



**The Public
Sector Leader**

POLITICAL PRESENCE - SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER



**I've Got
This!**



COMPLIMENTARY E-BOOK

www.thepublicsectorleader.ca

Political Presence - Speaking Truth to Power
by Ingrid Bergmann
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www.thepublicsectorleader.ca

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ABOUT THIS E-BOOK

Introduction

What do you do when your role requires you to tell your superiors that, in your professional opinion, the options to achieve their goals are slim or costly?

In other words, how do you tell them what they may not want to hear?

This complimentary E-Book features a compilation of the most memorable quotes and useful answers to questions asked by real public sector leaders in past seasons of our signature program "The Political Acumen Accelerator".

The content was chosen based on my experience as an Executive Coach who has logged 1000's of hours over 20 years walking alongside senior and aspiring public sector leaders as they learned their craft.

Use this E-Book as a quick reference when you're stuck and wondering what to do, when you're preparing to do something new or challenging, or trying to understand what just happened.

With deep admiration for your hard work and dedication to public service,

Ingrid Bergmann,
Co-Founder



What is the Truth in Politics and Government?

“Evidence is important, and you also need to understand that decision makers consider more than just evidence. Every decision has two components – the politics and the facts. Most decisions have mostly one or the other and some have both. As you come to understand this, you will be less frustrated by the choices that are made.”

Public servants get paid to offer advice based on their experience and knowledge. And, when they give advice, they need to ensure their opinions are grounded in facts.

There is always a need to extrapolate from the facts because it's not possible to know everything about a situation but it's important to understand the context and to make sure you can separate what *ought* to happen from a human perspective from what *needs* to happen from a political one.

It takes courage to present the facts to the people who need to hear them regardless of whether they want to or not. You need to

offer the most objective advice you can without offering what Stephen Colbert calls “truthiness”.

Whether the advice is considered true or not is determined by the person receiving it. A politician's view of what is necessary or astute may be different than that of the bureaucracy and it's best to leave the partisan pieces to those who are elected to make those decisions.

CONSIDER THIS...

There are many experts with many facts and a sometimes-unbridled enthusiasm to share them. Though you may never have all the facts, it's useful to think carefully about which facts are relevant to the discussion. Which facts are irrelevant?

What someone who is in a decision-making capacity needs to know to make the decision may not be the same as what you want to share with them.

Creating the Right Environment for Truth

The ideal executive office is one in which good humour reigns and staff are welcome to interact with the politicians. But, as we know, some offices are just not like that.

If you end up reaching a leadership role, but you're quick to jump to conclusions, you may choke off the ability to get information, especially contrary viewpoints. Be as open as possible to having people provide you with rigorous advice and make an effort to discuss it in a way that allows you to find better ways to solve the problem.

In terms of building an open culture, consider using the phrase 'Let me be the devil's advocate for a minute' and encourage others to use the same approach.

Make it the job of your team to keep you out of trouble.

Make it clear that you are going to listen,

and that staff have an obligation to tell you where the pitfalls are. There can be a tendency in some cultures for people to run from this because they think someone else who is more senior will do it. However, it's best if *everyone* feels they can speak up if they think they have to.

In business, it is often said 'don't bring me problems, bring me solutions'. But in government - to avoid simplifying complex issues - it can be the opposite: If you're only bringing forward solutions, you may miss the opportunity to talk about the nuances of a complex public policy issue.

Make sure there is discussion around the problem so that you are not bringing a solution to an issue the politicians don't know they have. Also, just because the bureaucracy understands there is a problem doesn't mean the public knows. Politicians would much rather be perceived as the solver of the problem than the creator of it.

"Sadly, power doesn't always want to listen. Your Minister may not be receptive to hearing the truth."

How do You Actually Speak Truth to Power?

You need a certain amount of courage to speak truth to power. This is formed from experience. Start by practicing. Look for opportunities to talk to the politicians or senior bureaucrats – in the elevator, share a meal, out in the community, in the car after meetings, go with them to events etc. Look for opportunities for informal interactions.

View the senior bureaucrats and politicians as a kind of puzzle to be solved; what is their style, understand their receptivity to detail and evidence. Some politicians will want more evidence and facts and others won't.

Your advice should be evidence informed; you should be able to justify what you are saying, and you need to be open yourself to receiving the same kind of advice. Create a culture where that's accepted and is the norm.

As you speak truth to power be genuine. Be honest, open and collaborative and read a lot about the area you are working in. Be comfortable in yourself. **How you do things is as important as what you do.**

Make sure you don't embarrass anyone – consider the language you use and the forum. You don't want to be so vague that people wonder what you are saying.

"Praise publicly and criticize privately."



Stories from the Real World

PRACTICE COURAGE

"During a time of budget restraint, we had to make really tough decisions about human resources cutbacks in a social development Ministry despite increasing caseloads. We did not cut any front-line staff and we were successful in placing all those who had to leave. In the process, we had to go to Treasury Board where the Minister spoke about our progress. As is often the case, Treasury Board seems to know better than you and they spoke to us about where we needed to do more.

At some point, I, as the DM of the Ministry, spoke up and said, "I want to be very clear with you, we have worked very hard, we have cut to the bone, there is nothing more we can do."

I knew the Minister would not be happy that I had jumped in, so I apologized to him. He said, "It was the right thing to do". Those who were my ADMs at the time still see that as one of their proudest moments in government.

Their DM spoke up and in effect said we have done what we can do, we did the right thing, we are not going to play this game."



FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM, NOT THE SOLUTION

"In the case of a big tax change, the politicians and some senior bureaucrats became convinced that they had the answer and they thought it was the right thing to do, but they forgot that they needed to persuade the public of that reality of well.

Someone needed to 'gut up' to say this to them: Just because we have something that is technically proficient doesn't mean that the public is ready to accept that solution."

How do you Balance the Urgent with the Important?

The political realities of government make the system almost addicted to urgency. Many things are urgent but not important just because they are politically charged. With experience, you can begin to build an understanding of the difference.

You begin to understand what decisions you have to make, and which will make themselves, as well as which things the politicians and senior administration care about more than others.

When you are inexperienced everything looks urgent. Part of the answer is to get experience and get very well informed within your field by asking the people around you what's important when you start a new job.

Build a connection to the Minister's / Mayor's Office, as they will know which things are more urgent than others. Culturally, in your own unit, it is very important to talk about this and how you can discern one from the other. This also helps with work/life balance and how you prioritize.

For a Mayor facing the press or a Minister facing issues in QP, things are both urgent and important. It's not a tradeoff - things can be both. In the world of the bureaucracy something may be neither, but in the political world they can be both. This is truer for the public service than in the private sector.

“You have to be careful with urgency. Often what you end up doing is bringing attention to things that will go away in a day and making them worse.”



WHO WE ARE

What is The Public Sector Leader?

ABOUT US

The Public Sector Leader offers online, mentoring programs designed to explore the unwritten protocols and grey areas that leaders in today's public service need to navigate in an environment of increasingly centralized decision making, a stronger political service, permanent campaigning, big data and a 24/7 news cycle.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The "**Political Acumen Accelerator**" is our signature mentoring program. Using an interactive, storytelling format, our Master Mentors share experiences and advice on how to develop and fine tune this important competency to help them overcome many of the complex challenges that

public sector leaders face today across all orders of government.

MASTER MENTORS

Our faculty of 42 Master Mentors come from a distinguished cadre of former Canadian provincial, national and municipal politicians and bureaucrats, who are excited to 'pay-it-forward' and share their experience and hard won lessons. They are joined by top academic and media experts sharing their knowledge and perspectives on what it takes to succeed in government today.

READY TO ELEVATE
YOUR LEADERSHIP?

REGISTER NOW

EXPLORE OUR SIGNATURE PROGRAM "THE POLITICAL ACUMEN ACCELERATOR"

Visit our website
(www.thepublicsectorleader.ca)
to learn more and purchase your
backstage pass to Real Talk
about when politics meets
bureaucracy and how politicians
think.

Special offers for advanced
registration and alumni.



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Public Sector Leaders



LIVE ONLINE MODULES:

INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL ACUMEN

What is It and Why is It So Important

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Political Presence

SEEING AROUND CORNERS

Strategic Agility, Anticipation & Situational
Awareness

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

The Inside Story of Issues Management

THE OUTSIDE STORY

Social Media & Public Engagement

CULTURE & INCLUSION

Essentials in a Post-Covid World

WHEN NO ONE IS LOOKING

Ethics and Integrity

CONFLICT & CONTROVERSY

The Search for Common Ground

BLINDSPOTS & BLUNDERS

Insights, Recovery and How to Get Ahead

GETTING IT TOGETHER

Collaboration Across Governments