

## **The Keystone: Speaking Truth to Power Playbook**

Also known as the capstone, a keystone, is the final piece in an arch that allows it to support itself.

The keystone symbol represents strength, unity and the importance of working together. It is literally, and metaphorically, a part of the greater whole.

Same with what I call speaking the unspoken. In organizations there's always a need to raise issues and provide systemic feedback. If people don't speak up, or if that feedback is not truly listened to, then things can literally crumble.

### Steps to Consider When Speaking the Unspoken:

#### 1) Prepare.

- Gather information.
  - Do I understand why whatever I'm challenging (whether a belief, a policy, a practice, etc.) exists? Do I truly understand my reasons for perceiving things differently?
- Consider potential consequences:
  - What is the best/worst that could happen if I don't speak up?  
What's the best/worst that could happen if I do speak up?
  - What if I speak up but they don't listen?
  - What's the value I'm adding by giving my perspective?
- Enlist allies (if you can) within the group and talk one-on-one with others:
  - Here's a sample conversation starter: "Here's an idea I have and I'm wondering how I can get your thoughts and criticism ahead of time before I speak to the group so I can potentially have some traction?"
- Choose an optimal time, place and manner.
  - When is the optimal time to speak up? Where should the feedback be given?
  - What is the appropriate medium or method?

## 2) Deliver the message.

- Be clear and specific and use a feedback framework such as **IDEA©**:
  - What are the **Issues & Interests** I'm perceiving? How do I best frame the problem being created?
  - Can there be a **Discussion** about this?
  - What are some ideas we can **Explore & Evaluate** that address the problem?
  - What is the next **Action** step that can take place?
- Manage your state.
  - Be calm and composed by staying curious.
  - Express empathy and understanding.
  - Be authentic and vulnerable:
    - “I rarely say much in meetings and my voice is trembling as I say this because I care a lot. At the same time, I need to make a comment here that’s been on my mind and that is...”
  - Demonstrate group loyalty and/or agreement before you reveal your counter-idea and what you see as the **issues & interests** that you’re communicating.
    - “I’ve been a member of this department for  $x$  years and so hopefully I’ve demonstrated my commitment to the college, department and to the students. This is why I need to convey ....”
    - “I understand this decision may lead to short-term gains, but I feel compelled to speak about potential long-term implications and issues as I see them...”
  - Use constructive language in inviting further **discussion** and **exploring** other solutions
    - Be solution oriented
    - Encourage collaboration and growth (versus blame and criticism)
      - “To build on the excellent proposal, I suggest we also...Can we have further discussion on this?”
      - “Other questions to consider in this situation include...”

- “Can you help me understand why we’re doing this...?”
- “Isn’t the real problem we’re trying to solve is how we both achieve  $x$  and  $y$ ?”

3) Start creating change by implementing [Action](#) steps.

- [Acknowledge](#) the status quo bias – the tendency for people to prefer things to remain unchanged.
  - What is the value of the “way we’ve always done things?”
  - What are the benefits of changing?
  - What will it cost if we don’t contemplate a different view?
  - How can we maintain the value of how we’ve done things in the past, and, also add value in doing things differently?
  - Follow up (if possible) with an email on [action](#) items.
  - Offer what you are willing to do and end with a positive question.
    - “I don’t profess to have the “solution” and so I’d be glad to lead a task force looking into this. Would that be helpful?”

Resources:

- The Art of Insubordination by Todd Kashdan, PhD
- Radical Candor by Kim Scott