**The intertwining of private conversation and public presentation**

**by Robert Warwick**

*Public performances in organisations, for example board meetings, annual general meetings, or ‘townhall’ presentations, are visible manifestations of invisible social processes of strategic planning. Here I take an example from the UK public sector to show how these two aspects – the visible and the invisible – are both essential in order to achieve transformational change. The relationship between them can be described as ‘paradoxical’, in the sense that these contrasting forms of communication are always both at work at the same time. A failure to respect this paradoxical nature of change can have a serious and negative impact on frontline services.*

## Keywords

Strategy, meetings, presentations, informal communication, targets, narrative, paradox

To explore the relationship between the invisible private process of strategy negotiation and its visible public presentation, I will draw on my experiences, presented here as three short narratives in chronological order, of people working on organisational strategy. The first narrative centres on the meeting of a government taskforce that was developing a UK-wide five-year strategy; the other two focus on the part of the organisation I worked for, which was tasked with implementation of the recommendations.

## A private strategy conversation

The first meeting I describe was held in the basement of a governmental building where a group of disparate individuals had come together as a taskforce to agree a new health strategy in private. We had been working together on this for several months. It was a big room, with tables arranged in a large square. The room was pale blue in colour, newly refurbished, but with little natural light. At previous meetings there had been a tendency for those with differing views to sit as far apart from each other as possible, and so it was this time.

Together with the chairman, I was one of the first to arrive. She confided that she was worried that one of the members might ‘walk out’ and put the success of the initiative in jeopardy. I noticed that she had a couple of large boxes she had brought down with her. It turned out later that she had made some cakes for people to share during morning coffee. This created a lot of interest and affected the conversation. The previously difficult and tense exchanges stopped as people became directed towards the cakes. It might seem a small point, but I heard people recounting their favourite recipes and giving a small insight to their home life. This struck me as being worth noticing, particularly the time and trouble the chairman had gone to bake the cakes and carry them on the train and underground. I think the gesture was significant. The offering of food indicated her role as a facilitator and mediator of disparate communities rather than being a dominant leader forcing her will on the group.

It occurred to me that there would not be many opportunities for such a diverse range of people to be in the same room together, not only because of their different professional and social circles, but because there was an active professional dislike and mistrust between some. This point had been made clear before the meeting when one of the members publicly and in writing described another professional group as being ‘slippery’. At the heart of this difference were very real professional, ethical and legal difficulties and ambiguities. Before the meeting I had a feeling of ‘what will happen this time?’ I felt concerned but excited.

Prior to the meeting I had sent around the latest draft of my report, a ‘work in progress’ that sought to capture the developing thoughts of the group at the time. Just before we sat down a couple of people came up to me and said how well the report was coming along and how amusing some of the minor typographical errors were. My Chief Executive came over to me to ask if there was anything he needed to do to support me.

I stood up to present the paper. There was quiet, attentive listening, but little in the way of active engagement. But then a point came where I felt that I was at the centre of the meeting’s anxiety and tension. There were comments that the report was unbalanced, with too much attention paid to supply chain issues at the expense of clinical concerns; the terminology I had used was wrong, and so it went on. It is difficult, or impossible, to untangle my feelings of anxiety and embarrassment. I felt myself wishing that I was somewhere else. I felt confused, as if I had missed something, a part of the jigsaw. After the meeting a couple of people came up to me to express surprise at what had happened and speculated about other private meetings that must have happened behind the scenes.

Later the events of the day went through my mind. It was at this point it started to occur to me that there was more to the discussion of the report, and my reaction to it, than appeared at first. The report was one example where conflict surfaced, just as the cakes were a focus for connection. Conflict and collaboration were constantly emerging in an unstable, surprising and interdependent way.

It is worth highlighting that each person came to this meeting representing their own constituency with their own power base. I was aware of ‘corridor musings’ as to whether these constituencies would go along with what was a growing consensus in the room.

The informal processes I have been describing so far include the emergence of loose thoughts and conflict in a relatively private setting, the forming of recommendations and their ‘rehearsal’ prior to their presentation to an external audience. As we will see in the second narrative, which describes a much more formal meeting several months later, what the audience hears is a polished, clear and confident performance that signals consensus and lack of conflict. It suggests that the delivery of objectives is assured. The occasion was the taskforce launch, where the final strategy was presented to the public following ministerial approval.

## The public strategy pronouncement

We had to go through various security checks at reception and we went downstairs into a larger room used for press conferences. After milling around and chatting, we sat down. The chairman and a few others sat behind a long desk with a crisp white table cloth. There was a neat backdrop, bottled water and microphones. We were sitting on rather uncomfortable chairs arranged in a few untidy rows, which became more untidy as people moved around to talk with each other.

The chairman began to speak. Viewed from the back of the room, the haphazard arrangement of people sitting on chairs in the foreground was in marked contrast to the neat backdrop and large desk from where the presentation was coming. Here the strategy and recommendations were presented in a confident and direct way. Other than recognising that all the 14 recommendations were important if the aim of the strategy was to be achieved, there was no recognition of how the recommendations would mesh together or fit within the wider picture. They were presented as clear and discrete areas of work that had been carefully thought out in the deliberations of the strategy group. This is not a criticism, more of an observation. Confidence and clarity were as important as the content, if people in the room and beyond were to be convinced that the changes were to be made. The presentation finished and we left, walking out to a cold January morning. Those present signed up to a 50% increase in productivity in five years, a figure that they were to come back to and re-interpret later on in a more informal setting.

I noticed several things in writing and working with this narrative. First the clear and confident manner in which the report was presented: here was little to hint at the arguments and tensions that had been so evident behind closed doors. The strategy recommendations themselves were only a few lines long, each accompanied by their own targets.

Second, the recommendations were presented as having neat, discrete and static boundaries. They were like a toy model, with clear instructions about how the pre-fabricated items were to be glued together. There was little acknowledgement of the vagueness of the recommendations and the potential for further conflict that was woven into them. There was little hint at how they were to be made sense of, understood and flexed in order to make them work. The success or failure of this endeavour would rest with these 40 or so people in the audience, and I was party to several informal conversations centred on how vague the recommendations were and how people were making sense of them in the context of their own work and the wider communities of which they were part.

Finally, there was a good deal of uncommented movement amongst audience members in the room: they shifted their chairs to talk with their friends and colleagues; chatter interrupted the presentation; paper, bags and coffee cups littered the floor. This was in contrast with the neat presentation from the chairman. In other words formality and informality, the visible and invisible, were emerging together, both relevant and reliant on each other.

**Why paradox matters**

What I am asking the reader to notice about these narrative accounts is the *paradoxical* intertwining of private conversation and the (much more visible) public presentation. I am using paradox in a specific way, well expressed by Ralph Stacey:

Paradox [is] a state in which two diametrically opposing forces/ideas are simultaneously present, neither of which can ever be resolved or eliminated. There is, therefore, no possibility of a choice between the opposing poles or of locating them in different spheres. Instead, what is required is a different kind of logic, such as the dialectical logic of Hegel. In this kind of logic, the word paradox means presence together at the same time of contradictory, essentially conflicting ideas, none of which can be eliminated or resolved. (Stacey, 2006, p. 241)

I draw attention to both public and private states existing in a tense dynamic with each other out of which transformation into something new emerges. These essential themes of paradox and emergence run through this paper.

## Theatrical quality of public events

I would now like to discuss the relationship between the two events: what is the purpose of visible and very public rituals like the second event? And what happens in private to enable those public pronouncements to come into effect? At the public launch, I observed that there was little that could be seen as new; little by way of emergent thought. And through a well-rehearsed performance the protagonists made no mention of ‘slipperiness’ or mistrust of each other. The only reference to these differences was an acknowledgement of tensions and difficulties *in the past*.

The work of mid-20th century sociologist Irving Goffman is relevant here: rather than focusing on larger-scale theories of society, he developed an interest in the micro-interactions between people (Goffman, 1959). In ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’, where he describes the working of groups ahead of an anticipated public performance, he writes:

We often find a division into [the] back region, where the performance of a routine is prepared, and the front region, where the performance is presented. Access to these regions is controlled in order to prevent the audience from seeing backstage and to prevent outsiders from coming into a performance that is not addressed to them. Among members of the team we find that familiarity prevails, solidarity is likely to develop, and that the secrets that could give the show away are shared and kept. A tacit agreement is maintained between performers and audience to act as if a given degree of opposition and of accord existed between them. (Goffman, 1959, p. 231)

Here Goffman is using the analogy of theatre to describe how people work behind the scenes in preparing their visible performance. The other important theme that he draws on is the inward-looking process of the group as it maintains the invisibility of internal conflict and emergence of thought. What Goffman notes is the tacit collusion between all parties, both those within the audience and the players themselves. It has certainly been my experience that people accept the theatrical, formal nature of certain meetings and events, knowing that much informal ‘rehearsal’ and negotiation go on behind the scenes. Both public and the private performances are essential and occur over the entire strategy process. Sometimes the stage is large, sometimes small.

Roll on eight months since the public launch of the strategy, where (as we saw) those present signed up to a 50% increase in productivity in five years, and the question remained: what does 50% look like? This was an important issue, as the following narrative of private conflict reveals.

## Continuation of the visible/invisible strategy process

After the public announcement of the government taskforce policy, we had further private strategic planning meetings within the organisation to make sense of it. We asked the question: for each of the five years, how much would the number increase by? At first it was suggested that the increase would be linear, along the lines of 10, 20, 30, 40 and 50%. I felt that this would be very challenging, as investment would be needed in the first two years before any improvement would be realised. The numbers were re-evaluated and the percentages for the five years were agreed as being 2, 8, 13, 28 and 50%.

There was little basis for such precise figures and it did not take into account all the other things that were needed in the wider health economy to make this happen. Nevertheless, these numbers went to the Board, and they were not happy – apparently they thought they did not show a ‘can do’ attitude. I was involved in several further discussions, some of which were very animated, to try to understand the numbers more. I found it strange that there were more heated discussions on this than there were on the actual actions that were needed to achieve the increases. In the end the following projection was agreed: 2, 8, 20, 35 and 50%. However, there were to be no additional actions or resources allocated to achieving these more demanding targets.

There are several things to note here: first, this Board meeting continued an process of informal (private) and formal (public) exchanges, both reliant on and intertwined with each other, lasting several months. Second, in this conversation nothing was mentioned about the actual actions and resources required to implement the recommendations and the improvements demanded. And finally, many of the essential parameters were beyond the gift of those in the room, yet they were prepared to sign up to them publicly.

## What are the consequences of overlooking paradox in human communication?

One way to consider the paradoxical relationship between the *visible* and *invisible* is to reflect upon the ways in which the paradox can be disrespected or overlooked. For example, people may disrespect the confidentiality of issues discussed in private, or not recognise the importance of the staid public performances. Furthermore, recommendations may become reified and include predefined actions, requirements and targets. I see this practice as increasingly pervasive in the UK public sector, as expressed by Tony Blair’s former head of delivery Michael Barber, who coined the term ‘deliverology’ (Barber, 2007, p. 70). What is lost, or at least becomes neutered, is the authority of those groups behind the scenes to make sense of what is happening and to take appropriate action in the moment.

I would like to illustrate further with another example. While the above narratives were drafted, a colleague, Kathy Jones (see ‘Nurses Voices’in this edition of *Organisations & People)* was writing about her work in another part of the NHS (Jones, 2008), where she was dealing with very precise targets for an emergency response service. The subject of these targets was response times measured in minutes. However there was far less precision when it came to the quality of that response, or indeed how it was to integrate into a wider and complex healthcare system. In a vignette of a strategy conversation she recounts:

[There was a lively debate that] came down to whether meeting targets was an ultimate objective or whether it was a subsidiary one, with “appropriate care for all our patients” or “higher survival rates for very sick patients” being ultimately more important.

Here the paradox is ignored: senior people set rigid targets that disrespect the need for people to use their discretion and pay attention to quality as well as time. They seriously consider the prospect that patient outcome is secondary. Jones goes on to discuss the impact this has on relationships at work and people’s physical and mental wellbeing.

## In conclusion: resisting the temptation to boil it all down

It would be tempting, in rounding off this article, to offer a few ‘bullet points’ or ‘take home messages’ on what people can ‘do’. However, I feel that to do this would be to provide a solution in the same mould as the problem that I am pointing to. Instead, for me, what counts is *the* *action* *of highlighting a problem, inviting readers to reflect on it and ask the question: ‘can I relate this to my own experience’*.

During my doctoral studies, I was drawn to the work of Gilbert Ryle, a mid-20th century philosopher influenced by Wittgenstein (Ryle, 1949). What attracted me was the way Ryle went about his work and what he invited his reader to notice. As one of his former PhD students commented, Ryle’s ambition was relatively modest (Dennett, 2000). What he did was to reveal subtle mistakes of language and assumptions that are rarely examined but underlie what is commonly said or written. In Dennett’s words, “One cannot learn … by memorising a few simple rules, but only by immersing oneself in practice” (Dennett, 2000, p. xviii). This is why I choose to resist the temptation of condensing experience into a list, free from the context that it was drawn from.

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## About the author

Rob Warwick is an independent consultant who has extensive experience in strategic change and organisational development and is an Associate Director at Cass Business School’s Centre for Better Managed Health and Social Care. He holds a doctorate in management from the University of Hertfordshire in healthcare policy formation and its relation to frontline staff practice. Rob’s website is: <http://www.metisexploration.com/> and he can be contacted at [robertjwarwick@gmail.com](mailto:robertjwarwick@gmail.com).