Karen Rhodes

Karen Rhodes, the struggle for power and control.

Craig R. Patton

Ohio University Southern Campus
Abstract

At the core of *Karen Rhodes – On Becoming A Manager* is an issue of power and control between her and her students while managing the Summer Youth Program. Karen is given her first opportunity be in a leadership position, the issue she is presented with early on is, does she have what is necessary to be an effective leader? Can she maintain power and control of her classroom or, will the students be the ones who are in charge? In the battle for power and control, will it be an overt conflict between Karen and her students or, will they engage in subtler forms of conflict involving rivalries, jealousies, personality clashes, role definitions, and struggles for power and favor (Johnson, 1976)?
Karen Rhodes, the struggle for power and control.

Karen was already a teacher at Midwestern University as well as a local artist however; this background did not prepare her for the difficulties of managing ten “at risk” students with checked pasts and of different ethnic backgrounds. This is apparent during her interview when she states, “I thought I could charm this groups into complacency and obedience” (Bell, 2007). The approach she hoped to adopt was the concept of charismatic authority, or a charismatic leader which, according to Max Weber, is charismatic authority based upon the personal characteristics and power of an individual or a small group (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, Ganesh, 2004). Karen’s basis for this style of leadership came from her past experiences as an instructor at the university; she assumed the students in the Summer Youth Program would look at her in the same manner. The problem with this approach was that Karen did not possess this kind of leadership in the eyes of her Summer Youth Program students and as such, they did not recognize or respect her authority.

Karen had the ability, the power that rests only with individual persons (Cheney et al., 2004), to manage the Summer Youth Program. She was an instructor at the local university and the subject she was teaching was something she had firsthand knowledge of. Karen also had legitimate power, one who has obtained the okay of society to use it (Cheney et al., 2004), to run the class since power was given to her to run the program from the Business Enterprises Center for Artists. Karen was also given the authority, legitimate use of power in society (Cheney et al., 2004), to use her power since the Business Enterprises Center for Artists had asked her to manage the Summer Youth Program believing she could handle the responsibility of not only the position but, of the students as well.
The problem that Karen encountered was, her students did not respect her authority, and she could not and did not maintain power over her class. In her interview she states that on the first day, “Everybody fought, everybody walked around, it was chaos” (Bell, 2007). The problem Karen faced was one of resistance, a stronger force, resource, person, or institution (Cheney et al., 2004), against her ability, authority, and legitimate use of her power and control of the classroom. The “resistors”, those who are opposed to change regardless of the personal or professional reasons for questioning a new initiative (Cheney et al., 2004), in this scenario were the students of her class, many of whom have had a troubled past and as such, did not adhere to authority. The students engaged in an overt form of resistance, while they were not unhappy to be in the class, they were unhappy to be under the authority of Karen.

Karen clearly did not have control of her class and the power rested in the hands of the students who, while being selected for the program, were not interested in anyone telling them how or what to do. Had it not been for a fellow faculty member, she may not have been able to grain control and power of her classroom, he clearly understood Karen needed help and suggested how she could take charge of her class. After taking his suggestion on watching The Dirty Dozen, she began to grasp an understanding on what he she needed to do to take back her power and control of the classroom. Karen decided to use coercive power towards what was the leader of the resistance, a young man who had already spent two years in lock-up. Coercive power was gained whereby Karen threatened to punish the rebellion student leader (Cheney et al., 2004). Karen confronted the student, made it clear that the student would not intimidate her or the fellow students, and then removed him from the class.

“Well, they saw I could be firm and fair” (Bell, 2007). Karen had clearly shown to the rest of the class that she meant business and she was not going to allow the control and power
within the classroom to get out of hand. Karen was able to garner a level of respect for her position that she did possess in the beginning. The class now recognized her ability, legitimate use of power, and the authority to use that power. It is at this point that class begins to move along and a routine forms. “The interesting thing is, they break the routine with their group talk. Sometimes it is to get out of work and sometimes they work away while this interesting dialogue goes on” (Bell, 2007). While this momentary break in between work may have been annoying at times, Karen still had power and control over the class.

Karen began to learn more about her students through these dialogues and about who these young men were. According to Karen, “Well, now they are talking about racism, in a way they are working out dominance, I think the group has debates. When one guy calls another a racist, the group tried to help” (Bell, 2007). In this sense, the students are vying for power and influence within their collective group (The McGraw-Hill Companies, 2000). Karen now has another dynamic to contend with, power and control within this small group of students. These students are using their voice, instead of violence, to determine who has the power and control; they use language, myths, symbols and rituals to exercise their power and influence over the others in the class (The McGraw-Hill Companies, 2000). “They are highly verbal. When I work with them one at a time they tell me everything. I worry what will happen because they have so many problems” (Bell, 2007). Sometimes just the simple fact that they are able to vent their feelings is enough to relieve their frustrations. Karen sees the potential of her students to more than what they are however, she is also realistic in that they may never rise above where they if they cannot maintain power and control of themselves outside the confines of the classroom setting.

Even given the problems of her students, Karen believes this is the group she wanted, “They gloves are really off. They only really care about each other’s opinions. They are at the
point that they will tell one another to go back and do it right” (Bell, 2007). These students are from a varied and troubled past so how can they overcome their hostility, discrimination, discord and tension resulting from the inability to be inclusive and respectful of human differences. The critical question is why is it so hard for different types of people to work together and to be productive (Wilcox & McCray, 2005)? The students in Karen’s class are beginning to exhibit another form of control and power, this one being multidimensional power, or multicultural power, with not only Karen, but with each other as well. This approach helps people to view issues from different points of view; participants use discussion to discover and to learn from one another, not persuade or advocate. The best deliberative groups can help participants move toward shared, stable, well-informed collective decisions about how to work through deep-rooted problems, how to move toward multicultural competence (Wilcox & McCray, 2005).

“They are terrified at being ostracized from the group. They only care about each other’s opinions. They are testing me I think. It is what I call “in-your-face management’’” (Bell, 2007). The students in Karen’s class have no problem with trying to exert their own power and control within their collective group. As Karen points out, no one wants to be left outside the group and its norms also; the group will take measures to ensure that the quality of work meets with the approval of the group. The students have set a bar for themselves and will not allow anyone from within the group to deviate from that standard. This does have the potential to spread outside the group and challenge Karen’s power and control of the class. Suppose the class should decide to get in her face and demand certain things of her and the class, if she is not able to handle this situation, should it occur, she will forever loose the power and control she had fought to gain and maintain.
Karen was asked if she would fire anyone else, her response was, “Sure, I would feel bad for about ten minutes. Seriously, I would have to, that’s what they want from me, the final testing” (Bell, 2007). Karen is fully aware that her students will rise up against her to challenge her power and control however; Karen has reward power where she can grant or deny positive sanctions to the students (Cheney et al., 2004). Assuming her class should decide to take the control and power possess, she can use her coercive power to remove the leaders of the rebellion from the class and then, she can use to reward power to take away many of the freedoms that may take for granted. In this way, Karen could rule her class with an iron fist should she let her power and control go to her head.

If we take a look at Karen at the beginning of the class to where it is now, we can see she had the ability, legitimacy, and authority to be in charge of her classroom and was given the power to run in accordingly. The problem was her students did not recognize this and tried to assert their own power and control of not only the class, but over Karen as well. Karen learned that she had to draw a line in the sand and get tough with her class if she was going to take back and keep the power and control of the class. In this she was successful but, as we see at the end on the interview, she knows that they class will make another attempt to challenge her. If Karen follows her previous steps, she will be successful in deflecting the attack and reassert her ability, legitimacy, and authority.
References


