

Power, control and space



By Marc Wilson

“Don’t be mean! You must share your toys,” said Matthew. We were a group of three six-year olds, but Matthew had already learnt some life lessons. My two friends had brought their toys with and we were engaged in some or another game. I was scared of my toys getting mixed up with those of my friends or broken. I was cautious – but my caution meant that my friends felt left out – and I was forcing them to leave me out too. I’ve never forgotten that moment. As kids, we do indeed learn the lessons that stay with us for life. The lesson that day was about control and risk. If I was going to see the benefits and fun of having friendships, I was going to have to learn that the more I wanted, the more control I had to give up. If I was always going to decide on the game, set the rules and lead the activity, pretty soon I would run out of friends who would be willing to play.

Whether you know it or not, you are absorbed in battles for power, control and space. You may be the instigator or the target. But you are involved. Maybe you learned how to play well with others as a kid, but at least one person you interact with sure as hell didn't. And sadly, these battles are almost entirely a waste of time and emotion.

There are unacknowledged battles for power, control and space that happen between us every day. They happen between team members, spouses, parents and children. They can be blatantly apparent or subtle. As fruitless as they are, for many of us they will shape our lives.

Perhaps the most obvious battle for power, control and space happens between teenagers and parents. As teenagers, we seek to discover and define who we are – and look for space to do this free of the influence of our parents. It is the peak of a journey that begins with the testing toddler exploration. But battles for control never completely disappear.

In the workplace, battles can be for control of outputs, direction, leadership. In relationships they can be for decisions, time, space and affection.

I had no idea how debilitating and dysfunctional these battles could become. Perhaps most of us lack the awareness of ourselves and others to realise where these fights take place.

A friend Sam (not his real name) had an eating disorder and used to cut himself. He told me, "I feel out of control of so much in my life. Through controlling my eating, I can control my weight precisely. It has become compensation for my lack of control and an obsession. The cutting is an expression of my pain. I feel out of control of the painful feelings. When I cut myself, I can precisely control a reason for pain."

Sam's behaviour is extreme, but sadly not uncommon. The need for control can drive self-destructive behaviours as we hurt ourselves and others. And there are many more battles that happen all around us on a day-to-day basis. You are part of this. Are you aware of your role?

In the long-term:

1. Power, control and space are important.
2. You cannot control someone else.
3. You cannot control your environment.
4. You cannot live for someone else.
5. All you really have is influence.
6. No one and almost nothing really controls you.
7. The only person you can truly control is yourself.

Power, control and space are important

Sadly, we romanticise power and control. We develop hero archetypes of powerful, all-seeing leaders – and may want to become them.

Some young team members were talking of some dysfunctional employees. “Why doesn’t their boss just fire them and replace them?”

“And what happens when the next employees also fail?” I asked.

“Fire them too!”

When we start out, power and control seems so resolving.

“How would you feel if I applied that same solution to your failures?” I asked.

Silence.

Power and control might provide short-term gratification – and leave long-term problems as we run out of people to dictate to and fire. But issues of power, control and space are typically much subtler than that.

The flip side of control is space. We all need space to different degrees. When we control another person’s space (through leadership, a relationship, etc) or ask too much of it, we can provoke withdrawal as that person fights to regain their control. Whatever control might be had becomes worthless.

Look how we react when our personal power, control and space are denied to us. When taken to the extreme, this becomes about our identity and what defines us. Battles and wars have been fought for this. Those battles and wars can exist in our businesses, teams and relationships. If we fail to resolve them, our businesses and teams are ineffective and our relationships are unhappy and fail.

When we try to control others, we can do this through outright exercise of power. But control can also be through to passive aggressiveness and co-dependency – often where the power or position to exert outright control is lacking.

When we are controlled, we can suppress our need for personal space, we can suppress our need for control of our experience and destiny. We can motivate this through loyalty, lack of choice, even love. Some people do this all their lives. They become co-dependents - enablers to controlling personality types.

Neither position is healthy. Controlling behaviour may service a person’s needs, but result in resentment and sub-optimal outcomes. It can rob those who are controlled of their freedom to add value as team members, create leadership vacuums – and even

rob people of their ability to experience life. It may even make those who are controlled feel like they have lost their own personal identity.

Controlling behaviour can result in dysfunction. In fact, controlling behaviour can be a dysfunction in itself. Some psychologists believe that how we are brought up between 3 to 5 years old can affect our controlling behaviour and patterns for the rest of our life. People who are out of control in areas of their life might compensate by controlling other areas. This can be as simple as through passive-aggressive compliance.

Compliance does not seem like the worst thing, but it is difficult to imagine getting the best out of someone if all they do is comply. People can compensate by obsessing about a sporting achievement, an award, a degree – something they can reassert their control without interference. While these might be distracting, it is unlikely that person will ever be truly happy or fulfilled.

You cannot control someone else

We might think we can control someone else. But control of some specific action, what someone says or doesn't say, time and interaction is not control at all. We cannot control how people feel. We cannot control for every sequence of actions and thoughts. We cannot fix someone. No matter how much it is for their own good. No matter how much we care about them.

We might exhibit controlling behaviour. And through power and position we might force compliance.

Have you seen an employee who is stuck in a job and acts out a role? Someone who loses their sense of self in the shadow of a controlling spouse? If this "control" was to bend that person's will, I think all we see is that person's will crushed – or it instigates rebellion.

When we are in sub-ordinate positions and "out-of-control" we might rebel and adopt a quiet resistance. We might fool ourselves that this results in control – but too often we merely become an image of the teenager with the rebellious hair style in the cage of adolescence. We are have not taken control of much at all.

"Control" through power, authority or co-dependence merely creates resentment, repression, rebellion and often forces the person being controlled to substitute elsewhere for lack of control.

If we choose not to attempt to create understanding and influence, we will never meaningfully change how we and others relate.

You cannot control your environment

We might want to control our environment. We might arrange the circumstances of our life to give us the feeling of controlling what happens to us. Ironically this requires

giving up more and more. Hermits don't exactly have a lot left after ensuring they have a controlled environment. We might erect boundaries, rules, enact behaviours, force habits – become obsessive. But we have let our fears and desires take complete control of us.

You cannot live for someone else

We sometimes care so much, feel so scared of doing harm, feel so helpless or want something so badly that we become enablers to controlling behaviour – to a job, a boss, a spouse or a team worker.

It is absolutely appropriate that we should give up control and build trust in order to be successful at work and life. But if we do this on a continual or unbalanced basis we ultimately miss out on experience and we accomplish less. We lose our identity. Even if we don't surrender everything, but just parts, we might overcompensate by fighting for control in other areas.

All you really have is influence

It seems much harder that all we have is influence rather than control. And it is. Influence requires accepting that ultimately a decision and acceptance lies with the other person. It requires that we are persuasive and that we present well-reasoned and emotionally persuasive motivation. It means that we must role model what we wish others to accept. It puts responsibility on us to sort out our own issues and give others the responsibility to sort out theirs.

In a previous job, we had a coach for more senior consultants. He was an Anglican priest. After listening to my frustrations one day he remarked, “Marc, you care a lot. But you can't sort out other people's shit. You have enough of your own shit to sort out.”

My surprise at the priest's choice of language meant that I probably missed the double meaning in that observation. But I never forgot the quote.

Like the pebble in the pond, the potential sphere of our influence is huge. However, we have limited time and energy. We have to choose how to balance the number of people we choose to influence and the depth of those interactions.

We also have to set limits: the amount of time and effort we are prepared to expend before we put the final responsibility for a decision or action with somebody else.

This might mean that we give an employee time to consider a way forward, supporting their consideration and decision-making but ultimately calling time on their decision.

It might mean that we earnestly engage on how to make an employment role work for an organisation and ourselves before making a decision to pursue something else.

It might mean doing everything to make a relationship work – before ultimately giving ourselves a chance to find one that does.

There is a power, a responsibility and a limit here. There is the power and responsibility of influence – we have the opportunity to influence things in a direction that meets our needs. The limit is recognising the other person's choice, our inability to control this, our own time and emotional reserve.

No one and almost nothing really controls you

I am conscious of how spoiled I am. I have so much relative to someone in poverty. I am not disabled in any way. I am healthy. I have not been a victim of violence. I am mobile. I have employment choices. It would be very easy to point at me and indicate the rarity of my situation.

Poverty is not a choice. Disability and illness are not choices. They might very well impose limits on us. It is truly amazing to hear the stories of people who have overcome these. Most other limits and controls are self-imposed.

A colleague once observed how at some point, many of us might step back and discover how many implicit choices we have made. We might be happy or unhappy with these as we observe the house we are committed to paying off, the job we have to do to support our family, the compromises that are the necessity of a relationship, the children we love and for who we would sacrifice anything for.

The team context: what can leaders do?

As leaders, we can architect, role model and performance manage. Ultimately we and our teams are better when we empower our teams to perform within clearly defined guidelines. To do this, we must:

1. Set direction and agree strategy
2. Define (where required) and lead based on clearly articulated values
3. Facilitate and sometimes make decisions and set priorities
4. Set performance requirements with objectives, measures and targets
5. Define clear roles and responsibilities
6. Set clear expectations
7. Empower and equip our teams (sometimes this means getting out of the way!)
8. Performance manage results holding people accountable against the vision, values, objectives and targets.

How we do each step defines how much we control and how much we empower and give space.

These are choices. They were choices we made along the way and they are even choices we make as we continue down a path. Very little actually controls us. Hopefully, we can change our job. We can downsize. We can end a relationship. Very few things ultimately bind us other than our ethics and morals. Having children is perhaps one of those few choices we are truly committed to.

Perceptions, our past failures, social constructs, conventions and even our characteristics do not control us unless we let them. We give these meaning. Nothing truly defines us – not our gender, our race or our nationality. We have control over how we internalise these and relate to the world. If we let labels, our personality, our feelings, our upbringing, our relationships or other people's expectations control us, that is our choice.

The only person you can truly control is yourself

Our first and most empowering choice is to choose to be conscious. Conscious of our own choices, of our ability to make choices. It is empowering but it is also frightening. Being conscious of our ability to make choices means being conscious of making them and giving them true consideration.

The power comes from the realisation that we can give up control of day-to-day actions and decisions and go with those of others. We can give others control knowing we have ultimate control of ourselves. We can step away from a role, a job or a relationship if our influence fails, if we do not get

The team context: what can team members do?

As team members we can set goals, influence, lead from behind – and follow:

1. Clearly articulate our goals and understand how they might or might not be realised within a team
2. Set timeframes for evaluating progress against our goals
3. Understand what our appropriate level of influence might be in the team and build this
4. Accept leadership and commit to the team
5. In the context of point 3, contribute to the definition of direction, values, objectives, measures and targets
6. Understand our role and responsibilities
7. Agree clear expectations
8. Step up! (sometimes as a follower or resource)
9. Manage upwards (feedback, influencing, seeking direction)
10. Be accountable for our performance
11. Assess our power, control and space requirements against our goals and our place in the team.

rewarded or recognised appropriately or if our trust is abused. This requires commitment to that influence, trust and purpose - or our giving up control and sitting back merely becomes a passive-aggressive act in itself.

It seems deeply ironic that realising ultimate control can mean giving it up.

It is critical to our health and success that we understand and prioritise what is controllable. In the end our control lies in the macro-decisions – what we choose to do, what we commit to, what we take on. Most of the micro-tasks involve others – who we cannot really control, only influence.

Importantly, not only can we not control others or the broader environment, we cannot control time. Every second passed is gone forever. Consciously setting goals and parameters against which we will evaluate our choices and reviewing these regularly allows us to gain control of our overall direction and lives.