



# Remaining credible when working on behalf of others

When you are working for change, you can often exercise influence, but not power. Your position may be in the gift of the people who manage the service system. Your invitation to the table can be withdrawn if your behaviour or suggestions are disapproved of.

You can be invited to make a contribution, but you cannot enforce any action. You can be critical of the current set up, but have no authority over it. Any power you experience may feel very transient and disapproval can come from any direction.

When you are trying to keep yourself grounded and safe in such an environment, you need to know whom you are working on behalf of and whose authority you carry within you. You need to know what makes you both credible and authentic.

When we were thinking about this solitary person trying to make change happen, we began to imagine a triangular force field around the person. The three points of the triangle represented the following:

- their personal credentials
- their constituency credentials
- their service system credentials.

Each of these points carries their own positive and negative attributes.

## Personal credentials

These include your natural authority. For example, being a parent of a child with a disability, being an older person etc. With the growth in 'user led' organisations, this credential has become increasingly important.

However, it is worth being aware that whilst a strong connection between a person's identity and the cause they are campaigning for is useful, it can also make the person vulnerable. Any time the external world devalues the issue they are wishing to be addressed, they can experience personal devaluation. Any expression of prejudice can be taken as a personal insult. Stigma is experienced not an abstract concept, but is acutely felt.

A person's beliefs and commitment to a cause or set of ideals can also give them personal credibility. People who are seen as genuinely being committed to a cause, without any obvious personal connection (such as having an impairment themselves or caring directly for someone else, etc), are of course essential to the growth of any movement. If the only members of your movement are people who have direct personal reasons to be there, you will not change the world.

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## Constituency credentials

These include the organisations, groups, clubs and families you consider yourself to be a member of and to represent.

Your influence can mirror the public reputation and power of the organisation. Some organisations are more powerful than others: they have larger bank accounts; they employ more staff, they have been around longer and they are members of the recognised disability establishment. Others are viewed as troublemakers or single issue groups, who have a very narrow focus. They may be seen as angry and destructive, rather than passionate and constructive. Trying to create a profile for a new issue or group is time consuming and organisations are often in competition with one another for restricted resources and influence.

## Service system credentials

These include the groups, committees, steering groups and working parties you are a member of and the number of key people within that system you can count as allies.

The status you have in these groups will depend on the alliances you make, the personal relationships you develop and the knowledge you bring. If you are not involved within the service system, you have little chance of changing anything. You may have huge personal authority and strong support from your constituency groups, but you won't be making anything change.

## Being centred

Imagine these three different kinds of credentials as points on a triangle around you. Each point of the triangle is in tension with the other two and your task is to remain an equal distance from each point in order to retain credibility with each party. If you move more towards one point than the other, then the whole structure becomes distorted.

For example, if you are seen as being in the pocket of the service system, the people and cause you represent may begin to become uncomfortable and feel unrepresented or even betrayed. They will withdraw their support. Alternatively, if you do not manage to maintain status within the service system, you may be strongly supported by their constituency but not be of use in negotiating change.

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If you are seen as being only interested in your own personal issue, you can be sidelined by the service system and marginalised by the constituency of interest you claim to be a member of. You can be accused of working only out of self-interest.

If you are seen as working on behalf of one group, you can again attract criticism in terms of self-interest, particularly when service provision contracts are being negotiated. However, if you have no connection with any group or organisation, it is difficult for you to act in a representative way as you may have no one to check anything out with or to mobilise.

Your task is to be aware of how healthy and balanced your own credibility map is and to take action to ensure that each point of the triangle is strong.