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## Understanding Authority

By Phillip Van Hooser, MBA, CSP

Let's admit the obvious.

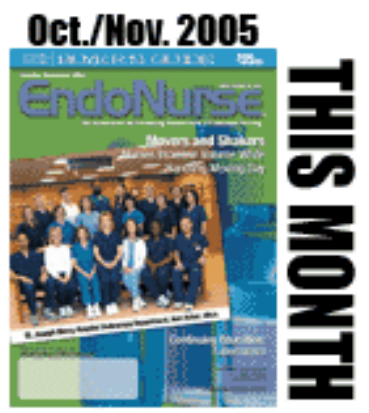


In the workplace, each of us has seen authority used effectively and/or abused deliberately. Authority is an important concept as it applies to an individual's quest to be a more respected and effective endoscopy nurse or a professional of any title.



Those of us aspiring to higher levels of personal and professional performance can benefit from a clear understanding of what the word means. To that end, consider Mr. Webster's rather formal — and somewhat sterile — definition: *au-thor-i-ty: power to influence or command thought, opinion or behavior*

Have you ever wondered what it would feel like to



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have influence over another human being? Have you ever daydreamed about actually being able to command thought, opinion or behavior? Well, you can. Actually, to some degree you already do so every day. Here's how. Consider my definition of the following:

*Formal authority:* The power that comes with the position one holds; being able to ask (or tell) someone to do something, expecting it will be done.

No matter what job or title we may hold, all of us possess some formal measure of authority associated with that position. Some of us are better trained and prepared to accept the responsibilities associated with it. Depending on our level of preparation, as well as our chosen actions and motivations, formal authority can cause us to help or hinder; ask or aggravate; inform or infuriate.

During the course of an average day, every one of us makes dozens of decisions. In positions of formal authority, endoscopy nurses become accustomed to telling patients to wait, sit, come, undress, go, lie down, roll over, raise your knee, relax, sit up, climb down, get dressed, go home — expecting them to do exactly as instructed. Because of the repetitive nature of the job, instructions flow past our lips without need for much conscious thought or consideration. We have learned that in most cases, the appropriate use of formal authority guarantees patient safety and allows the day to progress smoothly. Consciously or unconsciously, we begin to realize that formal authority: the power to influence or command thought, opinion or behavior can be a good thing — a really good thing!

However, every good thing has a potential downside. If not careful, we can easily become enamored with the “power of our positions.” Having people do what we tell them to do when we tell them to do it can have an intoxicating effect. Under such circumstances, too often our senses become dulled and we become oblivious to the dangers of formal authority. When authority “goes to our heads,” it becomes much too easy to disregard, or overlook entirely, critical input we might otherwise receive from peers, superiors and even patients. We all know that self-centered nurses

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and egocentric doctors are notorious for this. Their attitude speaks loudly: “I told you what I wanted you to do. Now do it — without asking questions.” The problems created by such an attitude can negatively affect the working relationships within the team as well as the patients we serve.

But there is a second type of authority to be considered — informal authority.

*Informal authority:* The personal influential power that results from others voluntarily granting their support.

What happens when we don't have the power of a position or job title to fall back on? Can we still influence others? Can we positively impact thought, opinion and behavior? Of course we can.

Each of us has encountered certain individuals toiling away in some low profile, out-of-the-way, seemingly insignificant position. Yet, upon closer inspection, in some amazing way, we find them consistently able to influence and lead others to act, behave or perform in unmistakably effective ways. Patients ask for them by name. Peers posture to be able to work beside them. Doctors and nursing supervisors argue about whose team the person should be on. These seemingly “powerless” individuals were making a difference despite their obvious lack of formalized authority. How did they do it with the organizational hierarchy stacked against them? How were they able to entice others to voluntarily grant their support?

Simply put, they committed themselves to helping others — fellow employees, supervisors, patients — get the things these individuals obviously needed but couldn't otherwise secure for themselves. They helped peers by offering their assistance, support and encouragement. They helped doctors and supervisors by offering loyalty, commitment and a professional attitude. They helped patients by offering information, reassurance and personal comfort.

It's true in doctors' offices, endoscopy clinics and hospitals everywhere. People voluntarily choose to follow and support individuals who help them or who take them to a place they cannot imagine themselves having been able to realize on their own.

With formal authority, the opportunities for utilizing the power of our position are obvious. But how can we go about maximizing our informal authority? Here are a few suggestions.

- Eliminate self-pity — stop whining. Remember, people are rarely, if ever, positively influenced by people who consistently feel sorry for themselves.
- Learn to listen; listen to learn. A direct correlation exists between listening to people and learning about their needs. It is hard to mess this one up. The more you listen, the more you will learn. After all, knowledge is power.
- Always offer your assistance. We may not be able to do much, but we can always do something to help. Make yourself available to others and they will naturally gravitate to you.

Remember, the more we understand the authority available to us — formal and informal — the better prepared we are to understand the scope of things.

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