hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, One Hundred Tenth Congress, first session, August 1, 2007, 21.

⁵ Ibid, 22.

objectivity to disguise a value-laden agenda.”⁶ So how do we help prepare our analysts in order to avoid future intelligence failures?

How can talking truth to power help to avoid intelligence failures?

The Director of National Intelligence in the *Vision 2015 “A Globally Networked and Integrated Intelligence Enterprise,”* notes that there exists a “potential tension between intelligence objectivity and relevance, often summarized by the axiom that the Intelligence Community ‘speaks truth to power’.”⁷ The statement goes on to suggest that it is not a case of the work of an analyst being objective or relevant, but that both objectiveness and relevance are the basis of good intelligence. They are also the basis of talking truth to power effectively. Although the aim of this paper is to facilitate talking truth to power, any of the communication skills suggested below will enable analysts to better communicate with their peers and communicate their intelligence product to stakeholders.

Petersen suggests that however you define the mission of an intelligence analyst, the only thing that really matters is the reputation analysts have for “analytic rigor, objectivity, and total integrity. Lose that and we lose everything.”⁸ He goes on to say that it is the analyst’s professionalism and tradecraft that “provides checks on the system, light the way, and leverage US power.”⁹ The first two of these, providing checks on the system and lighting the way are directly linked to the ability of an analyst to talk truth to power, and thus, avoid intelligence failures.

Easy to say, harder to do?

“The duty to speak truth to power is what in philosophy we call a ‘positive obligation’ – a duty to do the right thing, and not simply to refrain from doing the wrong thing.”¹⁰

We all know that sense of dread we feel in the pit of our stomachs when we are in a situation that requires us to challenge authority. Saying something to the boss is very different from talking about it with our peers. This is due to “the boss effect,” effectively the higher up the ladder a boss is, the less likely they are to be told the truth by employees worried about losing favour with the boss or missing out on a promotion etc.¹¹ Despite this discomfort, it has been pointed out by Jones that with regards to the CIA that: “A few folks with new ideas, uncomfortable and threatening ideas to the status quo, may be just what the DO needs.”¹² At this point, it cannot hurt to try.”

This is where the ‘feel the fear and do it anyway’ bit comes in, and where we, as educators can try to prepare analysts for what is to come. So what tools can we provide our students

⁶ P. E. Tetlock and B. A. Mellers, “Intelligent management of intelligence agencies: beyond accountability ping-pong,” *The American psychologist* (2011): 11.

⁷ Director of National Intelligence, *Vision 2015 “A Globally Networked and Integrated Intelligence Enterprise,”* (2008): 8.

⁸ Martin Petersen, “What I Learned in 40 Years of Doing Intelligence Analysis for US Foreign Policymakers,” *Studies in Intelligence* (2011): 15.

⁹ *Ibid*, 20.

¹⁰ James R. Mitchell, “Can I Really Speak Truth to Power? Practical Advice for New Executives, 5” 2007, available at: <http://www.sussexcircle.com/pdf/028-SpeakTruthtoPower.pdf>.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² Garrett Jones, “It’s a cultural thing: thoughts on a troubled CIA,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (2006): 30.

with to ensure that when they need to talk truth to power they can do so in a way that maximises results and minimises fallout?

How can intelligence educators help analysts find their voice?

Obviously in providing solutions to these problems the advice needs to be generic. Students will need to be advised that whatever agencies, in whatever countries they are working in, will have their own internal processes for providing feedback, and in the worst case scenario, whistleblowing. The following tips have unashamedly been borrowed (and acknowledged) from the business community – why? The business community are aware that having employees that can talk truth to power can be the difference between a company’s success and failure. The goal here is to provide intelligence educators with the heuristics of effective communication skills that analysts will need to be successful in talking truth to power in any setting.

The teaching of these skills can be done at any stage of training, or could perhaps be broken into stages with simpler skills being taught earlier in the course. The following are suggestions of what skills could be taught to for effective talking truth to power to happen:

- Work with students on developing increased self-awareness of current persuasion strengths and areas for development - It’s always important to be self-aware, and aware of what others may be thinking or feeling.
- Get them to learn to think critically about the issue. Does this really matter? How? From who’s perspective?¹³
- Those at the top cannot be expected to be the expert in everything. Can the analyst be relevant by providing information in areas where the client or boss has weaknesses, information deficits, or blind spots? Try to be insightful.¹⁴
- Help them learn how to frame concerns in terms of what is at stake for the leader and agency.¹⁵ By reconfirming the reasons for the communication the issue becomes the agencies or the leader’s problem, not just the analyst’s issue. Suggest the use of ‘us’ and ‘we’ in communication to underscore the fact that we’re all in this together.¹⁶
- Of course talking truth to power first requires access to power!¹⁷ Tell them to ensure they are talking to the right person. Rather than wasting their time and energy complaining to someone who cannot influence the problem they have raised, get them to take the time to ensure they know who they should be talking to.¹⁸
- Encourage them to be direct – with a busy leader the worst thing you can do is “beat around the bush.”¹⁹
- Get them to consider their timing.²⁰ Is this really the best time to raise the issue? What is the context of what is happening on this issue or in the agency currently?

¹³ James E. Lukaszewski, “Seven Crucial Personal Strategies to Get Your Boss to Listen to You,” available at: <http://www.drj.com/articles/online-exclusive/seven-crucial-personal-strategies-to-get-your-boss-to-listen-to-you.html>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mitchell, Can I Really Speak Truth to Power?

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Petersen, What I Learned in 40 Years of Doing Intelligence Analysis for US Foreign Policymakers, 14.

¹⁸ Steve Tobak, “10 Ways to Get Your Boss to Listen,” *Money Watch CBS Interactive Inc.*, 2011, available at: http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505125_162-57336231/10-ways-to-get-your-boss-to-listen/

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

- Encourage them to think about how their approach may look to others. They do not want to come across as difficult or intimidating. Having a sense of humour and humility²¹ goes a long way.
- Teach them the importance of staying clear of politics.²²
- Teach them to develop clarity and avoid ambiguity. If they know what outcome they want, encourage them to be upfront.²³ Petersen complains that the:²⁴

“most underused word in CIA DI analysis is ‘because’. Every ‘may’ and ‘likely to’ and ‘could’ requires a ‘because’ statement or its equivalent—the reason we believe what we believe. Absent the ‘because’, or its equivalent, that article is just another opinion in a town full of opinions.”

- Suggest that they try to provide solutions - what could be done next? If their suggestion is implemented what first steps would they suggest?²⁵

Perhaps most importantly, teach them to test their thinking.
Here is Lukaszewski’s approach for testing the value of an idea:²⁶

1. Does the idea help us clearly achieve our objectives?
2. Does the idea help the organization clearly achieve its goals and objectives?
3. If the answers to questions one and two are yes, is the idea really necessary or critical to future success?
4. What will stop, be damaged or harmed, or fail to proceed should you not share the idea you have in mind?

This testing strategy will accomplish two powerful objectives. First, it will significantly reduce the number of ideas that you recommend, which is a good thing. Second, those ideas you do recommend will have obvious importance and value, and will be considered more seriously, as well as have greater impact.

Should talking truth to power be a core part of the curriculum for intelligence education?

This is, of course, a debate for the intelligence community, but in the interests of talking truth to power this academic says yes!

It is unfair on our analysts to expect them to receive training on every other important aspect of the job and to not support them with communication skills. It is wonderful that critical thinking seems to be taught as a matter of course these days, but what good is critical thinking without the skills to communicate that thinking? By teaching these skills as a core part of the curriculum for intelligence education, we face a future whereby all analysts will be versed in these skills, and perhaps be better listeners for it? Is this not what we want for our intelligence leaders of tomorrow? Can this training in the early stages of an analyst’s career

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Mitchell, Can I Really Speak Truth to Power?

²⁴ Petersen, What I Learned in 40 Years of Doing Intelligence Analysis for US Foreign Policymakers, 17.

²⁵ Lukaszewski, Seven Crucial Personal Strategies to Get Your Boss to Listen to You.

²⁶ Ibid.

help to break down the structural and cultural barriers to talking truth to power at the agency level?

How can intelligence professionals be encouraged to relax structural and cultural barriers to talking truth to power in intelligence agencies?

The problem, as Garret sees it, is that in the case of the CIA, and no doubt other intelligence agencies worldwide,

“there is a marked tendency on the part of senior levels of the CIA not to tolerate criticism, but instead to staunchly defend the status quo. Additionally, a distorted selection/promotion system has led the Agency to become top heavy with risk-averse “careerists.”²⁷

One would guess that you could probably replace the word CIA with the name of nearly any intelligence agency and still have a truthful statement. A recent example from the New Zealand Intelligence Community over an enquiry into the running of the New Zealand Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB – New Zealand’s equivalent to the U.S. National Security Agency) notes that amongst other issues such as a lack of resources and too many managers “a culture of fear are (sic) behind the agency's failings.”²⁸

Born suggests that for “intelligence services be capable of ‘speaking truth to power’, the services should be insulated but not isolated from politics²⁹.” By making talking truth to power part of the core curriculum intelligence professionals would be sent a clear message that not only is it okay, but expected, that they should do so. This is about creating a culture of integrity.

Bennis, Goleman and O’Toole describe the three steps to integrity as:³⁰

1. Discerning what is right and what is wrong
2. Acting on what you have discerned, even at personal cost
3. Saying openly that you are acting on your understanding of right and wrong

Or, more simply put, the ability to talk truth to power. By creating a culture of integrity and truth telling, intelligence professionals will be encouraged to relax structural and cultural barriers to talking truth to power in intelligence agencies, thus reducing the risk of future intelligence failures. Let the talking begin.

²⁷ Jones, It's a cultural thing: thoughts on a troubled CIA, 39-40.

²⁸ “Damning GCSB report claims Kiwis spied on,” *One News* (April 09, 2013), accessed 9 April, 2013 at: <http://tvnz.co.nz/politics-news/damning-gcsb-report-claims-kiwis-spied-5399441>.

²⁹ H. Born, “Towards effective democratic oversight of intelligence services: lessons learned from comparing national practices,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* (2004): 3.

³⁰ Warren G. Bennis, Daniel Goleman and James O’Toole, “Transparency how leaders create a culture of cando,” (2008): 72, available at: <http://www.books24x7.com/marc.asp?bookid=25103>.