

# Avoiding Power Struggles

## Four Objectives

1. 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.
2. To help us **understand 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?
3. To **develop an effective strategy** for dealing with power struggles by taking a close look at the steps necessary for effective limit setting.
4. To help us **organize our takeaways** from the presentation into four categories and **identify the action steps** we will take using the information in this presentation.

We recommend that you keep a paper and pen handy so you can take notes that will make the content more personally memorable and relevant.

The first step is to identify those people with whom we find ourselves getting into power struggles on a regular basis. Perhaps the people that immediately come to mind are those in your care, such as your students, clients, patients, or residents. Maybe you found yourself thinking of the parents or legal guardians of the people in your care. Other folks who come to mind might include your colleagues, service providers, or possibly even your boss. On the personal side, perhaps a parent, spouse, or child comes to mind.

Now, write down a list of the people you find yourself getting into power struggles with on a regular basis.

When you find yourself in a struggle, or its aftermath, how do you let it influence the rest of your day? Does it diminish your productivity and present an unwanted distraction?

Always remember that struggles do not occur in isolation. They influence others. To help recognize the negative repercussions that power struggles can bring about, we identify four primary types:

## Four types of power struggles

1. Defending one's authority or credibility
2. Personal button pushing
3. Bringing up past history or irrelevant issues
4. Making empty threats and issuing ultimatums

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## 1. Defending authority and credibility

To identify power struggles that involve defending your authority or credibility, think of statements like "Who are you to tell me what to do?" or "I don't want to hear what you think as a nurse. I want to talk to the doctor." These may sound familiar, and one of your first responses to this kind of challenge may be to take defensive physical actions, like a change in your body language, the tone and volume of your voice, or your rate and rhythm of speech.

### Watch that body language!

Is your own or your interlocutor's body language a giveaway that a power struggle is happening? Do you find yourself crossing your arms and closing yourself off from that other person? Maybe you strike a defensive posture like putting your hands on your hips. Maybe you roll your eyes. You may find yourself shaking or pointing a finger at that other person, maybe shaking your head in disagreement with what they're saying. You might find yourself staring off into space or avoiding direct eye contact with that person, or maybe you even start to walk away from or turn your back on that now-significant other.

### Watch those paraverbals!

Did you ever hear the phrase "It's not what they said, it's how they said it," spoken in anger and instantly understood the exasperation behind it? A human voice can communicate many challenging attitudes and emotions, regardless of the words that are spoken.

"We might not even realize these subtle tells that we are giving away in our nonverbal and paraverbal 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."

## 2. Personal button pushing

When the person we are struggling with knows us very well, they probably have a keen sense of how to engage in behavior that gets under our skin and pushes our buttons. They may engage in this behavior until they get the kind of reaction they seek, which is for their opponent to feel uncomfortable and back down.

Take a moment to think about behaviors that push your buttons and why they so effectively manage to disturb you. It could be as simple as a comment about your appearance or as serious as a threat to your children, but in any instance, the key principle is to rationally detach and maintain professionalism by not taking it personally when those buttons are pushed.

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## 3. Past history and irrelevant issues

Two people who have a history of struggling for power often have something like a mental scorecard in mind, keeping close track of the perceived slights that have accumulated from past encounters and combining them into a collective grudge against the other. To determine if this is the type of struggle that's occurring, "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?"

Continuing on to explain that in this type of struggle, your opponent is utilizing comments like these to throw you off track and make you lose sight of the original issue.

One way to deal with this third kind of power struggle is to follow what we call the "Four CARE Principles." This mental exercise helps you to **C**oncentrate on the relevant issue, **A**cknowledge your own active listening through facial expression and body posture, **R**espond by asking questions and paraphrasing back what the other person has said, and finally, to **E**mpathize by trying to see things from the other person's perspective.

## 4. Empty threats and ultimatums

The anger stirred up by a confrontation during a struggle may not bring out the best in either party. The strength of this emotion may cause a person to ". . . state extreme consequences, for example, or [say] 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 that we know the four types of power struggles, what can we do to avoid them?

After the four types of power struggles have been explained and how to identify and interpret them, we go on to describe strategies to avoid them:

- Realize that it takes two to have a struggle. We can choose not to participate by simply not picking up the rope. Instead, we can try to improve our rapport and think positively rather than fearfully.
- We can change our perspective from one of negativity to one of opportunity, in an attempt to improve the relationship by modeling conciliatory behavior and professionalism.
- Stay calm and silent and use what's known as a "diffuser." These are signs that show the individual in crisis that we take them and their message seriously. "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 nonverbals match what it is you're saying and your demeanor is staying calm."