

Understanding and Avoiding Power Struggles

Presented By Pam Sikorski

Hello. My name is Pam Sikorski, Associating Training Director and Resource Specialist with CPI. Thank you for joining me for today and our presentation on "Understanding and Avoiding Power Struggles". This presentation builds from and expands upon some of the content covered in one of our most popular topical DVD titles "Effective Limit Setting". What you hear today could be used to dig deeper with this topic during a formal training event or be shared separately during a staff meeting, or an informal professional development series with your staff. I also encourage you to use it as a personal reflection tool to aid in your own rational detachment efforts.

I have four objectives I want to accomplish with you in today's presentation. First, to make sure we can all identify and better understand the four common types of personal power struggles. What are their roots? Where do they come from? This will equip us to better stop them in their tracks. Second objective for today is to explore some ways to avoid getting pulled into power struggles. How can we resist that urge or temptation to pick up the other end of the rope when someone is trying to lure us into a power struggle? Third objective for today is as an effective strategy for dealing with power struggles, we'll take a closer look at steps for effective limit setting. And finally, our fourth objective for today, I'll challenge you to organize your takeaways from today's presentation into four categories. What action steps will you take using today's information? So let's get started.

Please keep in mind that today's content has wide applicability across all areas of your life -- the personal, public, as well as professional realms. So as you think about the following question, I'm going to ask that you write down a list for yourself, so grab a scrap piece of paper if you have one handy. Who is it that we find ourselves getting into power struggles with on a regular basis? Let me pause here, and let you think about that for a few moments. Again, who is it that you find yourself getting into power struggles with?

For many of us, maybe the first people that come to mind are those who are in your care on a regular basis, whether they be your students, your clients, your patients, your residents, but those who are in your charge or your care. Maybe you found yourself thinking about the parents or legal guardians of those individuals that are in your care. Maybe those are the folks you get into power struggles with. Others of you may have thought about your own colleagues or other service providers that work with the individuals who are in your care. We don't always agree with our colleagues. Some of you may have even thought of your own supervisor, your boss, your organizational administrators. And then finally, maybe some of you thought about that personal realm of your life, and thought about your own family members. We can get into power struggles with our own children, our significant other, our partner in life, our spouse. And lastly, maybe you thought about people out in the public that you can interact with and get into power struggles with, whether it's standing in line somewhere or just a casual acquaintance that you may come in contact with. Any of us can find ourselves in power struggles with these various groups.

When one happens, how does that influence the rest of your day? When you find yourself in a power struggle, is it a distraction for you? Can it diminish your productivity at work? Do you ever find yourself dwelling on it, and staying angry about it for a period of time? Maybe you find yourself venting to others about it as well. Any of these possible outcomes reflect the concept of the integrated experience that we talk about and teach in non-violent crisis intervention, meaning our behaviors and attitudes affect those around us, and vice versa. We feed off of each other's energy, whether it be positive or negative. Keep in mind that power struggle does not take place in isolation. It spreads and it can come to influence others that we cross paths with throughout our day. So recognizing the negative repercussions that power struggles can have on us as well as others, let's get better acquainted with what these different types of power struggles could be.

The four common types of power struggles include, first of all, defending ones authority or credibility. A second type we'll take a closer look at today is that of personal button pushing. A third kind involves the bringing up of past history or

irrelevant issues. And finally, a fourth type of power struggle comes from the making of empty threats or the issuing of ultimatums. So let's dig deeper into each of those kinds.

First, we're going to start with defending your authority or credibility. Examples of this type of power struggle might sound something like this, "Who are you to tell me what to do?" "What gives you the right to tell me how to parent my child?" "I don't want to hear what you think as a nurse, I want to talk to the doctor." Sound familiar for any of you out there? So how have others ever challenged your authority? Let me pause for a moment, and let you think about that. Again, how have others that you deal with challenged your authority ever? How does it make you feel to have your credibility questioned?

For the person we're in a power struggle with, it can often feel like someone is not believing them, thinks they're a liar, or is always supporting someone else's point of view, not theirs. It immediately puts us on the defense when someone needs to defend their authority or credibility, or feels like they need to defend their authority or credibility. I know that for myself, these kinds of power struggles have made me second guess myself, and get distracted from the real issue at hand in that moment. Think about how this might come across and impact things like our body language, or our tone of voice, perhaps the volume of speech, or our rate and rhythm of speech.

When we think about how body language might be influenced for instance, could you ever find yourself crossing your arms, and closing yourself off from that other person? Maybe you're the type to all of a sudden to put your hands on your hips. Maybe you engage in an eye roll. Ever found yourself shaking a finger or pointing a finger at that other person, maybe nodding your head in disagreement with what they're saying? Maybe you find yourself staring off into space or avoiding direct eye contact with that person, or maybe we even start to walk away or turn our backs on that individual.

When we think about the impact on tone of voice, could we ever sound dismissive perhaps to the other person? Might they sense the aggravation in our tone of voice? Could our frustration be coming across? Maybe that person perceives us as exasperated with them, or perhaps we're even sounding and seeming insecure to that other individual. In terms of the impact on volume of speech, maybe we find ourselves getting louder and not even realizing it, or maybe you're the other kind of individual. Does it ever stop you dead in your tracks with silence not knowing what to say when that other person really gets you into a power struggle? And lastly, if we're talking about volume of speech being influenced, that also frequently influences rate and rhythm of speech as well. As we find ourselves getting more angry with that individual, then perhaps we're also speeding up the pace at which we are speaking.

We might not even realize these subtle tells that we are giving away in our non-verbal and para-verbal messages, but trust me, they are being sent. Many times we mistakenly believe that we can disguise them well, but they often are perceived by the person you are interacting with.

A second type of power struggle we want to take a closer look at today involves what's called personal button pushing. This comes from the fact that the person you're struggling with knows you very well. They know what can really get under your skin and bother you, and they will keep setting you off until they get the reaction that they are looking for, knowing you'll feel bad about that, back down, and that they then win the power struggle. Maybe they know it's personal insults that can get under your skin, comments about your weight, your appearance, how you do your job, insulting something you said. Maybe it's a racial slur. Maybe it's a threat to harm your own children. But they know what can get to you, and will set off that button.

Think about for a minute what pushes your buttons and why. How has that come to be something that can really get under your skin? Think about how those in your care learn what your personal buttons are. Have you maybe found yourself talking with coworkers in places where you thought it was confidential, but others are listening in on your conversations? For those of you working in healthcare, I think

about places like nurse's stations, or again where someone in a waiting room might overhear what people are saying in an office right nearby. So again, think about those in your care learn what your personal buttons are, and how you can protect that information. How can you rationally detach or maintain professionalism and not take it personally when those buttons are pushed? Maybe you're going to need the assistance of a team member or colleague when you're not able to rationally detach.

One great activity you might choose to use if you're a trainer out there that you can lead at a staff meeting or in a refresher class to help staff realize what their personal buttons are is called the "Human Continuum". Let me describe the activity for you. All you need for this activity are two pieces of paper. On one, you're going to make a sign that has the number 1 on it, and the other sign will have the number 10 on it. You put those two signs down on the ground, or taped to the wall with a tape line between the two ends. Again, 1 on one side, 10 on the other. You'll ask your audience to come and join you by that line, and what you're going to do is read off to them a series of things that could happen in the course of their day. Asking them to stand along the line to rate the level of emotional reaction that particular event would get out of them; 1 being "wouldn't bother me at all", 10 being, "smoke would be coming out of my ears if that event were to happen".

So you'll read events one at a time, and ask them to go stand to, again, match their level of emotional reaction to that event. Some examples could include things like being spit at in your face, having a false allegation made against or about you, learning that someone has keyed your car in the parking lot, or maybe a colleague overrides a decision that you have made. After all your audience members have again gone to where their emotional reaction would be at, discuss with the group why they're standing where they are, how they came to make that decision, and again, what could people who are down at the 7, 8, 9, to 10 level learn from those who are down in the 1 to 3 level. Maybe there are some great rational detachment strategies that group is using, they can share with the other group. It's a great way to get people in touch with, again, what their buttons are, and what we can do about those personal buttons. So try leading that activity at one of your next staff meetings.

A third kind of power struggle we want to get familiar with and be aware of is rooted in the bringing up of past history or irrelevant issues. These kinds of power struggles often come from grudge holding, meaning the keeping of a scorecard where a person never has an opportunity to erase the checkmarks made against them. Think about comments that may give away this kind of power struggle is happening. Comments like, "You tried that same thing last week" or "I talked to your teacher from last school year, she said you did the same thing back then." Again, is there a keeping of a scorecard going on against an individual?

Another way we could be bringing up past history or irrelevant issues is through the making of comparisons. A way that a person can engage you in this kind of power struggle may sound something like this, "My last teacher, or nurse, or caseworker didn't do things that way." Again, you're being compared to someone from the past here, and that's how you get involved in the power struggle. And finally, the bringing up of past history and irrelevant issues may be trying to sidetrack you off the current topic. This individual may be asking you all kinds of unrelated questions, and the goal here is to get you to pack your bags, and go off on a tangent so that they can make you forget what the real issue was, or the original request that was made.

When dealing with this third kind of power struggle, one way we can avoid getting sidetracked is by following what are called the "Four CARE Principles". The C stands for the word "concentrate", meaning ignore or get rid of any distractions. That's going to help you to not bring up past history or irrelevant issues. Keep your focus. Try using things like a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your door, putting down your cell phone and not responding immediately to those pages that are coming in while you're dealing with an individual trying to engage you in a power struggle. The A stands for the word "acknowledge", meaning we want to use facial expressions and body posture to let the individual know we are listening to them, we are acknowledging their presence and what they are saying. This may happen through things like validating head nods, leaning into a conversation, making sure our hands are in an open posture, getting at the same level with that other individual; so matching, if they're standing, we're standing, if they're seated, we're

seated. The R in the "CARE Principles" stands for the word "respond", meaning we want to paraphrase back to the person what was said, asking questions for clarification where needed. But remember this needs to come from a very sincere, genuine, and authentic place, otherwise that strategy could backfire on you. And finally, E stands for "empathize". Try to see things from that individual's circumstances, and through their eyes. Change your perspective, step into their shoes as you look at the situation at hand.

The fourth and final kind of power struggle involves making empty threats, or issuing ultimatums, meaning unfortunately our limits did not involve the giving of choices. This often happens out of anger where we might state extreme consequences, for example, or it could sound something like, "Don't do this or else" or "You need to do this because I said so." Often the individual we're in that kind of power struggle with sees it as an invitation to really test us to see if what we are saying is actually true. They're thinking, "I wonder if this person really means it, and will follow through." These kinds of power struggles can lead to a breakdown in trust, and the individual not feeling safe around us.

Now, this is a particular concern if you deal with individuals who have a lot of trauma in their backgrounds. Feeling safe physically, emotionally, mentally is of the utmost importance, so this is a particular one we'd want to be cautious about, again, if we support individuals who have traumatic backgrounds. Without preplanning and practice by staff, this is where our emotions running high can lead to when we are trying to deescalate a defensive individual.

So now that we've gotten a closer look at the four types or ways power struggles can start, again, they include, defending authority or credibility, personal button pushing, bringing up the past or irrelevant information, and lastly issuing ultimatums. Now that we've got those four types, a better understanding of them, let's devote some time to what it is we can do about them.

We can avoid getting into any of these types of power struggles by first of all early identification, and reminding ourselves, simply don't pick up the rope. Now that

we're better equipped to realize as one of these power struggles could be starting, we can simply not choose and consent to participate. We just can't pick up the other end of the rope. It takes two to have a power struggle. Secondly, we can change our perspective, seeing the moment as an opportunity rather than as something negative we have to deal with. When someone tries to get us to take the bait, and engage in a power struggle, it is truly an opportunity to practice and master our craft at responding appropriately. It's a chance to teach, and to role model expected behaviors, and to grow our rapport with that individual. We want to, and can, improve our credibility and professionalism in that moment. So think of it as a positive rather than something we should fear or that could fluster us.

A third strategy for avoiding and engaging in power struggles is to stay calm, followed by giving a silent pause while modeling cognition, and then matter-of-factly using what's called a "diffuser". Modeling cognition can include things like giving a validating head nod, looking up at the sky, touching your chin, tilting your head to the side. These are all signs to an individual in crisis that we are really thinking about seriously what they have told us and what they are saying. When we talk about using a diffuser, examples of diffusers include things like, "Hmm", "Okay", "Noted", "Perhaps", "I hear you", "Your point of view", "Regardless", "Keeping that in mind", "Good point". Comments like that can diffuse a power struggle situation, again, if your non-verbals match what it is you're saying, and your demeanor is staying calm. Follow up that diffuser with the word "and" rather than "but". "But" can close off conversation, but the word "and" leaves it open for "What else I'm going to redirect us to back to the topic at hand". So important to follow up, again, your diffuser word with the word "and".

Keep in mind limit setting is an appropriate response or intervention for any type of power struggle. So that's where I want to take us next today. Let's get into some greater detail about effective limit setting. Formally defined, setting limits is a verbal intervention technique in which a person is offered choices and consequences. We always want to make sure that our limits meet the test of being clearly and simply stated. Are they reasonable for the situation and person we're interacting with? And finally, do they meet the test of being enforceable? Meaning, will we follow through with the consequences that are given?

So a good example might sound something like the following, "Marcus, if you help clean up now, then you can go out for the full recess period today. Otherwise, we'll have to stay behind and clean together, and you'll miss out on the team picking that's happening out on the basketball court, and maybe miss the start of the basketball game."

One quick thing we want to keep in mind with limit setting is our interpretation of the word "consequences". Unfortunately in our language, this word has sometimes come to carry a negative connotation with it. Often times, people simply see the word "consequence" as a substitute for the word "punishment". The two should not be equated with each other. So if that's the case in your environment, consider using the word "outcomes" or "results" of a person's choices rather than the word "consequences". Keep in mind these could be natural occurrences, or stated sorts of consequences. It might be a peer response, or a staff response, be it positive or negative.

When it comes to limit setting, there are a lot of myths, misconceptions, and misunderstandings out there. Think about each of the following statements and what you believe to be true. Do you see each of the following statements as a myth or a reality? Here are six examples we want to take a look at. Number one, "There is no place for flexibility in limit setting." What do you think out there, myth or reality? I tend to think of this one as a myth. I want to keep in mind what's developmentally appropriate for someone, what's age appropriate for someone, and what's emotionally possible in that moment. All of those sorts of things could call for some flexibility in my limit setting. It's not as if we have to strictly adhere and never deviate from that situation.

A second example, think about whether you believe this one to be a myth or reality. "If I don't gain compliance, I have failed." Again, "If I don't gain compliance, I have failed." What do you think, myth or reality? Again, I think of this one as a myth. Nothing is a guarantee for success, but what you are setting up when you set effective limits is a consistent structure for future learning. You may

not have success in that moment, but you want to keep a long-range goal in mind for yourself. Are you setting yourself on the path to long-term success with this individual?

Here's another statement for you to consider, "By setting limits, you are offering a person choices, and it's that person who ultimately chooses the consequence." Again, "By setting limits, you are offering person choices, and it's that person who ultimately chooses the consequence." I think of this one as a reality. It's not my job to make a right choice in behavior on someone else's behalf. I don't own them, but rather it is my focus to have consistency with outcomes. That's my job and responsibility when setting limits.

Another statement we can consider as a myth or reality, "Setting limits is an intervention you can only use at the defensive level during a crisis." Again, "Setting limits is an intervention you can only use at the defensive level during a crisis." Do you believe this one to be a myth or reality? This one I see as a myth. We may find ourselves needing to set limits with a person who is acting out and exhibiting risky behavior, or we might have to follow through with previously stated limits when we find ourselves at the fourth and final behavior level known as "tension reduction" and we're in the middle of building therapeutic rapport with that person. So again, limit setting may be a strategy we use at multiple levels within the crisis development model.

Another statement I want you to consider myth or reality about, "I can make individuals choose to behave appropriately." What do you think? "I can make individuals choose to behave appropriately." I see this one as a myth. The only person I have control over is me and how I respond to someone else's behavior. We cannot make individuals choose to behave in any certain way. Last one I want you to consider today is the following statement, "Successful limit setting is connected to good empathic listening skills." Again, "Successful limit setting is connected to good empathic listening skills." Myth or reality? I see this one as absolutely a reality. Our listening skills attune us to what motivates someone and what their precipitating factors might be. It's how we get all the critical information we need to know in order to set the best limits with an individual.

With these considerations in mind, let's pause to reflect upon limit setting opportunities you may have experienced in the recent past. I want you to join me for the following visualization exercise. Think of a recent situation where you had to set limits with someone. And again, going back to our earlier conversation today, it could be anyone you come across in contact with your life, whether it be in the personal, professional, or public realm. But think of a recent time where you actually had to set effective limits with someone. Once you have that situation in mind, consider the following questions, and evaluate how that scenario turned out for you.

Did you explain to the person the reason for your request? Did you give them clear objective choices with corresponding consequences? Would you say you perceive that the given outcomes were reasonable and enforceable? Did you emphasize and help motivate the person to make the positive choice in behavior? Did you allow that individual enough time to consider their choices in behavior? And finally, did you actually follow through with the stated consequences that you had given to that individual?

It may help all of us to stay on the right track in the future if we follow the following series of steps for effective limit setting. So if that scenario you just thought about didn't have the best outcome, see if these steps might assist you. Number one, start by explaining exactly what specific behavior is inappropriate or unacceptable; make sure you're specific here. Second step, explain why that behavior cannot continue. Don't assume that the individual knows, clarify it for them, give them the rationale for why a change in behavior is necessary. Third step, give simple, reasonable, motivating choices with the corresponding outcomes. Again, give simple, reasonable, motivating choices with the corresponding outcomes. Step four is you need to allow enough time for the person to actually make a choice, otherwise they're perceiving it as an ultimatum. Now, again, keep in mind what seems like an eternity for you will seem like a very short period of time to the other individual. So give adequate allowance of time for them to really think through what the behavioral choices are, and what they're choosing to do. Don't assume they'll make the wrong choice in behavior. And finally, step number

five, follow through with the given outcomes for the choice in behavior that person makes, as consistency is what helps people to feel safe.

Now, good limit setting is really an art, not a science. So regardless of how many years we've been working in our fields of practice, there's always room for growth and digging deeper with your staff on the topic of limit setting. So the same webpage where you accessed this presentation today, please take note of the supplemental resource you can download from there. It's a structured handout for leading a "lunch and learn" session or discussion that would give your staff some good practice time refining their limit setting skills. It offers some starter phrases, some sample situations, and even a self-assessment section.

I want to conclude today's presentation by having you think about some takeaways and action steps that you're going to use as a result of what you heard today. So if you have a piece of paper nearby, take it and separate it into four boxes, four quadrants. You could do that by folding it in four, or again, simply drawing lines on the page to separate it into four boxes.

In the first box, what I want you to think about and write down for yourself is number one, what are you going to continue to do just as you have been in the past? Meaning, what was validated for you in today's session that you heard? Again, that first box is for continuing to do something just as I have been in the past. What have you gotten validation on you want to continue doing? The second box, list something you want to try to stop doing, or be more cognizant of as you proceed in the future with limit setting, and not getting yourself into power struggles. What's something you want to stop doing or be more cognizant of as a result of what you heard today? The third box, what is something new to me that I heard today I would like to implement? What is something new that I heard today that I would like to try or start using and implementing? And the fourth and final box, what's something you heard today that you think, or would like to share with a colleague? What is something you heard today that you think you should share with a colleague or would like to share with a colleague?

Now that you have those takeaways and action steps, find someone who will hold you accountable, and help you to follow through on those action steps that you have set for yourself today.

I thank you for listening to today's presentation. I hope you found it valuable and useful with your time today. If so, please share it with a friend or a colleague. Feel free to contact us here at CPI with any follow-up questions that you might have. Take care, and have a great day.