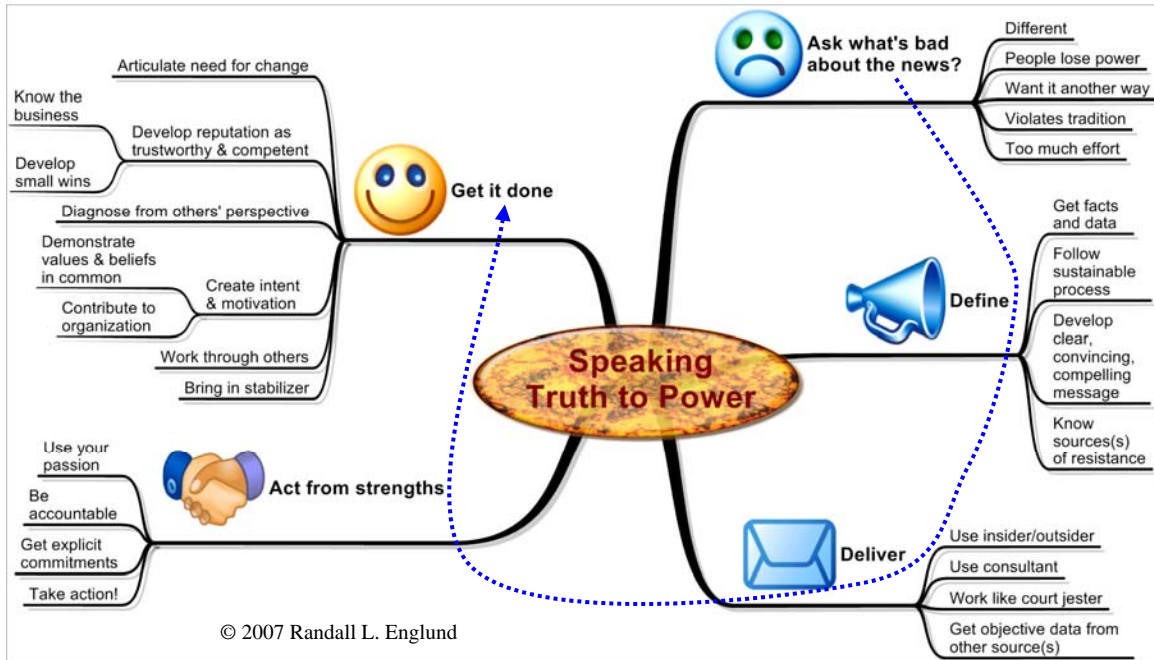


## CASE STUDY—SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

The Speaking Truth to Power process is illustrated in this case study. Start at the top and move clockwise.



A project manager at a high tech company sensed a big problem. There was no process in place to manage hundreds of technical issues that had been identified within a newly developed computer architecture...and products were now being developed based upon this problem-laden architecture. Toni knew the news was bad and getting worse, but she had no more authority than anyone else to do anything about those issues. The complexity of the situation was different than anything else this organization had experienced before. All variables were changing: markets, products, technology, people, organization, and size. No one person was directly in charge. No one was putting in the effort to correct what looked like a massive problem.

However, there was something different about this person—she was willing to speak truth to power. Project leaders are closest to the action in most organizations. While that makes them knowledgeable about what is going on and what should be done to achieve project success, unfortunately, they often do not possess the resources, political clout, or approval to do those things. And the people in power are not always open to hearing the truth. This happens for any number of reasons, such as pressure from shareholders, a drive to

meet an out-of-alignment measurement system, turf battles, or insufficient knowledge about the project management process. Even worse, the messenger may get proverbially “shot” for delivering the “truth” (bad news) to those in “power”—telling the truth can have negative consequences to the teller.

Toni took the initiative to define the truth. The issues reflected big gaps, errors, or undefined paths in the new computer architecture, issues so significant that new product development was being delayed in multiple areas. Several different product lines would be built upon this platform. If the issues were not resolved rationally, immediate design decisions would have to be made on multiple projects that might compromise or severely limit future functionality options in the products being developed. Architects argued for the purity and integrity of the architecture. Implementers wanted pragmatic solutions that leveraged the work completed to date. The problem was not getting solved—concrete closure actions were not getting taken. The congenial but functionally separated environment was potentially “toxic” for anyone stepping up to take charge.

She was one among dozens of project managers depending upon the new architecture. Overall, Toni took it upon herself to cause action. She created a compelling picture of why action was required, what needed to be done, how to resolve the issues, and what the results would be. Here are steps she took:

- She identified the functional managers whose business was impacted by the issues and asked them to get together for a discussion. These upper managers were clearly frustrated by the issues and concerned about getting their projects completed on time. They had no spare resources to resolve issues that they believed other people should be working on. Her personal invitation to attend a meeting with peer managers to address important and urgent issues, or else be stuck with what others decided, made it compelling for them to show up at the meeting.
- To deliver the truth, she put together a presentation that clearly stated the nature of the issues and catastrophic impact on all business areas. In the meeting with R&D managers from across the organization who were responsible for developing various pieces of the computer platform, she articulated the issues with amazing alacrity. Yet she did not overwhelm them with details—they knew enough to fill in the blanks with the pictures she presented. The consequences of inaction were delays in time to market, duplication

and rework of effort, frustrated engineers, high costs, bad publicity, and unfavorable attention from unhappy executives. She spoke a language they all understood extremely well.

- In this presentation, she proposed that each business ante up key engineers to meet in study groups that would research the options for resolving the architectural issues and propose solutions. People in all project areas would then need to review the proposals and agree to adopt them. This work would have to take place concurrently with development efforts underway. (NOTE: Although not actually required in this case, many times it takes bringing in a trusted outsider, such as somebody in another organization who solved a similar problem, or a consultant, to convince people that such drastic action is required.)

What made Toni able to take on such a strong role in a very sensitive situation? Her actions were driven by choosing to exercise personal strengths. Her passion and belief in a very different future state being possible provided courage and energy to take on this difficult task. And she used savvy and sensitive communication skills to be credible, trusted, and ultimately listened to:

- Through words and actions she made it clear that her sole motivation was accountability for success of the program. It was clear that she had no hidden agenda or desire for personal gain—just relief from the frustration she was experiencing. Her outspoken manner diffused any possible resistance by making it clear, through her choice of words up front and throughout, that she was not after personal glory or power plays but just wanted to make the program successful. None of this was a surprise to the attendees because she had conducted one-on-one discussions with each manager in advance of the meeting.
- She pointed out the pain that could be felt by each person. She had the ability to design a process that could lead to changes, and she linked the pain and change efforts directly to needs of the business.
- By reflecting and drawing upon previous experiences, she articulated the current reality and defined the steps needed for the change. Fortunately, she had completed a number of previous projects quite successfully. She was technically competent and could understand the difficult nature of the problems being encountered. Her carefully chosen words addressed different

perspectives; that is, she talked broad picture with upper managers and technical issues with engineers. She consistently demonstrated the values, beliefs, and contribution that this effort would bring to the organization.

- She asked for their support. The goal of the meeting was to get explicit commitment from all attendees that they and their organization would participate in this program. This was not just another meeting to talk about the issues; it was a call to action.

Toni's thorough plan, reinforced by inputs from other people around the organization, convinced this council of upper managers to get on board as a guiding coalition. The plan first requested these managers to set constraints and define priorities. It then described how cross-organizational teams of engineers would be assigned full time to specific modules or areas within the architecture. Approval would come from all other teams reviewing, commenting, and voting on proposals. Fears subsided as concerns about priorities, content, process, oversight, approvals, and implementation were addressed.

In the end, they asked Toni to lead the new program.

Believing in the program, she agreed to get it going. She became the leader, the guiding vision, and the workhorse. She also planned from the beginning to go "out of business" as a revolutionary. Toni went to the program management department and requested a program manager. The initial conversation with Toni revealed many negative expressions, but the program manager had a sense to persevere and later came to realize the negativity came only out of Toni's frustration with the current realities. The program manager came on board and gradually took over to coordinate the massive cross-organizational efforts to execute this plan. After successfully completing the tumultuous first phase, she guided the program team through a retrospective analysis, saw that progress was proceeding on the right path, went back to managing her own project full time, and got promoted. She continued taking on new development efforts within the company.

Her impact extended beyond that critical program. The program team became quite competent on the new process that it had invented and then refined about how to identify and resolve architectural issues. It was significant to observe how the management anxiety initially present around the complexity and far-reaching nature of the "truth" was upsetting to those in "power" and gradually subsided and mostly

disappeared over the course of the program. Credit goes not only to the engineers doing the work but also to the program management approach that was applied. All this became possible because one person was willing to risk her career and speak up. Resolving those architectural issues was at the heart of the huge success subsequently enjoyed by the company in the computer business. Management supported a huge celebration to recognize the achievements of many that were initiated by the power of one.

Later the program manager sought out this person as a mentor as he was so impressed by her abilities in getting things done within a convoluted organization. He wanted to know how she managed to exercise *voice with power* and short-cut a path to *cultural distortion*. One question was about improving judgment. She suggested observing judgmental situations—make your own call as difficult decisions come up and observe how those in power make the same call. Compare their actions with yours as a way to learn to make better decisions from the masters. Seek to understand their thought processes; probe into the reasons they act as they do. Her feedback on this and other topics was invaluable and long lasting. Later in a different job at corporate the program manager was able to reciprocate and provide her with advice on a project submittal.

### **Take aways:**

- Act from personal strengths, such as expert, visionary, or process owner.
- Develop a clear, convincing, and compelling message and make it visible to others.
- Use your passion that comes from deep values and beliefs about the work (if these are not present, then find a different program to work on).
- Be accountable for success of the organization and ask others to do the same.
- Get explicit commitments from people to support the goals of the program; then they are more likely to follow through.
- Take action, first to articulate the needs, then to help others understand the change, and finally to get the job done, following a plan.
- Tap the energy that comes from the courage of your convictions...and from the preparation steps outlined above.