Authority vs. Relationship?

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ABSTRACT: This article was adapted from a speech given by the author to a group of child care professionals. It offers some practical suggestions on how to go about building the kind of relationship with children and youth that will form a solid foundation for the exercise of authority. The author argues that authority ultimately depends on the perception of youth regarding the concern, honesty, fairness, reasonableness, and dependability of those who are in authority.

It is a maxim in residential programs that effective treatment needs to be preceded by effective control; that no treatment is really possible unless the disturbed, delinquent, or disorganized behavior of the client population can be made to be responsive to staff authority and control. While there is universal agreement on this point, there is no agreement and very little understanding about how to teach staff to go about the job of competently and skillfully exercising authority. Even in the best programs, there are markedly differing abilities among staff to command the response of youth in their charge. New staff who feel inadequate to the demands of a position that calls for them to assume responsibility for the management and supervision of a group of youth look wistfully at the apparent ease with which experienced staff exercise authority. On the other hand, experienced staff look with a mixture of sympathy and frustration at the fledging efforts of new staff and find it easy to see what they are doing wrong, but find it near to impossible to tell them, much less teach them, how to do it right.

A large part of the difficulty seems to be that there is no easy way to talk about authority. One can talk about setting limits and establishing structure, but, while that seems to be a part of what authority, control, supervision, and group management are all

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about, the latter processes clearly incorporate other kinds of variables. It is true that in order to exercise effective control and authority one has to establish structure and set clear limits. But, having stated that, it still leaves one wondering about the process of getting youth to respond to those limits and that structure.

What then is authority? How is it unique from the issue of structure and limits? What does one have to understand about authority in order to establish long-term effectiveness? Are there any easy verbal handles or frames of reference that can be used to aid staff, particularly inexperienced staff, in developing a more comprehensive understanding, and hence a more effective use, of authority?

There is one basic thing about authority that is not well understood. Authority is a relationship issue, and because it is a relationship issue its effectiveness is a function of the quality of that relationship. This is directly counter to the notion implicit in much of traditional social work practice that has always suggested that authority and relationship are two different matters;¹ that in a sound treatment relationship one cannot be expected to exercise effective control; that a choice has to be made between one or the other. And it was on this basis that many residential programs were organized. Staff were divided into two groups: custodial and treatment. Control and authority were issues that custodial cottage staff specialized in, while treatment and human relationship matters were the exclusive preserve of social workers who did "therapy" in offices.

In fact, that division between custodial and treatment, between authority and relationship, may have been more responsible than any one other thing for the continuing failure of residential treatment. Clearly, authority and relationship have to be viewed as part and parcel of the same fabric. To do otherwise is to deprive authority of a foundation. Authority without a relationship foundation is authority that is arbitrary and that has to be propped up by intimidation, fear, threats, and hostility. Not only is this kind of authority short-lived, but it is obviously destructive and counterproductive to quality treatment.

Ultimately, authority is, in the long-term, not something that can be imposed on others against their will. But it is precisely under this misapprehension that many staff struggle. And thus the

¹Note should be made of the fact that this tradition prevails in many settings despite the fact that as early as 45 years ago Pray (1934, 1949) began to conceptualize the role of the social worker as incorporating both relationship and authority.