

The Use of Power in Mentoring and Pastoral Relationships

Rick Lewis

Abstract: *This article discusses the use of power in mentoring. While it is often tempting for a mentor, motivated by love, to take control of a vulnerable mentoree it is actually unhelpful for them to do so because the use of a mentor's power, which derives from their personal qualities or their position of authority, actually diminishes their role. It is crucial that mentors should reflect the "powerlessness" of God, for God's power is made perfect in weakness. The paper then discusses the implications of this in terms of the kind of formal relationships that should or should not exist between mentor and mentoree.*

In real life situations, it is very tempting for a mentor to take control of a mentoree, especially when they are floundering and in a vulnerable place. It is common for someone at their wit's end to throw out the question, "What am I going to do?" At that point the mentoree might welcome someone they trust simply taking over. From the mentor's point of view, it might seem the kindest thing to put an end to the agony and take charge of the situation.

Walter Brueggemann notes:

Most of us will not quickly embrace an alternative that is given in a coercive way. Such coercion more likely makes us defend the old, and in general causes us to become defensive. What we need is a safe place in which to host ambiguity and to notice the tension and unresolve without pressure but with freedom to see and test alternative textings of reality. An inviting effective alternative does not need to be toned down in its claim or made palatable. It does, however, need to be presented in a way that stops well short of coercion that is threatening and that evokes resistance to hearing or appropriating the new text.^[1]

Over time, mentors accrue a certain amount of power within their relationships with mentorees. To put it crudely, mentors are able, if they so choose, to get mentorees to do things that they would otherwise not choose to do. Accrual of power occurs for reasons which vary from one relationship to the next, but are broadly to do with either personal power or positional power. Mentors are faced with the question of what to do with the power they accrue; whether or not to use or refrain from using it.

While the power of the Holy Spirit is welcome within mentoring relationships, the exercise of human power is problematic. By this, I do not mean the 'power within' of a spiritually mature person or the 'power for' exercised in affirmation and encouragement. I am referring specifically to the 'power over' that is present in coercive and potentially coercive interactions. It is this sort of power that may be detrimental to mentoring relationships, rendering them unsafe for the mentoree.

The operation of 'power over' in mentoring relationships is directly impacted by the motivation of love mentioned above. Logically speaking, the opposite of love is hate (or perhaps apathy). But psychologically, the opposite of loving someone is dominating them. Over sixty years ago, Carl Jung astutely observed the inverse relationship between these two dynamics in human relationships:

Where love rules, there is no will to power, and where power predominates, there love is lacking. The one is the shadow of the other.**[2]**

In other words, if a mentor is truly expressing love toward a mentoree, they will not attempt to wield power over them. To the degree that power is exercised over a mentoree, the expression of love is diminished in the same degree. If mentoring relationships are to promote the work of God's Spirit and be conducted in a manner consistent with God's agenda, they must be rooted in love, not power. Operating in love, the mentor may appear to be in a 'powerless' or 'weak' position to bring about change and growth in the mentoree. Yet this is a crucial prerequisite for pursuing the Holy Spirit's agenda, for God's power is made perfect in weakness.

This kind of thinking about power is revolutionary. Worldly wisdom would suggest that in order to effect change in any situation, a certain measure of power over that situation must be exercised. Hersey and Blanchard represent the commonly accepted secular understanding of interpersonal power when they write:

First of all, realize that power is finite. There is only so much power around. If someone else has it, you don't. If your power is negotiated away, it is no longer there. The amount of power available does not expand in different situations.**[3]**

Christian mentors are able to see things quite differently. For a start, they may understand that power is infinite and that there is far more power present in a mentoring relationship than that which resides in the human participants. Christian mentors know that God's power at work within us is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. Also, they can appreciate that the operation of power in human relationships need not be a zero-sum game. Interpersonal transactions involving power need not always result in win-lose scenarios; win-win is possible. That is to say, it is possible to give power away and still be left with as much or more power as before.**[4]**

Some mentors find it difficult to accept that they should not use power over a mentoree; although they may prefer to use the term 'authority' or call it 'giving direction'. If a mentoree is constrained against their will it amounts to the same thing, and it is contrary to the wisdom of the New Testament. Late in Paul's life, he wrote to Timothy advising him about the use of gentle, non-coercive approaches in influencing others:

The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.**[5]**

Paul knew that effecting a change in behaviour through coercive power is worthless, for it does not change the heart. Meaningful repentance must be freely chosen. Even when sorely tempted to exercise coercive power when dealing with the Corinthian crisis, Paul showed restraint. To those who were apprehensive that he would use his authority to punish his opponents he says in 2 Corinthians 10:6, "we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete." In other words his intention was to resist using his power to punish until such time as his loving formation of Christ in them had rendered such punishment redundant.

Mentors who choose not to exercise power over their mentorees are being Biblically responsible. Yet, in some cases, their admirable restraint may not be enough to create an environment that feels entirely safe for the mentoree. This situation arises when the mentor occupies an organisational position or has personal connections to which power is attached. Even though a mentor in this position may intend never to use that power, the possibility is enough to stifle the candid openness that is essential to an

effective mentoring relationship. Brent, in the story I shared above about being safe, was fearful of this dilemma until he was reassured that I had no access to positional power.

After many years of observation it is my conclusion that it is not only the actual exercise of 'power over' a mentoree that is detrimental to the effectiveness of a mentoring relationship. Even the possibility of such power being exercised may have the same effect because of the apprehension of mentorees. Therefore, it is helpful for a mentor to minimise the sources of their power over mentorees. I noted above that the accrual of power to mentors stems from either personal power or positional power. A mentor's personal power is largely derived from the esteem in which they are held by their mentoree, and little can be done to eliminate this. However, positional power is more readily addressed. I recommend that mentors of Christian leaders in formally appointed roles be independent, holding no position of power in relation to their mentorees so that the threat of power is neutralised. That independence entails that the mentor not be a supervisor or formal authority figure of any sort, nor even a part of the same organisation.

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1997, p.29

[2] Carl Jung, "On the Psychology of the Unconscious", an essay first published in German in 1943, found in English translation in R. F. C. Hull (tr.), *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge, 1966, p.53.

[3] Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1988, p.204. An alternative view was cogently expressed by Stephen Covey in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989, but his voice is still in the minority.

[4] For more on this topic, see Janet Hagberg, *Real Power*, Salem: Sheffield Publishing, 1994.

[5] 2 Timothy 2:24,25

Rick Lewis

works as a mentor and consultant with a wide variety of Christian leaders, churches and agencies, principally in Australia and the UK. He served for 30 years as a local church pastor while also lecturing, mentoring and consulting in diverse contexts. He holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Fuller Theological Seminary. His first book, 'Mentoring Matters' was published in 2009. He may be contacted at ricklewis58@gmail.com