



# Ethics in Training

## The POWER of the Trainer

*Based on his experiences as a trainer in international youth activities and in his organisation, Miguel Angel poses some essential questions on how trainers use their power.*

Power and trainer are two words with a lot of different meanings and understandings. The combination of the two concepts opens a lot of vistas from which we can approach the always sensitive issue of "the power of the trainer".

The approach that I want to share with you is a self-critical one. It comes from my own experience as a trainer in international youth-activities. Based on my concrete experience, putting my thoughts into words and without generalising, I would like to provoke some reflections in the readers of Coyote, particularly from the large spectrum of trainers (each of them with their particular training experience).

### Awareness of our power as trainers

Understanding power as the capacity to decide, change or influence, trainers should first of all be aware of their power. In a training activity trainers do decide, change and influence while organising, planning, leading, facilitating, and evaluating... We do have power as trainers.

Assuming this power means assuming the tasks and responsibilities (with their limits) of being trainers. Without the assumption of our responsibilities as trainers, our power would be something just esthetical, without any content, or in the worst case pure authoritarianism.

### The scope of our power as trainers

Our direct power as trainers concerns mainly abstract things (programmes, planning, methods and timetables...). But our, in principle, impersonal decisions have a very important impact on people - mainly on trainees but also on other members of the team. We should be more aware of this, even if we have probably experienced it very often. (In this article, I use the words "participants" and "trainees" to name the same people. The

associated meaning that I have in mind is that "participant" expresses more the notion of "being part of..." - more co-responsible" while "trainee" expresses more "being the target of a training..." - more receiver".)

While being aware of the consequences of our decisions on the trainees, we should not think or pretend to have a direct and automatic power over them. This not just because we cannot predict the results of the training on the trainees, but also because of our respect of them as autonomous individuals. This respect requires among other things, flexibility in the programme, readiness to assume unexpected results, openness to new ideas and willingness to listen to the comments and evaluation of participants. In the same way, outside the strict training programme we should avoid any use of our power. Some trainers, without being asked to do so, try to direct trainees even during a free day.

### Some characteristics of our power as trainers

*The trainer's power is normally given.*

The trainer's power is normally given by the organiser of a particular training; it is not something that we possess by virtue of the fact of being trainers. I would not feel the need of formulating so evident a statement if I had not observed trainers making use of their power outside of training situations. Such behaviour very often shows our deficiencies and insecurities as trainers rather than our qualities or professionalism.

I am not suggesting that trainers should take on some other role outside of the training situation. But I think that we should distinguish more clearly between different moments, places and situations. Outside a training situation, we are still the same person but we should not

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make use of the power given to us for and during the training.

*The power, which is given to the trainer, is therefore limited.*

How many times have we tried to alter aspects of a training activity already decided upon or beyond our competence as trainers (e.g. the profile of a training course, the profile of participants, budgets, the length of the course...)? Sometimes, it is difficult for us to accept the limitations of a training course. Sometimes as trainers we deeply disagree with some points but no channel exists to put forward our opinions. But the way of solving these problems should be through dialogue, negotiation and evaluation with all the people involved, and not by taking decisions on our own which are beyond our competence.

Of course, trainers must have some freedom and flexibility in determining many organisational aspects of the training but if we abuse it, this flexibility will be sooner or later questioned and probably cut down.

*The trainer's responsibilities: some responsibilities are more attractive than others.*

All of us have probably experienced this many times. Some tasks and decisions are easily appreciated by trainees but some others not so much. For example, in general, it is not so attractive to guarantee that participants will make a report as it is to lead an interesting dynamic exercise with them.

These two aspects of being a trainer are not so visible to participants (some of whom may well become "new trainers"). If these two aspects are not accepted and transmitted from the beginning, a partial image of what is involved in being a trainer will be reproduced and multiplied. And it will have to be questioned and confronted, sooner or later by our own trainees, in the stages of the process of becoming trainers themselves.

Trainers have different talents and fields of specialisation. Tasks should therefore be divided accordingly among the trainers working in a team. At the same time, I think that it is always a challenge to assume integral the responsibility for a training process. Being a member of a training team should not be something "à la carte".

*The power of a trainer is something shared.*

A team of trainers is a privileged space for living co-responsibility and for the sharing of power. This is easy to say but difficult to do.

Sometimes, what in principle should be an exercise of sharing - the distribution of tasks - becomes a competition for power: each trainer tries to take responsibility for the most attractive elements and leave the rest to the others. Too often, in the discussions and decisions of a trainers' team, under the arguments of experience, skills, professionalism and dedication, we can discover a competition for power going on among the trainers. And this competition is obviously projected onto the participants.

A training is always a collective process in which every person involved should have and assume his or her responsibilities and in that sense, make use power in a spirit of collaboration and not of competition.

### After all of this...

You might have the feeling that I think that power is something rather dangerous and that the best thing that trainers should do with it is to be careful and approach it with a lot of precautions... This is not exactly what I mean.

I see a very positive and enormous power in training and in trainers: they can contribute with their work to the building of a better society for every human being. But trainers have this kind of POWER only if their training has a real influence afterwards in reality, only if through the training they contribute to the transformation of society.

We should remain ambitious to work in that direction. To achieve this aim, it might be good to reconsider from time to time how we are using our power as trainers within training. This is what I mean.

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