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Title: The Role Of Personal Integrity In Upholding "Right Relationship" In Organizations

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The ethical character of the relationship between formal services and the people they assist can often be very problematic. Organizations of all kinds can much too easily end up treating the people they serve poorly, and may even grow to put their own needs ahead of those they are supposed to put first. Rather than exemplifying an ideal such as “right relationship”, these relationships are often damaged by ethics that are devaluing and disempowering, and that become embodied and institutionalized in the formal roles and structures of services. At the same time, it is very important to recognize that while such “structural” ethics are to be faulted, the people who work in such arrangements may often be much better than the structures themselves. Nonetheless, even good people may inadvertently help reinforce and legitimize these embedded negative ethics unless they are mindful of carefully choosing pathways that uphold “right relationship”.

This begins with the recognition that there needs to be a fundamentally respectful and ethical relationship between services and the people they assist i.e. “right relationship”. Secondly, it also requires that such individuals recognize that they can personally embody “right relationship” ethics in how they relate to people, even if the systems of which they are part behave in a quite contrary manner. Thirdly, it also requires that such persons be willing to bear the cost of upholding “right relationship” ethics, as positive ethics held without commitment cannot possibly provide a counterweight to deeply embedded negative ethics. Should these kinds of orientations take hold in the practice and culture of an organization, then it becomes possible to imagine an internal process in organizations in which the people in them try to draw the organization back to a “righter” relationship with the people they serve.

In other words, it is conceivable that an ongoing struggle is engaged to ensure that ethical relationships with the people served prevails, more often than not, over the vast array of pressures and vested interests that undermine such a foundation. In this regard, much like in the links in a chain, the strength of the chain rests in the integrity of the person who constitutes each link. Naturally, the greater the ongoing investments made in collectively strengthening people to draw closer to some sort of ideal of an ethical or “right relationship”, the greater the probable benefit. In ideal terms, such organizations could exist, but the more normative reality is that substantial numbers of our human service organizations do not attend to this issue very well, and may routinely succumb to an ethos in which what happens to the people served fades as an overarching focus, notwithstanding the usual reassuring rhetoric that “the people come first”.

These kinds of conditions, in which ethical collapse becomes embedded and institutionalized as ongoing structures and practices, will most certainly leave good people in these organizations stranded, and without support for their loyalties and ideals of “right relationship”. To say to such people that

nothing can be done about any of this until such time as the organization reforms itself, is to invite despair, as such internally driven and thorough going reforms are spectacularly rare. Consequently, it is important to look at what can still be done with "right relationship" *despite* the organization's overall state of either ethical indifference or perhaps torpor.

A great deal of what can become possible under such unfavorable conditions such as these depends a great deal upon the kinds of decisions taken by individuals more than those of the organization itself. These can be entirely individual decisions or they can be decisions taken by small groups of persons deeply committed to supporting each other, but not necessarily backed by officialdom itself. In this regard what will be described here are "extra official" decisions or decisions that can transcend official thought and disposition, but which do not necessarily oppose it per se.

As such, what is possible are decisions taken by persons who still believe they are free to act and for whom the posture of officialdom is pertinent, but not definitive. These are decisions that are only capable of being made by persons who are certain enough of their own independent authority as a person with their own principles, and who perceive that they have a measure of "free agency". These decisions that will be described here are most certainly quite difficult and committing, but they have the value of being both possible and desirable in the face of adverse conditions. Many might suggest that such decisions are universally untenable when the real difficulty is that they are untenable for some rather than others.

The first decision is to resolve to act towards the users of services in regards to how they "ought" to be treated. Normally, in the best sense of this intent, it would mean extending to the people served a level of respect, decency and actual useful service that would stand a reasonable test of ethical and beneficial treatment at the hands of the organization.

A second decision, quite aligned to the first, is to resolve to unambiguously not treat people in an unethical and devaluing way. In other words, to consciously withdraw from engagement in and endorsement of any devaluing and degrading practices that may be asked of people who may work in that organization. Though many may not believe it, conduct of this sort may not necessarily result in sanctions against the person who acts in this way.

A third decision is to consciously take the position that one will principally remain loyal to the people served, even though one will always strive to give the organization its due. As such, the organization would not "own" such a person, as the person has decided that it is their loyalty to the people served that is their principal concern.

A fourth decision is to take the view that, while the organization may well be entitled to one's best efforts as a dutiful employee, this does not in any way extend to the task of being seen to publicly uphold its myths, manipulations and other forms of deceptive representations of what it is actually about. In other words, the person decides to only uphold that which is truthful, as best as this can be discerned.

A fifth decision is to recognize one's own extensive shortcomings, ethical lapses and the like, and to resolve to ameliorate these such that the role model one asks others to follow is mirrored in one's own conduct. This is not meant to suggest that the person must be an exemplar, but rather that the person resolves to remedy their own matters of integrity, before asking others to do so.

A sixth decision is to resolve to support and uphold others who are attempting to be good and ethical people. In this way, they are strengthened and important alliances become possible. It does not suggest that all such people to be supported are virtuous, just that they are sincere in attempting to be.

A seventh decision is to resolve to persevere with one's attempts to behave ethically for as long as this may be sustainable. The whole point of being a "presence" is to make a difference and this is more likely if the effort is of some duration. This decision does not mean that mere perseverance is enough, as it does also matter qualitatively what kind of "presence" the person may be ethically.

An eighth decision would be to look for suitable opportunities to challenge the organization to become more faithful to people. This need not mean a set of pointless and accusatory confrontations, so much as a drawing of attention to the good that is possible if the organization were to do the right thing.

A ninth decision is to seek to continuously strengthen and prepare oneself to be conscientiously and consistently principled. It serves no one if the person seeking to bring a positive presence to bear lacks the stamina, strength and endurance to stay the course.

Lastly, one can make the decision to stand alongside the people that the organization serves such that they act as advocates, protectors and champions of people where this is welcomed by them and where it is needed.

These decisions collectively constitute a foundation, located in the integrity of individuals, that can serve to support an instinct towards the ethical treatment of people, and will undoubtedly serve, to some degree, to draw an organization back to "right relationship". Nonetheless, they only have

effect if the individuals are able to hold to them. In other words, the individuals must show fidelity to the people for whom these decisions constitute a kind of pledge or promise. If they promise such things, and then act in contradiction of their true intent, then a kind of dissonance begins to occur that will eventually lead to an ethical collapse. Consequently, "right relationship" rises and falls with the ability of the person to act with integrity.

Once this alignment is properly understood, then it is easy to see why organizations behave so differently when they are populated and led by people with strong ethical orientations. One can see that the active ingredient of "right relationship" is people whose integrity and loyalty to people is forthright, dependable and authentic. It is also true that such commitments are often demanding and taxing for the individual, and may well seem quite unattractive to people in search of a hassle free existence. Not only do such ethical commitments bind people to act in consistent ways, it also makes them much more accountable than people who have no obligations to behave honorably towards the people who are supported by the organization.

These "costs" are more than offset by the satisfactions of living up to a principle, but it is important to recognize what ethical commitments might ask of people, and the sacrifices and even sufferings that may come from such obligations. If an individual were to conclude that they could not bear such distress as may come with being occasionally at odds with one's organization and colleagues, then it would be sensible for them to only undertake obligations they can sustain. It is also obvious that a person may quite wisely decide that they cannot personally undertake a demanding regime of ethical commitments to people due their own limitations at a given point in time. They might well support and admire such ethical commitments, but recognize that they cannot meet the obligations involved.

It is also true that few people can expect to be utterly consistent in their ethical conduct, as this would require a kind of systematic conscientiousness and coherence that may well prove to be unattainable for many otherwise good people, with quite admirable levels of personal integrity. Consequently, one might quite sensibly be very cautious about equating ethical integrity with some kind of perfectionism.

This would still leave the door open for any number of good people to sharpen their ethical commitments to "right relationship" by reviewing the kinds of ethical decisions they may have made or not made, and coming to a judgment that they would like to go somewhat further. Since the outcome of "right relationship" is ultimately very dependent on these personal judgments, any effort to reflect on personal integrity will be beneficial in keeping the matter alive and in mind. Where matter can begin to worsen is where integrity is presumed to be beyond doubt, and where there is no need to question it.

We are all the beneficiaries of the countless decisions of many anonymous people who have simply decided that ethical principles matter to them, and that they will try to uphold them. Often we do not appreciate their benign presence and influence until others, with a different cast to their characters, come into force. It is also interesting that while we often praise such persons in retrospect, we often leave them unsupported in their struggles to find and do the right thing. Perhaps if we could develop a culture of appreciation and recognition for these wonderful aspects of many good people, we might somewhat lessen the load they carry on our behalf. "Right relationship" is possible, but not without the integrity they bring.