

# 'SERVANT LEADERSHIP': WHAT I'VE LEARNT ABOUT POWER



By Jill Baker

One theme emerging from the Sharing and Building Power cell during 2021 is the value of practising 'servant leadership', releasing power in others, and stopping others – and ourselves – from abusing power. Jill Baker gives her reflections here.

When I was asked to talk about power at a Better Way network meeting my initial reaction was 'Me?' What do I know about power and where would I start?' But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that actually, I have experiences of power across the spectrum of power-less to power-ful and as a result have formed views and practices that stem from those experiences.

If you work in the social sector, creating the changes you want to see can sometimes feel like an impossible task- it's too difficult, it's too big, it will take too long. But I and just about everyone I have ever worked with have effected some change, because they have chosen to work hard and use the power they have – however little that may be – to create a difference. I have of course worked with many, many wonderful people in the course of my career and all of them have done this, to a certain extent. Sometimes, though, the power they have gets in the way or goes to their head and

they inadvertently create another power imbalance between themselves and the people they seek to help, usually by the way they behave or think they should behave.

I believe that everyone has power – we often talk about people being 'powerless', meaning they are unable to effect change in their lives, but the word is power-less, not power-none. Even those people who experience multiple and complex barriers in their lives still have some power even if they feel like they don't, or can't use it. What that has meant for me in my practice is that when I have considerably more power than they do, it is my responsibility not to share it, but to actively give it away, as much as I can. That has got me into bother with others – usually those with more power than me – because it means you do things that are different and sometimes go against the norms and it also means calling things out when you see power being used badly – even when that's hard to do.

Early on in my career I came across a book that talked about 'servant leadership' and it really resonated with me – the notion that if you have a position of power, authority or leadership, your job is to always think how you serve those you lead, not the other way round. When working out how or what to do, I often go back to that question – who am I serving here? The people I am actually here to serve or the authority that oversees the systems that keep those people in the places authority sometimes wants them? Checking my behaviours and actions are for the former not the latter means that generally I am able to give away the power. It means asking questions such as 'what would you like to happen next' rather than making statement such as 'this is what I'm going to do for you' – which keeps power with me, it doesn't give it to them.

It also means acting with humility, respect and – for me – with humour. Those behaviours help me to communicate more effectively with others who may think my power means I am somehow different to them.

Here's an example from children's social care – when systems lead good people to do things that make no sense but they do them because the system dictates it and they feel power-less to change it. Take the care system – the system tells us one way to keep children safe is to remove them from the things that are causing them harm. Seems sensible but actually that does not empower anyone in the situation to change – it just moves people about. We know that often the outcomes for children in this situation are very poor – but we keep doing it because that's what the system tells us to do. When we started to do something

different the biggest resistance was from staff who felt they would be blamed by 'the powers that be' if it went wrong. As one of the 'powers that be' I was able to use that to empower them to do differently and know they would be supported, whatever happened. It was hard and took time because they were disempowered by the system too. And the outcome was better for everyone – the child, the parent and the workers.

In my current roles I am in several positions of considerable power, across sectors and in roles both paid and unpaid and I challenge myself to give away my power and call out abuse of power wherever I can. I don't always get it right, but always trying means, for me, using the power I have to make a positive difference to someone else.

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