

Staying Empowered When Dealing with Powerful Players

More than two months have passed since the NASJE conference was held in Austin. Some things you may remember, some things you may have forgotten. Perhaps there are even some things you wish you could forget. Isn't it funny how we can forget 90% of what we've learned within a week but can't seem shake off something we want to forget over a lifetime? Of course, there's research on why that happens, yet the focus of this article is to circle back on what you learned—or missed—in the session on *Staying Empowered When Dealing with Powerful Players*.

Before we review, please pause to take a moment and imagine that you are sitting in a room and you feel cold. You notice an overhead fan above. You shiver as you feel the cooling breeze on exposed parts of your skin. You look around and realize you don't have a jacket and wish you weren't wearing a short sleeve shirt. Then you notice a switch on the wall that has the power to turn off the fan.

Would you turn it off?

Did you answer yes?

How about no?

Or did you find yourself pausing to ask other questions like who else is in the room?

Interestingly, research conducted on this scenario showed that people who feel powerful are more likely to turn off the fan.

Now before you go and give yourself a pat on the back for having answered yes, there is additional research that shows that people who feel powerful are often less in touch with the world around them and can wreak serious havoc in other people's lives as they charge after their own egocentric pursuits.

Yikes.

The question becomes, how can you enhance your power and remain empowered while being considerate of others and having a positive impact on the people around you?

Not surprisingly, a vast amount of research reveals that powerful people take greater risks, are goal-directed, action-oriented, and happier. On the other side of the continuum, people who feel powerless and are in less powerful roles have been shown to be more inhibited, experience greater negative emotions and tend pay more attention to threats over rewards.

Like Goldilocks, there is a delicate balance between feeling powerful and powerless and exerting one's real and/or perceived power.

We discussed first-order and second-order change in the session. Let's review power through a first and second-order lens to better address the nuances among varying levels of power dynamics.

As a reminder, first-order change represents a more surface level change while second-order is a deeper psychic change. An example in learning might be following a newly learned set of procedures in a strict order because it is the suggested way of doing things that is widely adopted by others. When learning is crystallized and more deeply incorporated into one's being and value system, the person can be more flexible with the procedures—and even advance the procedural norms through innovative change.

Most people can relate to the first time they drove a car and tightly clenched the steering wheel in the “2 and 10” position while being hyper aware of each step. Compare your current driving habits, where driving has become so ingrained that you can suddenly find yourself in your driveway at home after thinking about a slew of other things on the drive. This is the difference between first-order and second-order change.

The Power Struggle

Returning to power, while a typical definition of power is to have resources, the social science definition is having asymmetrical control over valued resources. In other words, hierarchy. Examples of resources from a first-order perspective include authority, money and job security. Second-order power examples include political power and influence, dominance, and respect/lack of respect.

The judicial system is hierarchical and many people in it have asymmetrical political power and influence over others, along with authority over job advancement and reputation. This leaves judicial educators with a daunting and challenging task of educating powerful players, like judges, and empowering judicial staff while keeping power struggles at bay.

By definition, educating someone suggests the educator has asymmetrical control over valued resources—in this case, essential knowledge. The potential for a power struggle is automatically set up when the student is a powerful person in a powerful position, *if not handled with finesse*.

Chances are, the finesse you have learned is to avoid approaching the powerful player in any way that is demeaning. You are probably treating a judge with more respect and offering a healthy dose of praise mixed with suggestions and research. You are cautious not to act condescending or arrogant in any manner. Instead, you give ample respect, and are probably highly-conscientious about meeting them where they are at (appealing to their learning style, time-management preferences, and overall value system). You probably know that to do otherwise could risk their putting up a defense and not hearing (or learning) anything you say.

When people come to me and express frustration because they find themselves engaged in a power struggle with a powerful person and they want to feel empowered, it usually stems from a situation where they are conducting a training or giving some essential feedback and the other person becomes defensive and asserts their power by demeaning the information, dismissing their credibility, endlessly debating, disengaging and ignoring the person. More severe cases involve bullying, threatening, harassing, making jokes about the person, attacking their mental health, and seeking avenues for demoting and/or firing the person.

The non-severe, normal human power struggles that happen with everyone can be very similar to a scene in an old Western movie, where two characters are facing each other on a dusty road, usually just outside of a saloon. Their hands can be seen hovering over their holsters, as they prepare to grab their pistols and shoot.

Being caught in a power struggle with a powerful person (or anyone) is a lot like holding your hand over a pistol in its holster. When the other person begins attacking with condescension and defensiveness, it can be very difficult not to draw your own gun and shoot back.

Instead, try disarming them by listening and repeating what they are saying. Many times, all they need is to feel heard and understood. At that point, they may be ready to listen and value what you have to say.

When confronted with an objection or complaint, try reframing it as an open-ended question that is solution-focused. (i.e., How can we make most efficient use of your limited time to help you and your staff achieve XYZ so you can successfully meet ABC goal?)

Don't be afraid to take a time-out and offer a bio break (for them...and *you*). In the session, we addressed the consequences of sleep deprivation, hunger and thirst. Try offering snacks and water if possible.

Maintain an experimenter's point of view and keep practicing methods that appeal to different audiences. Remember what works for one person won't always appeal to another, so keep growing your toolkit with new ways of presenting information. Learn ideas from others that have worked in the field. The more you learn and practice, the more confident and empowered you will become.

Now that we've addressed some ideas for disarming power struggles, let's discuss what to do when power struggles prevail—despite your best efforts.

What About Dysfunctional Power Struggles?

While the best outcomes in leadership success reveal that people in powerful positions have empathy for others around them and feel a sense of responsibility to those they serve and manage, many people in power have been shown to be more egocentric and narcissistic.

Narcissistic persons in power tend to exert power at the expense of people's welfare. They feed on dominating others, as it fills their defensive ego needs for power and makes them feel superior. Some research has even revealed that this type of personality physiologically relaxes when they are bullying a weaker person. In these situations, the person's narcissistic demands eclipse basic empathy and toxicity prevails.

Communications become tainted with defensiveness, criticism, silent treatment, confusion, accusation, micro-aggressions, and overt harassment and bullying. This may help explain why people who feel powerless pay more attention to threats over rewards, are more inhibited and experience greater negative emotions. They are trying to survive a turbulent and legitimately crazy-making experience.

Remember when we discussed that all relationships are reciprocal? This is true in the narcissist relationship with others. We influence each other and "mirror neurons" allow us to experience other people's feelings. In the case of narcissistic power struggles, narcissists require and feed on narcissistic supply (NS) from those around them, such as adoration and the endless sacrifice of time and energy from others. A bit of an overly simplified explanation of this is that the narcissist is unable to self-soothe and needs the external "soothing" from others along with external rewards like power, money, titles, and items that may be deemed conspicuous consumption. Underneath this false image they actually suffer from far more insecurity than is displayed.

NS-oriented individuals reinforce the narcissist by supplying them with a steady stream of adulation and service, but often *at the risk of their own personal boundaries and energy reserves*. In severe cases, the

NS individuals are bullied into a state of physical and psychic fatigue. Sometimes this shows up in physical symptoms such as high blood pressure, headaches and failing health along with anxiety, depression, and self-medicating with excess food, alcohol and/or other substances.

“Many industries normalize and perpetuate narcissists with organizational cultures that encourage the work mentality of narcissistic leadership and the mores of narcissistic supply (NS) among employees.”

Most people have experienced a narcissist at least once in their life, while others have been continually surrounded by narcissistic personalities to the point that their aggression and egocentricity seem like normal behavior. In addition, many industries normalize and perpetuate narcissists with organizational cultures that encourage the work mentality of narcissistic leadership and the mores of narcissistic supply among employees.

In order to stay empowered (and healthy!), recognize if you are dealing with a narcissist and/or working in a crazymaking narcissistic culture. Sometimes knowing that the other person and situation is the problem can be the best medicine, much like walking in a house of mirrors and knowing the reflections are distorted. It's the internalization of the distorted reflection as reality that can cause the most damage to our psyche.

The Wisdom Behind Knowing Thyself

How do you know if you have internalized the distortions? Often, there is a feeling of dread and misery coupled with self-attack, self-doubt and fear. To combat this very human consequence of living in the world among fallible human beings (narcissist or not), it helps to cultivate self-awareness of the inner dialogue that's constantly running in the background of your mind. Everyone has these voices, some are more aware of it than others. It's the “chattering monkeys” that Buddha described. To discover the running dialogue, try sitting still for five minutes without doing anything or thinking of anything. It's difficult, right?

Once you recognize the silent commentary, the next thing to do is to learn to differentiate the different voices. This might sound like the easiest thing to do, yet it can be the most difficult—and the most powerful of all psychological interventions.



In the session, we discussed a three-finger mnemonic for finding the internal voice of your worst enemy and differentiating it from your healthiest and best self. The key is knowing that we can't trust every voice in our head. Nor is every feeling accurate. Some internal voices stem from fear, self-doubt, and repeating negative messages from others.

Discovering this hidden dialogue and learning to differentiate the voices is one of the most empowering gifts you can give yourself. Here's a reminder of the three-finger mnemonic:

1. **First Finger or “Pointing Finger Critic”**- Remember how your mother told you not to point at anyone? Imagine associating this finger with your inner critic's voice and stop listening to it. The internal critic, often referred to as the “parental introject” in psychology, is highly self-destructive as it feeds you a bunch of rules, shoulds and should-nots, and continually ridicules and puts you down. Some people blindly follow this voice's whipping guidance and repeat the

criticisms and dysfunctional messages they internalized from parents, authority figures, society—and bullies. This ridiculing voice says, “You’re not good enough, smart enough, physically attractive enough, rich enough, strong enough, accomplished enough,” etc.

2. **Middle Finger “Martyr”**-Just like the narcissist that needs narcissistic supply in order to have power, the Middle Finger Martyr represents what happens when we fall victim to the Pointing Finger Critic. This is the part of us that gives up and says, “You’re right. I’m worthless.” It’s the part of us that *is the most self-sabotaging* as it succumbs to despair and is devoid of hope. It stays in abusive situations because the abuse mirrors the inner abuse and this part of our selves falsely believes there is nothing better—and that the abuse is deserved. It is the hidden and unconscious part of ourselves that is responsible for recreating situations and relationships that victimize us. This is where psychology describes “unfinished business” and suggests that similar power and relational **patterns repeat themselves until the person recognizes the pattern** and makes a different and more empowered response.

3. **Ring Finger Ringleader**- While a ringleader can often denote a rebel to authority, in this case it’s a rebel to the dysfunctional authority of the Pointing Finger Critic and the Middle Finger Martyr. It represents the emergence of our most authentic selves. This is the source of our highest truth and best possible self. It is also our most empowered state. When we are our true selves, there is confidence, strength and ease in decision-making. This is the place of our core values—and is where love, gratitude, hope, and meaning come from. There is a feeling of lightness of being and a compassion for others that eliminates all power struggles because external validation and egocentric power is not needed.

How do you rise above the inner critic and inner victim dynamic and attain the qualities of your highest self? Start paying attention. Catch yourself in the act. The unconscious self-sabotaging can’t remain hidden when we listen to ourselves and begin taking responsibility for our situations. We have the power to rise up and say no. We protect our personal boundaries. We manage our self-care. How often do you journal and allow your inner voice to reveal itself? How often do you sit still and take five minutes of deep breathing and feeling your body’s sensations? How often do you pay attention to your feelings? Being continuously busy and unable to sit still—without distraction—is a sure sign you’re probably abandoning yourself and are completely unaware of the inner conflicts within you.

If you find yourself thinking this is too “touchy-feely” or overly simplified, pay attention to your defenses. Sometimes that’s the ego’s way of maintaining external validation over the inner validation that comes from deeper self-awareness.

While the goal is to be our highest and most authentic selves, part of being human is being imperfect and we can easily slip into other aspects of ourselves, so be gentle with yourself as you cultivate deeper self-awareness of these various hidden parts. It can take a lifetime—and the self-discovery and consequent healing and wisdom can be the most rewarding part of life’s journey.