Decreasing Power Struggles

One of the many challenges in working with people who have developmental disabilities is avoiding power struggles. In a power struggle, each person has his or her own perspectives, stressors, and agenda. The objective for each person is to be the one to come out on top—to have his ideas or desires prevail. In such a struggle, both sides often lose. Let's take a look at how a power struggle can evolve between staff and a consumer:

**Step 1:** The conflict often starts small—maybe the consumer wants some extra food, or he does not want to do a task, or the consumer is being disruptive with an annoying behavior.

**Step 2:** In a power struggle situation, the staff would then respond in a way that is disagreeable to the person— the staff says no, the staff appears disrespectful, or the staff is persistent in demanding what he/she originally requested.

**Step 3:** The consumer then responds with more assertiveness, usually with a louder voice, maybe even yelling, swearing, or talking in a disrespectful way.

**Step 4:** The emotions start to rise for each. Both of them are often very stubborn and unwilling to give in.

**Step 5:** Sometimes, in desperation and without knowledge of what else to do, the consumer may become aggressive. Sometimes the end result is someone getting hurt, police called, and the consumer is taken to the hospital. This occurs in the extreme cases, but it points to how far a situation can go.

The long-term effect is that this cycle often continues to persist. When a power struggle occurs between a consumer and his staff, there are a lot of negative feelings that can develop between them. These negative feelings and emotions continue to fester and wear away at the rapport that had been developed. Because the staff no longer has a good rapport with the consumer, there is a higher likelihood that more power struggles will occur between them.

**In this corner, we have “the staff”**

For some staff, the idea of having authority is very important to them. This is especially true with those working with people who exhibit behaviors. The concern is that, if they do not have authority, the consumer will walk all over them and the behaviors will get out of hand. They want to feel that they are empowered and have the control, which they may think is inherent to them because of the position that they have. Even when they realize that they are wrong about the situation, staff will sometimes continue the power struggle in order to maintain the control. A power struggle may sometimes be more likely if the peers of the staff are present, because the staff may want to show them that he is able to hold his own ground against the consumer.

Staff will sometimes react with very strong emotion. They are human. The consumer may say something to the staff member that is taken as a personal attack. The staff immediately reacts with emotion in a way to demand respect. These emotions are most common in those who are new to the field.

Staff may also engage in these power struggles because they feel that they are doing what is right and best for the consumer— whether it has to do with safety, their well being, or morals. They do not want to allow the consumer the choice to fail.

Staff often get into power struggles as a result of “just trying to do my job”. They may be getting messages from their supervisors and other team members that certain outcomes have to be accomplished, the consumer must be prevented from doing something, or that they must make somebody do something.

**And in this corner is the consumer:**

There is a large element of control in why the consumers become participants in power struggles. They typically want to be their own person. They do not want to be told what they can and cannot do— they want to make their own choices. When it is necessary, the consumers are often willing to “put up a fight” to keep that control.

The consumer also does not want to be embarrassed in front of his peers. By backing down and allowing the staff to have authority, the person may appear weak or foolish. Therefore, the consumer may keep up the struggle in order to save face.
A large part of reason that people with developmental disabilities get into power struggles is that they tend to lack the skills that are necessary to avoid the struggles: relaxation skills, coping skills, problem-solving skills, reasoning skills, etc. As a result of not having these skills, getting into power struggles may be the only option that they know.

They are also very likely to react emotionally, which will interfere with the ability to think clearly. The more emotional, agitated, or anxious that a person becomes, the less likely he is to think clearly. The highly charged negative emotions will often quickly lead to aggressiveness.

Some people with developmental disabilities tend to be very rigid, meaning that they think things have to be a certain way, and they have difficulty changing their mind. It is very difficult to convince them of other options or ways of looking at the situation. The person often appears to the staff to be irrational.

**Ten Steps for Dealing with Power Struggles:**

1. **Develop a good therapeutic rapport** with the people that you are working with. People are more likely to give up control to others if they have a good rapport with them. In fact, they will want to please you. If they do not have a good rapport, they will fight that much harder in order to come out on top.
   - Show interest in the things that the person likes,
   - Be polite,
   - Be respectful,
   - Say hello and goodbye
   - Be positive around the person.

2. **Keep your emotions in check.** Identify where you are emotionally before you even come in to a situation. If you have had a bad day, or you have a negative attitude about the person or the situation, you will be more likely to quickly respond in a negative way. You must keep your cool in order to manage the conflict situation in a professional manner. During an incident with a consumer, if you respond with a lot of emotion, it will likely interfere with you ability to think through the situation clearly and cognitively. You will also add to the consumer’s frustration and prompt him/her to challenge back. The consumer may see your emotional reaction as a threat and retaliate against it.
   - Take a deep breath,
   - Tell yourself that you are going to react calmly,
   - Speak in a calm, neutral, professional voice.

3. **Identify the bait.** Avoid reacting in a confrontational manner to remarks that are deliberately intended to draw you into a power struggle. Realize when they are trying to push your buttons or get a reaction. They may see it as a game or as a test. It is important that you do not take the bait. If a comment is merely annoying, ignore it. Try to redirect the person by bringing up a different topic of conversation. It takes two people to get into a power struggle. A power struggle can be avoided if the staff person does not choose to take part in the struggle.

4. **Listen.** By you listening, it is going to help prevent you from going back and forth with the person. Use your active listening skills. Give the person your undivided attention and convey to him that you are really listening to what he is saying. Resist the urge to correct the person or give your input at the time. Paraphrase what the person is saying to show that you understand. Convey to them how they are feeling, and that you understand that they may be upset. By doing this, you can demonstrate respect for the person and his point of view.

5. **Prioritize the issues.** Which things are the most important? What situations are you trying to avoid? Put a lot of effort into things that are really important, and put a little effort into things that hold little importance. Always think to yourself, “Will this be worth getting into a big physical altercation about”. **People’s safety should always be the main priority.** Turning small issues into full-blown aggressive behaviors is not acceptable.

6. **Give real choices.** You must acknowledge that the consumer must make his own behavioral choice, and that you cannot really make him do anything. Give your consumer options and choices so that he feels like he has some control. These choices should be ones that are doable and agreeable to everyone who is involved. Explain the choices that he has, along with the potential results that may follow for making each choice. Then back off and allow him process the options and respond. Consumers sometimes find themselves in situations in
which they are unwilling to back down from a show-down. By backing off, you allow them to save face. Keep your responses very brief. Staff sometimes make the mistake of showering the consumer with a lot of unnecessary comments, and they begin to sound like lectures.

7. **Strive for win/win.** It is common for a person who is in a power struggle to strive for a result in which they come out on top. They win, and the other person loses. If we are going to strive to reduce power struggles with our consumers, we must change our goals as staff. We should no longer expect our consumers to say “okay” and “yes” to everything that we say. We should be striving to teach them problem-solving skills, coping strategies, and negotiating strategies. The person is going to need a lot of help with problem-solving, because he probably has not done it well before. They will especially need help initially with the emotional control. They will not be able to problem-solve if they do not have control of their emotions. It is often helpful to allow the consumer to have a “cool-down” break. Allow the person to go into another room and relax before returning to discuss the problem.

8. **Limit the audience.** Your consumer will be less willing to back off and agree to turn things around if there are others around them. They will want to save face. The person may even be showing off to his/her peers. Having others around may also contribute to the problems because the other people may add to the situation with their teasing, arguing, or scolding.

9. **Avoid threats and promises**—especially ones that you cannot keep. Threats will likely increase the person’s agitation and make the situation worse. Your words will become meaningless if you cannot back them up.

10. **Say “I’m sorry”.** Sometimes it is best to admit that you were wrong and back off. The person will often see the act as a gesture of respect. Give yourself an out. Do it early before the situation gets out of hand. If you think that you are “giving in”, take comfort in knowing the person is not necessarily going to increase the behaviors or walk all over you the next time.

**Some scenarios that require extra attention:**

One of the common sources of power struggles is when a consumer makes a request for a desired item or activity, and the staff person denies him. The response from the consumer can often be quite negative, and even explosive. When looking closely at the situation, we see that there are three different types of answers that a staff can give the consumer when he makes a request.

1. **Yes**—You don’t have concerns. The consumer wants it. Be agreeable and avoid a power struggle all together.
2. **No**—This is only reserved when you actually mean “no” and you need to stay with “no”. Think before saying it. Too often, staff realize half-way through the power struggle that they did not need to say “no”, but will continue with the struggle because they do not want to give in. “No” should be reserved for absolute rules and safety concerns.
3. **Let’s talk about it.** Hopefully, most things will fall in this category. A good way to start the discussion is to simply repeat to the person what he just asked for. Ex: “You want pizza”, or “You want to stay up later”. This helps to buy time because the person is frequently expecting to hear “no”. As soon as the “N.” comes out of the mouth, the situation quickly escalates. By repeating the request, the caregiver is essentially saying, “I’m not saying “no”, so don’t fly off the handle just yet; let’s talk it out.” This may allow enough time for the agitation level to remain low enough to start a discussion. Then start talking with the consumer about when the request can be carried out at a better time, or whether there are other alternatives to the request that can be worked out. Show patience in working it out, and help him to keep his emotions in check.

Another situation that can lead to a power struggle is when a consumer refuses to comply with a request made by the staff. We become too concerned about what we will do when they say “no”. Instead, we should put more focus in thinking ahead of time about what we can do to increase the odds that the person will say “yes”.

- **Make sure that the consumer is paying attention to you.** Get eye contact if possible. Make sure that he understands what is being asked.
- **Pair the request:** When you make a request of the consumer that might be unfavorable, try pairing it with a more desirable activity that would follow. Ex: "Bill, why don't you shave quickly, then we will sit down and have a donut".
At the most, give the consumer only one or two different requests at one time. Do not give him a verbal list of things to do. It is difficult to process and remember, and it may overwhelm him. If that happens, he will shut down.

Try to establish a routine in which many of his typical tasks occur. As it becomes more of a pattern to do these things, he will eventually think less about whether or not he should do them-- he just does them.

**Build a momentum:** Try to get the consumer into a positive momentum. Talk with him first. Get him in a good mood. Be upbeat and use humor when making the request to the consumer. Play around with him a little before and after making the prompt. Try first asking him to do something that he is likely to comply with. Give him praise for complying, and then follow it up with the task that you are seeking compliance with.

The consumer may be more willing to comply with a request if it is seen as doing someone a favor or helping someone, especially if he likes that person. If he does not like that person, he may see it as an opportunity to upset the person. In this case, phrase it to him as a way to help himself.

Try writing the request down or presenting a visual prompt such as a picture. People with DD tend to process and understand things when they are presented visually to them.

You may need to praise the individual for carrying through with part of the request. Hopefully, he will then follow through with more of the request next time

**If the consumer first says "No"...**

*Remember: It is not possible to make somebody do something. In the end, it is always his/her decision to comply.*

Don’t always take “no” know as the final answer. Sometimes, “no” is simply the first word that comes out of somebody’s mouth. He may then think about it, and change his decision. Give the consumer some time to process the situation and think about his choices.

Remember to stay calm and give a neutral reaction. Do not let on that his decision not to comply affects you.

Ask yourself what it is that may be preventing him from following through with the request or affecting his decision to refuse the request. You might be able to address that and change it.

Start up a conversation with him, interact with him, and gradually steer him toward compliance.

Give him some time to process and respond to the prompt.

If possible, negotiate a time in which he will be able to do it.

Remind him of the expectations.

Hold off on the next desirable activity until the request is followed through.

If the consumer begins to yell, hit, kick, or any other undesirable behavior, back off. Wait for him to calm down, then restate the request. Do not let the consumer get out of the request by exhibiting behaviors.