



# wolf calling

## SPEAKING Truth TO POWER

Witnessing the present state of world today, I find myself scratching my head and wondering, "What are these people thinking?" The political arena, the financial merry-go-round and the corporate kitty-litter box are all places I am glad not to be employed in right now. I'm happy down here on terra firma, where I hear folks talking about compassion, conservation and community with genuine, not-faked sincerity. Down here I can see that most people are basically good, honest, and want to make honorable choices and pursue happiness without it being at someone else's expense. I see people striving to be authentic and not playing games. And I'm enough of a cockeyed optimist to perceive my community as reality. I also take heart that most communities in the world would feel much like mine if I were to spend time in them.

### LOOKING UPWARD

As I look "up there" at the combined level (corporations, organizations, governmental jurisdictions,) I notice a



dichotomy between how I perceive my community and what I would expect to look like a roll-up of these similarly principled communities. So why does it look so different? Why is it that I have faith in "us down here" and just don't believe a word from "them up there?" It is as if the two aren't connected in a meaningful way.

And I begin to wonder about that disconnect and how it got there. And then I begin to wonder, is anyone telling "them up there" the truth?

This takes me to problem analysis (as does all my thinking, I'm afraid) and I am inspired to look at one component that we "down here" may be contributing to this dichotomy. What I noticed is that more often than not, many of us "down here" have an inconsistent ability (or willingness?) to speak truth to power. I'm talking about the difference in how we behave when the person with whom we are communicating has a real or perceived power over us. If, for instance, you are standing in front of a judge, in traffic court, you

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will most likely choose to speak the truth because his/her honor has the legal power to assign punishment. In this instance, a judge has real power and it's wise to acknowledge that real power because you most likely don't want to go to jail. In a case like this, most of us wisely make a choice to match our perception of power to an outcome we'd rather not risk, and so we speak the truth.

## **DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES, DIFFERENT CHOICES**

In a different circumstance, if I am interacting with my boss, who may not want to hear the bad news I am bringing, then I might consider his/her power versus what I might risk in speaking the truth. He/she has the power to fire, which is again a real power, based on what I consider a real risk. Yet, it doesn't feel honest doing duty as a "yes man," as that may be risking my integrity and all that it means to me. So, I have a choice, albeit an unpleasant one. This isn't as simple a choice as the previous example, and it is my choice. My own thinking is, I will speak the truth as I honestly see it, and be prepared to pay the consequences. This choice might be easier for me, as I'm ready for retirement, giving me a little more freedom from the firing risk. But for those of you who aren't in my position, it could be quite scary to risk your job and possibly livelihood for your integrity. And it is your



choice. As individuals, we make lots of these choices every day.

## **NEGOTIATING THE RISKS**

So I began intertwining these thoughts with how people "up there" might be getting their second-hand view of the world, and I am left to wonder how much of their input comes from the risk-averse people? And how much comes from those to whom speaking truth to power is more important than damaging their sense of security? I understand the reasons for both and have compassion for those who might not choose as I would. I can also see how the view from "up there" can be skewed by the potentially deadly combination of leaders who naturally want to hear good news, and a majority of followers who aren't comfortable speaking truth to power. I don't think anyone is intentionally trying to mess up the view. People are all just trying to do the best they can while negotiating around the risks.

## **WHAT DOES IT TAKE?**

What does it take to speak truth to power? It takes an intensely personal, internal inspection of our own values and a clear commitment to maintain that integrity by sticking to them. No one is perfect, yet we can still take every opportunity to choose to speak truth to power, staying clear on the risks and being willing to make our choices for the long term. ▲

### *Client Comments:*

*"Diane has written the clearest case for executive involvement in IT that I have ever seen."*

*- A state agency head*

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