

# ETHICS: THE RIGHT USE OF POWER AND INFLUENCE

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of creating their Code of Ethics and Grievance Procedure

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I have come to understand ethics in a very simple, yet very broad way: ethics is the right use of power and influence. Today I'd like to offer you a context for this understanding of ethical behavior.

Ethics is so often seen as a long list of specific things never to do because you could cause irreparable damage and/or be taken to court. Negative and terrifying. This point of view plays on our fear of making mistakes, and can engender paranoia, defensiveness, and a self-righteous right and wrong. It also tends to make those in power the bad guys and those not in power the victims. This is not to say that clear guidelines for appropriate behavior by those in power positions are not important to prevent intentional or unintentional harm.

The context I wish to present here is one in which behaving ethically is seen as a life-long process of increased awareness of your relationship with power and influence. It requires learning to own the power that is yours, and tracking the impact of your use of power both when this impact matches your intent and when your impact doesn't match your intent. It requires learning how to notice and take responsibility for mistakes. For goodness knows, we all make them. In fact, if we let fear of making mistakes or hurting someone stop us from taking any risks, we would live lives of poverty. When I was a carpenter, some years ago, my boss used to say, "the sign of a good carpenter is not one who never makes mistakes, but one who knows how to fix them."

Being ethical asks nothing less than being willing to fully engage with your relationship with others

in a conscious way—intending no harm. In this context, I find ethics, in fact, quite exciting.

I would like to tell you a story about my personal experience in learning about ethics: both what I now understand, and how much I don't yet understand. I've been for over 10 years now, a member of the staff of an organization that provides training for psychotherapists. About 4 or 5 years ago, we began to realize we needed to pay attention to some people who were experiencing harm. This need first came to light in a meeting of the teaching staff when we discovered that a number of teachers were holding information about sexual liaisons that other members of the staff were having with students. These stories seemed to filter down to the women teachers who would then hold the information in confidence. Some of these situations seemed accutely harmful and others did not. We had our own version of your unwritten "no talk" rule. I don't know why I didn't say anything: maybe because I was afraid to question the judgment of my peers; maybe I thought that I just didn't properly understand the situation; maybe because I imagined no one was being harmed.

There's also some history here. Fifteen to twenty years ago, humanistic forms of personal growth work were pretty naive about the impact of the power role in therapeutic relationships. We were actively trying to change the old system of one up/one down, therapist/patient, disease/prescription and transform it into one in which the patient was called a client and the therapist was in a collaborative relationship in which the client's inner wisdom was respected and empowered. That was the good news.

The prevalent idea was that psychotherapy was about two equal human beings meeting in respect and empowerment. These two people could then be expected to make responsible choices about engaging in sexual, business, or any other kind of relationship. This was much more empowering than the old model, but very innocent in that we did not understand that any time one person assumes a formal role of helper, healer, mentor, authority, a power differential will be created which has a profound impact on the relationship. One is vulnerable, the other is less vulnerable; one is perceived as an authority or holder of wisdom and the other is seeking wisdom or help. What I have now come to understand is that I meet others as equal in our humanness, except that in many situations, one of us has a role that gives us power over the other. Power, in itself, is not bad. It is influence. We all have it and we all need it. So it is our responsibility to learn how to use it rightly.

So we found ourselves in a place similar to the one your organization is in right now: confronted by a number of people who had been hurt, were very angry, and needed us to own our responsibility, and take strong actions to handle and heal the situation. We had never talked about ethical behavior before. So we spent some time, a very concentrated couple of days telling our stories. Both men and women had things to face. For me, in a non-teaching business role in the organization, I had had a brief sexual relationship with one of the students in a training program, not understanding that I was in a power position here. As a teacher, I had had several, what I would call, "special relationships" with students. These were not sexual, but friendships. I didn't realize the effect on other students: jealousy, alienation of the student from the rest of the class, unrealistic future expectations.

It was a very powerful time that the staff spent together. As more and more information began to come out, we were very confused. I can only begin to convey the range of emotions. Shock. Initial denial. Our whole system was being shaken up. A sense of guilt about the harm I and we had caused that we didn't even know about, or even worse, knew about but denied. Grief for the amount of pain in the community. Awakening from innocence and/or denial is a painful thing. So painful that it seems, that some of us began to focus the blame on the person against whom actual written complaints had been received—the person whose unethical behavior had come out into the open first. Some expressed outrage at his

behavior. Some were angry that he had gotten caught. Some wanted to punish him, to get him to repent and reform. Some wanted to focus on him to avoid taking personal responsibility. Others understood that taking this issue of ethical behavior seriously and attending to it in depth was something we all needed to do. We were all responsible.

Overwhelmed by discovering how very much I didn't know and all the possible ethical violations I could commit, I remember feeling a strong desire to simply not have power, to disown my power. Then I wouldn't have to be so careful about watching my impact all the time. When I taught, I was paranoid about giving any student a hug, or talking at length, or making jokes that could be misunderstood, or saying something that should have been confidential, or working with someone who was outside my level of competence. It was very intense. I was "on my case" all the time.

After some time, I understood that it really wasn't possible for me to disown my power. I had grown into my roles as teacher and therapist and couldn't pretend. I also noticed that I could track distress, misunderstanding, or a mistake and by attending to it right away, I could resolve things pretty quickly. It was when I didn't know, or pretended not to know, that I got into more difficulty. So I began to be able to relax my hyper vigilance. Hyper vigilance was a very important stage in learning about myself, however.

In various ways and to various degrees, I think most of us on the teaching staff went through a process of learning similar to mine: from innocence or denial, to shame, to blame, to regret, to disowning, to hyper vigilance, to compassion and responsibility. As I experienced it, on the other side of this process, there are two gifts. One is compassion. There's a place inside where I can make mistakes and have compassion for myself, where I can say, "I really didn't know and I'm sorry" or "I really did know, and I'm sorry." There's also a place of compassion for those people who have hurt me. Maybe they didn't realize what they were doing and maybe they did later and couldn't admit it. The other gift is the freedom that I get from being willing to say, "Yes, I have power, I have influence, and I can learn how to track my impact. I can sense it in a slight drawing back, speeded up talking or breathing, or a subtle wince, or a blinking eye, or furrowed brow, or loosely tightened fist or shoulders... simple, often non-verbal signs. There is a rich

freedom to be real, engage, risk when you have enough self-awareness that you can trust yourself most of the time to track how you are being received and attend to it if there is distress, misunderstanding, or a mistake.

So, to finish the story, we did create a code of ethics, and a grievance procedure. This code was framed as guidelines based on experience, to be used for continuing self-education. When right use of power and influence is seen as a life-long process, we understand that we can all benefit from the learnings of others. This is the reason for a code of ethics. But we can also assume that we will all make mistakes as we learn about power and impact and that we need to be compassionate and take responsibility for the harm that we cause. The function of a grievance procedure is to investigate possible ethical violations and to set up consequences, especially educational and healing opportunities that aim toward preventing a similar mistake from recurring.

After going through this grievance procedure several times, we discovered that the most important tools for healing are mediation and education. At the right time, it is really productive to arrange a safe setting for both parties to talk and try to understand the situation and then resolve the conflict. The willingness to learn is a big part of taking responsibility. It's not enough to apologize. One needs to understand what happened and how it happened. As Moshe Feldenkrais said, "You can't change what you're doing until you know exactly how you do it."

So, to summarize: ethics can be considered simply: the right use of power. Since we are all in positions of power and influence and in positions of being subject to power, it is a lifelong learning process in which we become as aware as we can about what kind of impact or influence we have. Since this is such a huge task, we assume we will make mistakes and we make rules and guidelines. As P. London says, "All good people who have power over others, even just a little power and even for a little while, need access to an ethic that can guide their use of it." We need to have compassion for ourselves and take responsibility for the pain our failures cause.

As you may well know, there are a great variety of ways in which we are in positions of power. The more obvious include teacher, healer, practitioner, supervisor, authority. In these, there is a clearly identified role relationship, which includes a time framework, a setting, and

payment or trade. There are other more informal positions of influence that are less defined but which also require ethical attention. These are roles acquired through learning and experience: mentor, guide, helper, further along the spiritual path. In the context of your situation, I'm sure there are many of these forms of influence and they are very important in the development of your community and spiritual faith.

As I said earlier, whenever you are in a position of power over, in any form, there will be a power differential that you must recognize and take into account. You, as the one in the power role, and it is indeed a role (not your identity), are the one responsible for understanding the impact of this power difference. For example, in the formal relationship of therapist and client from my organization, the therapist's role is to "create a safe space; empower the client; protect the client's spirit; and to see a wider perspective". As therapist, you are paid, client is not; you keep the time boundaries; you are held in high esteem; client is vulnerable, you are not so vulnerable; the course of therapy is deeply affected by your personality, issues, perspective, training; you keep boundaries while your client is encouraged to study and possible change theirs; you are the trusted keeper of very private information; you are the helper, they are helped; you have exceptional influence on how your client sees self. Even in less clearly defined power relationships, these issues of boundaries, vulnerability, and susceptibility to influence will be very present and possibly harder to notice. This open heartedness and trust is, of course, very important for learning and healing, and easily taken advantage of.

To be more concrete, here are several examples of ways in which power can be misused and has been in your organization. Using your position as an authority or mentor to control someone. Getting sexually involved with a client or someone subject to your authority. Using sexual energy in a client relationship in service of your own needs. Being aware of misuse of power and keeping silent about it. Not understanding the amount and depth of influence you have and thus misusing your power with people who are new to the community and thus are very vulnerable and open. Believing that men and women aren't equal in worthiness and spirit. Dismissing feelings/information from someone you have power over because you think they are just projecting on you.

I think there are a number of reasons for misuse of power, some simple and some complex. One of them is innocence. This is one of ways I have most often made mistakes. I can often say I genuinely didn't know anything inappropriate happened because I'm not willing to accept the power that I have. "Who me?" I say. I just can't believe it. I'm taken totally by surprise. Do any of you know that one? Another reason is the mistaken assumption that intention and impact are always the same. Interpretations of what actually occurred are, of course, inner subjective. My intention is to be helpful. In fact, I am so clear about my intention that I become defensive and refuse to believe their experience. How many of you have know this one? No one is wrong here, unless one makes the other wrong. The misunderstanding needs to be brought into the light and clarified.

Another reason for the misuse of power is misplaced ego needs. That is, trying to meet normal natural needs for intimacy, or recognition, through an inappropriate relationship. Another cause of abuse of power is overidentification with the power role, thus using it to control, manipulate, or take advantage of the other person's vulnerability and respect for you. You forget that other people's needs are as important as your own. Maybe you need to control others because you lack a sense of control or self respect in yourself. Fear can be another motivation for misusing power. Being afraid, you remain silent, either by not talking about and examining your own behavior, or by not talking about what you see or know about how others are being treated. Being afraid, you misuse your power by turning anger, pain, and self-judgment against yourself.

So, I would like to invite all of you to engage in an ongoing process of learning about yourself and others in relation to power and influence. I'd like to invite you to come to this exploration from a sense of interest and curiosity, rather than shame and dread. Find out all you can about tracking other people's responses to you, actively seek feedback, be compassionate, own your power and use it responsibly. Learn about being a good follower and tracking the use of power. Speak out immediately when you feel you've been used or hurt. Clarify. Be willing to accept misunderstandings. Take risks, apologize and forgive. Take responsibility. Be human.

## EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE DONE WITH THE GROUP FOLLOWING THE TALK

Next, I'd like to offer you an opportunity to explore your humanness in an experiential way. Please move your chairs to form into groups of four. Get comfortable, breathe, relax, close your eyes, and turn your awareness from the outside world here to your inside world. Just turn your awareness inward and notice your experience of yourself right now. Take a few minutes to notice how you are in relation to all that has gone on this morning. What is it like to be here opening the door to the issues we are bringing to light today? You might notice your thoughts, sensations, breathing, emotions, images, any or all of these. (Option: share what you notice with each other.)

Now, from a receptive place, please let your unconscious offer you a memory of a time when power was misused toward you, in which you were hurt, used, misunderstood. And now notice what this experience is like in your body. Do you tighten up? Are you neutral? Do you freeze? What sensations and where? What is your felt sense of your experience? Notice what kind of thoughts you're having? Is your mind running very fast? Slow? What kind of breathing goes with this experience? What kinds of emotions are you having? Hurt? Stuck? Angry? Confused? Blank? What's it like in your heart? What kind of misuse of power is this? Does it have a particular name, or flavor? Is it familiar to you? Take your time, and when you have enough information, please let go of the memory and bring your attention back here to the rest of the group and then talk with each other about your experience. What commonalities, what differences are there? What's it like to talk about this? Take 10 or 15 minutes.

(Then do same thing with recalling an experience of misusing power. Share in same small groups.) Then hear responses from whole group.

**PURPOSE:** to open the door to talking about ethics; to personally engage people in self-study about power; to humanize by helping people discover themselves in both power over and power under positions; to get away from blame, scapegoating, and dramatic storytelling; and to encourage vulnerability, realness, and the ordinary everydayness of ethical issues. )