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The Understated Art of Knowing When to ST*U

By Sgt. Maj. Robert Nelson & Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Gabriel Arnold

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Many people miss a great opportunity when they talk too much. It is likely this phenomenon exists due to the perceived value in oversharing one's opinion. However, speaking up at times can be detrimental to your reputation and career aspirations. This depends largely on the time you've been with an organization, your organizational reputation, positional power, competence, and leader agreeableness (Grant, 2016). As it turns out, there is a time to speak up — and a time to ST*U. This article will guide you to building a reputation within your organization and help you determine when and if it's finally your time to speak.

Time in the Organization

The formal and informal power structures within an organization significantly affect your ability to speak up. Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory suggests newcomers to an organization learn through participation. However, this participation is subjective because it is either

afforded or restricted by old-timers (people who have established themselves through a position of power, reputation, and demonstrated competence within the organization) based on whether or not they like an individual (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, when an old-timer asks about an idea or a decision, be careful because what they really want is for you to agree with them, not tell them what you think. Anything contrary may place your reputation and career at risk.

Reputation

The quality of an idea is not as important as the reputation of the person presenting the idea. Oftentimes, new leaders or subordinates may be able to see changes which would improve their organization. However, unless they have well-established reputations with steadfast dedication to the organization, their suggestions are likely to be ignored. If this happens, you have one of four choices: 1) leave the organization, 2) apply less effort, 3) continue



First Sergeant Brady McDonald, Delta Battery, 1st Battalion, 145th Field Artillery Regiment, addresses his Soldiers during Operation Diamond Strike near Camp Buehring, Kuwait, Feb. 28, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Thomas X. Crough)

to speak up in hopes of making a change, or 4) grit your teeth and persist without improving the system (Grant, 2016). Thus, if you cannot leave the organization, do not wish to become neglectful, or do not have the reputation needed to speak up, it is best to keep quiet and persevere until you develop a positive *old-timer* reputation.

Power

Power makes you “always right” and comes in many forms. One in particular, is known as *legitimate power* and is derived from the official position one holds within an organization (French & Raven, 1959). If someone is new to an organization but is in a position of significant power, like a commanding officer or command sergeant major, he or she is able to speak up and share ideas contrary to accepted practices. However, regardless of organizational tenure, if you are in a middle management role or below, and thus lower on the positional power spectrum, speaking up about flaws in the organization’s systems or presenting an idea critical of the organization can be detrimental to your career. So, it’s important for you to know your place on the ladder (Pfeffer, 2010).

Competence

Competence is often explicitly linked to one’s participation and reputation rather than one’s actual ability in a particular field (Pfeffer, 2010). Competence is so important the Army added it to *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0: Mission Command* (Department of the Army, 2019b). It is no surprise competent individuals are allowed to speak up in organizations and their ideas are heard and respected to a greater extent (Grant, 2019). The downside is that individuals cannot be competent without the organization deeming it so. So, unless you

are considered competent by an organization, it’s best to keep new ideas to yourself until you’ve earned a reputation of competence.

Leader Disposition

Like all manifestations of power, leaders can decide what ideas are accepted by an organization. Therefore, one might infer a leader with a cooperative disposition is more likely to accept and implement an idea than a disagreeable leader. Interestingly enough, according to Grant this is not true. In his theory, supervisors with disagreeable mindsets tend to be more comfortable challenging the status quo than leaders who value cooperation (Grant, 2016). This is because cooperative leaders tend to value

organizational harmony over organizational improvement and will squelch ideas they see as differing from the organizational norms (Grant, 2016). Thus, in a case like this, it’s best to keep quiet.

Solutions

While the previous sections may seem cynical, they represent real, and frequently overlooked, communication challenges. The following sections provide insight into what you can do to overcome these barriers and elevate your voice when the conditions are right.

Understand the Operational Environment (OE)

The process of gauging when to remain silent begins with understanding the operational environment (OE) and your audience. Consider the relationships, actors, functions, and tensions (RAFT) framework (Eikmeier, 2010). When engaged in conversation, consider your relationship to the person with whom you are speaking, the other participants, the conversation’s purpose, and any tensions that exist or existed in the past. If any RAFT categories are unknown, it’s best to be quiet, listen and learn the full extent of the situation before inserting your opinions.

Recognizing nonverbal communication cues (tone, volume, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, posture, etc.) also relates to understanding the OE (Depaulo & Friedman, 1998; Cherry, 2020). If you do not know or miss these cues, then you risk losing your relevance and your audience’s attention.

Smarten Up

Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, Army Leadership and the Profession, states “Intellect consists of one’s

brainpower and knowledge” (Department of the Army, 2019a, p. 4-1). Instead of trying to sound smart, put some effort into educating yourself. Study the attributes and competencies associated with the leadership requirements model to identify areas that need improvement. Read often and consistently because books are a great way to increase your knowledge and competence. If you want to achieve success in discerning when to speak up or to stay quiet, you must continue expanding your knowledge, which ultimately increases your competence.

Exercise Disciplined Initiative

“Disciplined initiative refers to the duty individual subordinates have to exercise initiative within the constraints of the commander’s intent” (Department of the Army, 2019b, p. 1-12). Since commanders are extremely busy people, they want you to get to the point, follow orders, and quietly stick to the plan until you realize the orders and plan are no longer suitable to the situation. At that point you have the option of speaking up. However, if you do not have a shared understanding of the mission and the commander’s intent, it is best to stay quiet and not offer advice until you do. Of note, this does not mean you should not ask questions that would improve your understanding, but it does mean you should be disciplined in what you ask or simply be quiet and listen.

Build Relationships

Building relationships is an extremely important building block for effective communication. Relationships require energy to create and maintain, but this does not mean you must be everyone’s friend. You should treat everyone with dignity and respect and, in

return, you enhance your reputation within the organization and enhance your ability to speak and have your opinion respected.

Consider W.A.I.T.ing

W.A.I.T. stands for “Why Am I Talking,” and while it may be a joke around the office, there is wisdom in the application of its framework. According to Grigan (n.d.), the first question you should ask yourself before speaking is, “Do I have something important to share?” If the answer is no, then be quiet. Do not talk for the sake of talking. If the answer is yes, you must then ask, “Is this the right time to share?” If not, then be quiet.

If it is the right time, and the content is relevant and important, you should know if your contribution is an opinion or a fact. If you are sharing an opinion, you must consider if it is part of your job or responsibility. If it is not related to your job, you may be better off staying quiet, since most leaders value facts over opinions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to provide a blueprint to help you earn respect within your organization and give your words weight. You should take note of any powerful people such as old-timers and the style of leadership in play. If you are ever unsure how to react or respond, don’t pass up the opportunity to simply stay silent until you achieve a more powerful position or earn more respect within your organization. Take the time to understand the OE and your coworkers and remember that, ultimately, it’s better to say less, but have your words carry power and respect when you do choose to speak. ■

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Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Gabriel S. Arnold is the chair for the Department of Army Operations, SGM-A, Fort Bliss, Texas. His previous assignments include command sergeant major for U.S. Army Cadet Command and Fort Knox and regimental command sergeant major for the U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School. Arnold deployed to Operations Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom. He holds a master's degree in adult education and lifelong learning from Pennsylvania State University and is working towards his graduate-level certification in instructional design from Western Kentucky University.

Sgt. Maj. Robert Nelson is the senior instructor and vice-chair of the Department of Army Operations, SGM-A, Fort Bliss, Texas. He has served in a variety of leadership assignments and positions over the last 29 years ranging from squad leader to command sergeant major. Nelson is a Class 63 Sergeants Major Course graduate and a fellow of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Seminar XXI Fellowship. He holds a bachelor's degree in social science from Washington State University; a Master of Health Science and a Master of Business Administration from Touro University International; a Master of Education from Pennsylvania State University; and a Doctorate of Education from Vanderbilt University.



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