

*Service, Support and Success:
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*Edited By: Dave Hingsburger, Vita Community Living Services, www.vitacls.org
and Angie Nethercott, North Community Network of Specialized Care, Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca*

The Alibi of Tyrants: Power and Control in Service Provision

**Colleen Orrick
Loyalist College**

Power.

We need it.

We like it.

It feels good to have some control in our own lives. It feels good to have the sense that we have some power in the world. We don't have to be super villains with plans for world domination in order to admit that power is important to us. We just have to be human beings. Feeling that we can influence our environment is considered an indicator of good mental health. As human beings we need to have some power in the sense that we have some control in our own lives. We like to have some control over our schedules and routines, who we interact with, where and with whom we live, what we eat, what we do for entertainment, how we dress, where we work and how we spend our money for example. When people do not have control in their own lives, they communicate that lack to others with their words and behaviour, sometimes aggressively, or they give up and become over-dependent or very passive.

This need for power applies to all aspects of our lives including our work. In some fields, there are clear lines of authority; everybody knows who has what power. For example, in businesses, everybody knows who the boss is and what s/he controls. In the field of human services, we have not always been clear about power in our work. Sometimes we have not even admitted who has the power or should have the power. We have not admitted that we are abusing our power. We have not been aware of issues of power. When we are unclear about issues of power, people get hurt, people get oppressed, people get controlled and people get abused.

In the past, we have openly and without empathy controlled people with developmental disabilities. We have even believed that they needed us to control them. We have used horrific means such as cattle prods to control people. More recently, we are coming to embrace the

understanding that people with developmental disabilities need to have power and control in their own lives, just like the rest of us. In fact, they have the same rights to power and control in their lives that you and I do and we do not have the right to control them.

If you think about this, our understanding of power in our relationship with the people we support can radically affect what we see as our job and how we treat the people we support. If we believe, as has been believed in the past, that people with developmental disabilities need to be controlled, then we do just that – we control them, often by whatever means are necessary. This position ignores their humanity and their capacity, need, and right to exert control in their own lives. It makes the support worker the controller and the person supported an object to be controlled. This is a dangerous power dynamic and can easily become an abusive relationship. These power dynamics can be subtle. Rarely would anyone say to you, “Your job is to control Dave.” Although, in the past, they might actually have said that, I believe it is much less likely to be that obvious in today’s world. However, these expectations can be subtly conveyed by bosses, family members and/or co-workers.

I am going to go out on a limb here and state that, if you are reading this, you likely want to be in a helpful, as opposed to oppressive, relationship with the people you support. You want your helping relationship to be one that enhances their lives rather than diminishes them. You want to help them live the lives that they want to live and you do not want to control them. Sometimes it is easier for support workers to control people. Just think, if you are the one in control then your agenda and your schedule dominate and everything suits you. That’s pretty easy to take! But this is not about you; your job is to support people to live their lives their way. You know that old Frank Sinatra song, “I did it my way,” well we should not be singing that tune! We should be assisting the people we support to do it their way. In order to ensure that your support is about helping people to do it their way, here are some tips:

1. *Recognize that you have power in your relationship with the person you support.* You have power in all your relationships, but here you are in a relationship with a person who has traditionally been seen as powerless and who has often not been educated to know the power that they do have in terms of rights. There may be few checks and balances on the way you interact with this person and they may not have the skills to report any abuse of power. Additionally, they may be afraid to report abusive or controlling treatment. These circumstances make them very vulnerable to abuse. Recognize that you are in a relationship where there is a power imbalance and that if you do not handle your power ethically, you are at high risk of being an abuser.
2. *Decide how you want to use your power.* You are like the Jedi knights. You have the power and you must decide whether you want to use it for the forces of good or the forces of evil. Do you want to use the power you have in this relationship to promote the humanity of the person you are supporting, to assist them to use the power they were born with, to exercise the rights they hold as a human being and a citizen, to exercise control in their own lives? Or do you want to control and oppress them? You have to

make a decision and then commit to acting in a way that is consistent with your decision. (If you choose the “use your power for the forces of evil” option, you can stop reading right now – the rest of this paper will not apply to you). Realize that you are going to use your power – the point here is to use it on purpose and consciously to achieve the kind of helping relationship that you want to achieve – one that respects and empowers the person you support.

3. *Examine your attitude.* Is your attitude consistent with your decision to use your power for the forces of good? Do you genuinely believe that the people you support have the right and the capacity to direct their own lives? Yes, they may need support to do so, but so do we all to various degrees. Do you genuinely believe that the people you support can handle life’s problems? You do not have to protect them or pamper them, just support and assist. Know that your attitude is kind of like Shrek’s onion – it has layers. Don’t be surprised to uncover some negative attitudes about people with disabilities. Our society is full of these negative attitudes – “they are better off with their own kind”, “if I’m ever like that just pull the plug”, “those people are rude and dirty”, “they are like children” – you know that kind of stuff, you probably hear it every day. We are steeped in it – we do take it in, subtly and unintentionally. It’s like that old saying – admitting is the first step. Once you know that you hold some negative attitudes towards people with disabilities, you can deal with them. You are not a bad person, just a child of your culture. So examine your attitude, dig deep, not just once, but regularly.
4. *Make a commitment to a relationship of collaboration and solidarity rather than a relationship of control.* This means that your relationship is based on mutual respect and that the person directs the support as much as they are able. You must get to know the person. You must get to understand the world as they understand it. You have to know what they want and don’t want for themselves. You have to leave your ego at the door and understand that this is not about you – it is about them and how they want to live their life. You might think they should do things differently and you might disagree with them about how they want to live their life. But the bottom line is that it is **their** life, not yours. Collaboration means you work together to meet the person’s goals – the ones they have chosen for themselves. Solidarity means that you are on their side, rooting for them and supporting them and wanting the best for them. You have to give up the role of “expert” and recognize that they are the experts on themselves and how they want to live their lives. You are there to support them, not tell them what to do.
5. *Recognize an alibi when you see one.* Albert Camus, the famous French philosopher, once said, “The welfare of the people in particular has always been the alibi of tyranny”. This means that tyrants justify harming or controlling people by saying that it is for their own good. Can we ever ethically harm or control someone? Even a little bit? When it seems necessary to restrict someone or do something injurious to someone, then there should be an ethics committee or rights group involved in decisions and monitoring. It should never be the decision of just one person. Often these abuses start out as a one time

only situation or a very mild interference or harm. This is the beginning of a slippery slope. It is easy to escalate the abuse of power slowly and incrementally. It is easy to rationalize abuse by saying it is for the person's own good – “they have to learn!”, “it is important to make him do this”, “it is the only way to get through to her”, “it just takes too much time to do it any other way”, “we don't have the resources to do it any other way”, “we don't have money for more staff, we have to do it this way”. It is difficult for people to admit that they are doing something cruel or unjust for their own benefit so they construct “alibis” that sound good – it is for these peoples' own good that we treat them like this, we have to work within a budget, we can't let them take up too much time, money, or resources, it is easier for everyone if we just do it this way. We do have to work within budgets and with limited resources but that never justifies the abuse of power. People do have to learn, but they don't learn when they are scared and hurting. It is important to be clear and deeply honest about our motives if we are controlling another person who has less power than us.

6. *Hold yourself accountable.* This means that in addition to your agency's policies and procedures and even in addition to the law, you hold yourself up to your ideal and examine your strengths and needs. For the purposes of this paper your ideal is to establish a relationship of collaboration and solidarity with the person you support and be guided by them in the support you give them, in other words, to use your power for the forces of good. Have you gotten to know the person and their preferences so that they can guide and direct the support they receive from you? Are you focusing on people's strengths and gifts? How have you supported them well? Where might you have done better?
7. *Say you're sorry.* When you recognize something that you have done that has been controlling or oppressive and therefore harmful to the person you support, apologize to them and commit to doing better. Don't beat yourself up, just commit to doing better now that you know better.
8. *Watch your language.* Jim Beggs says that, “What we say is important, for in most cases, the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” Remember those attitudes that are layered like an onion (or a parfait or a cake)? Well, the ones we are not aware that we possess can still influence our behaviour and one way they can make themselves known is through our language. Consider the following (these are all things I have heard support workers say):
 - a. I “let” someone do something, I “allowed” someone to do something. This makes you the gatekeeper. You give or withhold permission to do things. Is that really appropriate when you are supporting people? Shouldn't it be, I “assisted” someone to do something? I “helped” someone to do something. We did it “together.”
 - b. I “fed” someone. This implies that you are doing something **to** someone. You are active and they are passive. Try saying, “I helped someone to eat their lunch” – suddenly they are in an active role. I “toileted” someone. First of all toilet is a noun not a verb. Again a statement such as this puts the person in a very passive

role and the support worker is doing something **to** someone. Try, “I helped John to use the toilet.” John is using the toilet, you are assisting. These statements convey a relationship in which the person who is supported is doing something and the support worker is providing support.

- c. I “give” people choices. I “give” people their rights. Well, not unless you are the Queen! We can help people get to know what choices they have. We can introduce them to options. We can assist them to have access to a typical array of choices. Then once they have chosen, we can honour their choice. We can educate people about their rights. But they already have those rights by virtue of the fact that they are human beings and citizens. Those rights are not ours to give. But we can respect (or disrespect) people’s rights.
- d. I help people to make the “right” choice. What is the “right” choice and who decides what the right choice is for someone? Only that person knows what the right choice for them is. And like the rest of us they can make a choice and then change their minds and make a different one. Often in services the “right” choice is the one the support worker thinks you should make and, once you have made a choice, there is no changing your mind. Wow! I couldn’t live like that! Why do we expect people with developmental disabilities to live like that?
- e. I will “empower” people. See c. above. The power is not yours to give. “I will assist people to have control in their own lives”. In all honesty that is about the most you can do – but, when done right, it is a lot.
- f. I plan “for” people. Seriously? I hate it when people plan for me. We should be planning “with” people. They should have an active role in directing their own planning. You can show people the options and discuss possibilities with them but ultimately the plan has to be directed by them.

Be sure to avoid the language of power and control. Instead commit to using the language of collaboration and solidarity. Language is one aspect of attitude; it is not the whole thing. Language and action together are influenced by our attitudes and beliefs and they influence other people’s attitudes and beliefs. Language is an important gauge of attitude so we should pay attention to it. Notice power words. Think about how you can rephrase something so that it conveys collaboration and solidarity.

- 9. *Question things.* If you are in a situation that seems oppressive, you should question it. Go through the proper channels when questioning. Sometimes there are rights committees or ethics committees associated with organizations. If you are asked to carry out some duties that you feel violate the rights of the person you are supporting, don’t do it until you have been satisfied that there are ethical reasons. This puts you in a difficult situation because you are being directed to use your power to do something that controls another person. You will have to make decisions based on your ethics and on your commitment to use your power for the forces of good. Don’t hesitate to seek guidance

from a person you trust if you find yourself in this situation. Following orders does not justify the abuse of power.

10. *Be open to accepting feedback and constructive criticism from other people* including co-workers and the people you support. It is not always easy to be open to criticism. However, done respectfully, it gives you and others the chance to grow and develop in terms of the support you are giving people. This cultivates a culture that promotes accountability and clarity in human services. In such a culture, it is hoped that abuses of power will not go unquestioned. This will make the environment safer for everyone.

Power and the use or misuse of power is a huge issue in human services. We do not have a good history of respecting people's right to control their own lives. In fact we have a history of controlling people and abusing power in human services. That is changing. Policies and laws are changing. Sometimes it seems like the change is slow, too slow. Support workers are the ones who implement these changes in their helping relationships. More importantly though, outside the realm of policies and laws, how you use your power as a support worker is about who you are as a person and the kind of relationships you want to have with the people you support. It is about helping people with developmental disabilities to live the lives that they want to live. It doesn't get any better than that!

About the Author:

Colleen Orrick has been a student for much of her life. She now teaches at Loyalist College in the Developmental Services Worker Program. Before that she worked in human services for over 20 years. Her most profound learning has come from relationships with people with developmental disabilities.

Letter to the Editor Regarding Issue 11 (Talking Turf: The Job of Being a Good Neighbour)

From: Donna Stevens, Boston, MA

Excellent Advice. Although it may be presumptuous, I would suggest adding a few things. Invite neighbors over for an open house around summer or holiday times (most are dying to see what goes on in "that" house anyway, when they meet the people, have a snack and see "wow you have a kitchen table and a toilet just like us" much of the mystery is deflated). With the garbage, be especially mindful disposing of rubber gloves. As service providers we are so used to using them we may not even notice when they fall out of the trash and into the driveway. Neighbors do and they instantly think of the most dangerous and deadly infectious diseases they can. A few years ago, one neighbor next to one of our beautiful, well maintained homes sold his house. I met him for the first time in his driveway as he was leaving, I introduced myself and wished him well. He sarcastically told me anywhere would be better than next to the "AIDS house". I explained the gentlemen who lived in the home were all elderly men who came to us from nursing homes, and were not the people he thought they were. His response, "Then why

are there always rubber gloves falling out of the trash?” and he walked away. Nothing I could have said or done would have changed this man’s mind. Making sure the rubber gloves were securely tied in up a trash bag would have prevented one from ever starting.

Service, Support and Success accepts articles for review and publication. To get a set of writer’s guidelines or to discuss ideas for articles contact the editors at:

dhingsburger@vitacls.org

anethercott@handstfhn.ca

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Note from Editors: We are both excited about this issue for two reasons. Firstly, Colleen’s article is the first to be printed that came from a submission to the newsletter from a reader. Secondly, we have our first, for publication, letter to the editor. Service, Support and Success is not quite a year old and we’re pleased at the breadth of the readership and the natural way it is growing and developing. We are looking forward to having an international voice here so we encourage our readers outside of Canada to contact us for writer’s guidelines – there aren’t many – and ideas.