

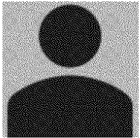
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Silence is not golden: The civil service must enable a 'speak-up' environment

A culture of silence is dangerous for the workplace. Employees should be able to voice concerns without fear of reprisal



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By [Dame Una O'Brien](#)

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"See it. Say it. Sorted." We hear it every day, everywhere on the rail network.

Has there ever been a more irritating or, in reality, more effective safety and security slogan? Memorable, easy to act on and, crucially, with a member of the British Transport Police primed and ready to pick up legitimate concerns.

Wouldn't it be great if we could speak about our concerns at work as easily? Why can't we have an equivalent for our organisations?


The call of "See it. Say it. Sorted" is, to the travelling public, an opportunity to speak up about something that "doesn't look right". We act on a genuine concern; there's unlikely to be a downside to us personally from raising an issue in this context.

We are not, for example, in fear of being excluded from trains or ridiculed next time we travel because our concern turned out to be awkward for rail management... and therein lies the crucial difference between the appeal of this slogan and the reality inside too many of our organisations.

When it comes to speaking up at work, we face two essential questions. Firstly: do I have the inner courage to do this? Each one of us will have taken similar steps in the past and our willingness to act is likely to be as shaped by those experiences as by the immediate issue we face.

Second: will I be heard respectfully without negative consequences? The policies and procedures might look polished and inviting, but sometimes, especially in the civil service, a culture of hierarchy and dismissiveness can cause us to hold back.

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We only have to go back to last year and recall Sue Gray's report regarding No.10: "Some staff had witnessed or been subjected to behaviours at work which they had felt concerned about but at times felt unable to raise properly."

No less disturbing is the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on the withdrawal from Afghanistan, where they point to the absence of an adequate process for officials to express concerns about policy without fear of damaging their careers.

Notwithstanding some recent changes, these examples shine a spotlight on a deeper challenge for government departments and indeed the wider public sector about the need to nurture a culture where it is safe to speak up.

What is to be done? For inspiration, Amy Edmondson's excellent book *The Fearless Organization* (Wiley, 2018) is a good place to start. She points to the benefits of "psychological safety", an environment at work where we can raise questions, concerns and ideas without risk of humiliation or punitive consequences.

Her research shows compellingly that this is much more than a nice-to-have; teams with an open culture, willing to raise and review mistakes, are more innovative and effective.

One of the hidden heroes of creating a culture of safety in the field of surgery was Professor Marc de Leval. An outstanding children's heart surgeon at Great Ormond Street Hospital, he came to believe the drive to perform faultlessly created a strong pressure to overlook mistakes.

Being curious, he teamed up with a researcher who specialised in studying workers in high-risk environments to observe surgical teams in action. The resulting seminal articles in the 1990s demonstrated that lives could be saved by a more open culture in surgery where anyone on the team, the most senior and most junior, could feel safe to ask questions, admit mistakes or raise concerns.

And there is plenty of mature good practice to observe within the high-risk nuclear and airline industries. Over decades, both have learnt the hard way from serious accidents that a culture of safety means having systems that counter deference and encourage staff at all levels to speak up with concerns.

We need to free people from being afraid of each other at work by tackling the power imbalances that silence. Within organisations this takes leadership, a culture of trust and respect, with policies and incentives that send the same message. It takes focus, time to achieve and is hard work to do.

At an individual level, though, we don't need to wait; each of us can act in our own teams: take a moment to ask, what's one small step I could take to make it safer for the people I work with to speak up?

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