GUEST EDITORIAL

Mixing Truth & Power: Implications For a Knowledge Organization

Ed. note: This opinion was written by David Ellerman (senior economist in DECVP). The Staff Association favors an open and constructive dialogue within the Bank Group, whether on internal policy or the broader development framework, and is publishing the article in that spirit. The SA would like to encourage such open dialogues, and even management response.

"But we all hate criticism. Nothing but rooted principle will cause us willingly to expose ourselves to it." — Lord Keynes

In the past few years, the World Bank has had some difficulty in handling internal dissent and criticism. After Chief Economist and (now) Nobel-laureate Joseph Stiglitz took the "consensus" out of the "Washington Consensus" (the liberalization and privatization recommendations of Washington institutions for developing countries), he resigned rather than stick to the Party Line. Ravi Kanbur, the director of the important millennial *World Development Report* (2000/2001) on poverty, resigned rather than give in to pressure from the gurus of growth fundamentalism. They wanted him to remove the report's equal emphasis on the empowerment of poor people. And, within months of publishing a book, *The Elusive Quest for Growth*, marshalling evidence of the ineffectiveness of the major postwar development assistance strategies, William Easterly, senior researcher in DEC, took the hint and his leave.

On observing these exits, outside critics might compare the Bank more to the Catholic Church at the time of the Spanish Inquisition than to an open learning organization dedicated to the promotion of learning about development. Sophisticated insiders, however, point to the positive contrast with the IMF, where none of the above apostates would have gotten a foot in the door in the first place. Compared to the IMF, the Bank is a raucous debating society, and, in their view, the exits were unnecessary—particularly if the transgressors had shown a little more decorum and restraint.

In any case, it certainly looks like there is *some* problem with handling internal criticism and dissent within the World Bank. These matters actually run to deeper concerns about the mixing of truth and power within a knowledge-oriented organization and about the whole practice of having "Official Views" on some of the most complex questions facing humankind. It is not a matter that can be papered over with better public relations; indeed, it seems that the public relations function is more a part of the problem than a part of the solution.

Perhaps it is time to stand back and review the arguments for welcoming rather than repulsing internal criticism, for promoting a knowledge culture or ecology that rigorously separates truth and power, and for resisting the temptation to have a Party Line of Official Views in a knowledge-oriented organization.

The Ecology of Knowledge

The interplay between questions of truth and power is a most subtle matter. We have learned from the history of totalitarian regimes that once "truth" is mixed with power, then it is truth that suffers. The principle of religious tolerance (e.g., separation of church and state) is a special case of a broader principle of the separation of truth and
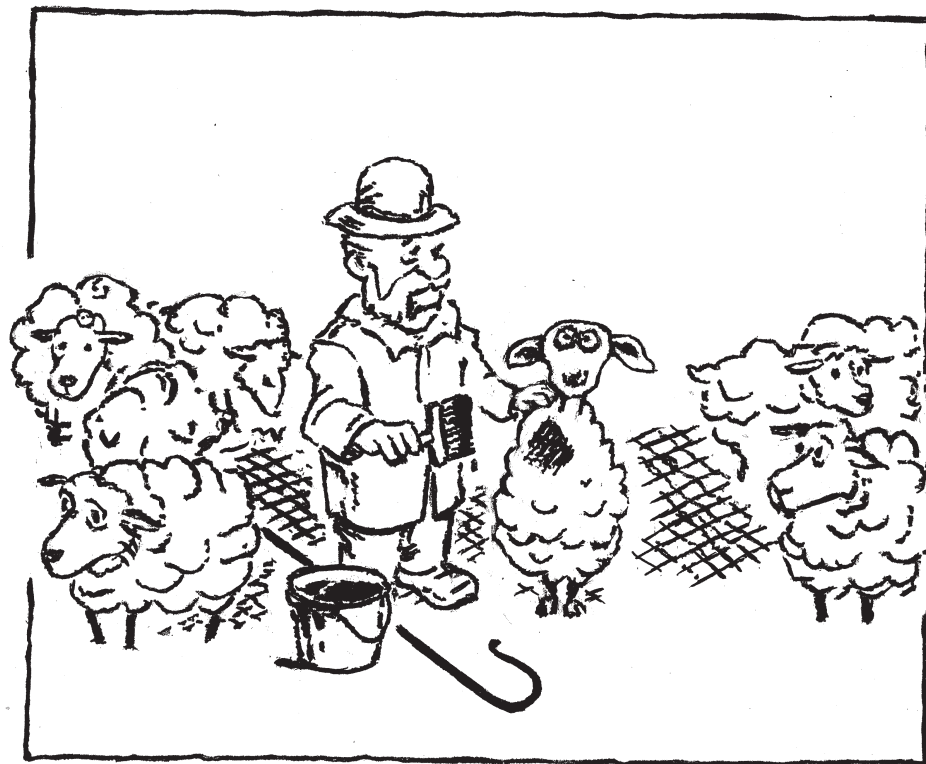
power within organizations (not just in the state).

Power corrupts the ecology of knowledge—the conditions under which knowledge grows and flourishes. Those in power in an organization tend to enshrine their views as the Official Views. Nothing of any scientific value is added to a theory by having an Official Imprimatur, and, indeed, there are many negative consequences. Experimentation, debate, and the exercise of critical reason are curtailed to stay within the safe boundaries of the Official Wisdom. To those in power, others who argue within the organization against Official Views only reveal their unreliability and lack of fitness for positions of authority. Those who argue against Official Views *outside* the organization—particularly with any public notice—are seen as traitors being disloyal to the organization itself.

Thus critical reason gives way to bureaucratic conformity; a community of development researchers gives way to a company of intellectual clerks; and honest and open debate gives way to an organizational ideal of agreement, accommodation, and "playing with the team"—to approximate a small society like that satirized by 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant as the Arcadian ideal where men would be "as good-natured as the sheep they tended."

Barrington Moore (a Harvard social theorist) has noted that "among contemporary social arrangements the modern western university is the main one that has endeavored to make intellectual criticism and innovation a legitimate and regular aspect of the prevailing social order." The university does not set itself up as an arbiter of truth; it takes no Official Views. The university, ideally, is an arena within which contrary theories can be examined and the collision of adverse opinions can occur in open debate. Reporters do not rush to the phone when two senior professors disagree in public.

The same general principles of separating truth and power apply to any organization aspiring to be a knowledge institution—such as the World Bank functioning as the Knowledge Bank—even though it is not technically a university. The basic principles that foster the development of knowledge—such as the open contestation of rival ideas—do not change simply because an organization does not take in students or grant degrees. There seems to be little reasoned basis for a development organization that is dedicated to promoting development knowledge to explicitly or implicitly adopt Official Views on some of the most complex and subtle questions facing humankind.

Like oil and water, truth and power do not mix. So, what is the solution? It is not to expect researchers to be suddenly emboldened to risk their jobs by speaking truth to power, but instead for those with power to cease taking on the role of arbiters of Truth, to encourage intellectual modesty (Socratic humility), and to begin fostering an atmosphere where the public exercise of critical reason and the open contestation of alternative views is welcomed.

The Role of "Public Relations"

The basic role of the public relations or external affairs office in an organization is to disseminate information about the programs, activities, and mission of the organization. Universities have public relations offices as a matter of course. There is no inherent conflict between the public relatios function and the separation of truth and power in a knowledge-based institution.

When the organization has more of an active role in the world than the classical university, then the public relations function seems to include always presenting the organization in the best possible light—with the most positive spin. This is the classic PR function of disseminating only the positive information and trying to vet any public distribution of potentially negative information. Clearly such a PR function needs to be wholly separated, as if by a Chinese wall, from internal research on the effectiveness of development strategies—the latter being fundamental to learning and improvement, not to mention the intellectual integrity of the research function in the organization.

When an organization adopts Official Views, then the public relations function seems to morph into the function of propagating the Official Messages and acting as the thought

police to the black sheep in the organization who—within public view—are not "on message" with the rest of the flock. Thus organizational self-protection corrupts the ecology of knowledge and the spirit of critical inquiry.

Managers show no moral turpitude in doing their job to follow the logic of adopting Official Views. The problem lies much deeper in the original notion of trying to be a premier knowledge-based institution that nevertheless mixes truth and power and adopts Official Views to begin with—in spite of all the hard lessons learned over the centuries about the sort of organization that does or does not foster the development of knowledge.

How an Organization Might Work

Suppose a reporter writes a story based on the "contradiction" between the published views of two senior researchers. Instead of responding by tightening up the vetting of publications and interviews, the public relations office should celebrate the evidence of vibrant diversity showing that the organization does *not* operate like Big Brother. When public disagreements become commonplace, such stories would lose their news value.

In fact, the advisors from the organization should see to it that clients hear the best arguments (usually by their proponents) on all sides of complex questions—and that the final decisions are up to the clients. It is fine for an advisor to state his or her preferred view or perhaps a predominant view *so long as* the client's "assent" to that view is not the condition for aid. It is more important that a client be genuinely committed to reform, even with "Incorrect Views" (e.g., China), and that mechanisms of learning by the client, the organization, or both be part of the project.

Finally, on the complex questions of development where intelligent and knowledgeable people differ, alternative approaches should be allowed to compete and to be implemented within the confines of the same open learning organization. There is no royal road to learning, no road that bypasses real competition and local experimentation—even within the organization itself. One of today's preeminent thinkers on development, Albert Hirschman of the Institute for Advanced Study, has often ridiculed the "rage to conclude" that tends "to cut short that 'long confrontation between man and a situation' (Camus) so fruitful for the achievement of genuine progress in problem-solving."

Those in power in the organization should harken to the admission and admonition of John Maynard Keynes (the principal founder of the World Bank): "But we all hate criticism. Nothing but rooted principle will cause us willingly to expose ourselves to it." Instead of aspiring to Official Truths, the organization should aspire to a self-critical fallibilism or Socratic humility of knowing that one does not know, and then on the basis of "rooted principle" to promote the knowledge processes shown to be "so fruitful for the achievement of genuine progress in problem-solving."