

## Becoming Powerless in the Client Role

*Deborah Reidy is the director of Cornerstone in Massachusetts. In this article she points out that the role of 'client', which is often considered to be benign, actually has powerful negative effects for people who are already vulnerable.*

In the last two decades, a model of management called technocratic managerialism has taken hold in human services. The nature of the technocratic managerial model can be found in the definition of the two words. 'Technocracy' is a social system in which scientists, engineers, and technicians have high social standing and political power; a philosophy that advocates the enlistment of a bureaucracy of highly trained technicians to run the government and society. 'Managerialism' is the application of the techniques of managing a commercial business to the running of some other organisation such as local government or public services.

Models are sets of ideas, images, beliefs and assumptions that we carry in our minds; they have a profound effect on how we perceive the world and ultimately on how we behave. Models are often taken for granted and unexamined by those who adhere to them, yet their impact on practices can be profound; they shape every aspect of practice, including how a problem is defined, what the possible remedies might be, and who is seen as the most qualified to offer remedies. As a way of illustrating this, contrast the names of two residential agencies: One is called Services for Community Living, an agency that was formed and named in the early 1980s; and the other, Alliance for Resource Management, is a residential agency operating in the present day. What does the name of each agency imply about the aim of the agency?

From the perspective of the model of technocratic managerialism, as applied to human services, the problem or need is defined as being the efficient and economical management of services. Possible remedies then include standardisation, uniformity, and cost containment. The focus is on the management of the service rather than on the content and quality of the service; human beings become subordinated to processes. The following is a recent example.

A young man with cerebral palsy was unable to continue living at home with his family and was placed in a respite house near his family home where he lived for a number of months although respite houses are intended for short-term breaks. The young man's family was very involved in his life, visited regularly and invested a great deal of time working with staff to orient them to their son's needs. Although the situation was not ideal it was relatively satisfactory to the family. They were then told by the local government agency, which funded the service agencies that supported their son, that those services would no longer be available. The family was also told that their son would need to move out of the respite house within six weeks, although the government agency had no idea where the young man would be moving or what other agencies would now take over his support services. The family had no recourse in the matter because the changes were based on an administrative reason beyond their influence. The administrative reason was this: One agency had declined to 'bid' on the respite contract, which meant that they were going to lease the respite house to another agency that would be providing services to a different 'population' of people.

In this, and other examples of technocratic managerialism, we need to ask: Who are the people engaged to carry out the remedies of standardisation, uniformity, and cost containment? Most likely, they will be those in roles of administrator, bureaucrat, or some other functionary role that is content-free. They will not necessarily be people with a background in human service provision because such people can actually be seen as being an impediment, likely to focus on the 'wrong' things, such as the needs of individual people.

In the technocratic managerialist model, the major role filled by those who receive services is that of 'client'. The client role is a relatively new one in an array of largely negative roles such as eternal-child, sick or dying organism, and burden, that have historically been filled by people with disabilities. The role of client, often considered to be benign, actually has powerful negative effects, including the following:

- Personal attributes take a backseat to generic characteristics; and scarcely anyone knows what is unique or special about the person who is the client.
- The client role passifies people, robbing them of the possibility to develop their unique gifts and talents.
- The locus of control lies outside the person: others know better; others are the experts.
- A predominant practice is that of fitting the person to processes, even when such processes are termed 'individualised' or 'personalised'.
- People spend a lot of their life being given remedial 'treatment' for not fitting in.

In the technocratic managerial model, it is almost impossible for people receiving services to fill any significant role other than that of client. This is why many attempts to help people break out of the client role are unsuccessful. If we understand the power of models then it is insufficient to attempt to change the roles that are filled by the individuals who are affected by the model, without changing the model itself. Although 'one person at a time' change-efforts are quite appealing, they seldom result in more than minor improvements in how a person is perceived.

I fear that the technocratic managerial model has yet to see its peak. Those who have concerns about the impact of this model on the lives of people receiving services might begin by thinking hard about the kinds of positive roles that those people might fill and then identify what beliefs, assumptions, support arrangements and models would best develop and sustain those roles. That way, we might stand a chance of designing systems that work for people, rather than the other way around.