

Developing and Using Personal Support Systems

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One method, of acquiring, maintaining and demonstrating one's interpersonal competence is to have a network of supportive relationships, which can be drawn on as needed to help achieve one's particular objective.

There are many different roles that other people can play that provide support to the individual. A well-developed support system, therefore, includes a variety of types of individuals and is not limited to people who are, say, close or good at listening or giving advice.

It is a skill to be able to establish, maintain and effectively utilize a support system. As with all relationships, support systems can be difficult to establish, counter-productive and disappointing at times, and somewhat unpredictable. They take energy to maintain. They can also be used as crutches that make an individual more dependent rather than more resourceful.

Keeping one's support system up-to-date and relevant to one's goals requires on-going assessment of the kinds of people who are currently available, letting go of those who are not relevant or who in fact are sabotaging one's efforts, and building in new persons who could be of assistance.

Supportive people may or may not be aware that they are part of your system, and they may or may not be aware of the other persons who are important in your life. The relationship may be close and personal or quite distant and impersonal. But it is important that they be useful and that the relationship be equitable and fair.

It is not necessary that support systems be reciprocal. However, most of us do function as parts of other persons' support systems. It is an equally important skill to know how to *provide* support in a variety of ways. Analyzing how one becomes part of another's support system and how one leaves that relationship can provide a basis for increasing one's own interpersonal competence.

Definition of a Support System

The definition given below is broken into phrases for the purpose of emphasizing and elaborating some of the major issues involved in building an effective support system.

A Support System Is:

- A resource pool;
- Drawn on selectively;
- To support me;
- In moving in a direction of my choice; and
- Leaves me stronger.

The *resource pool* consists of people, things, environments and beliefs. However, here primary emphasis will be given to the issues concerning people and relationships. The notion of a resource pool raises several questions for us. It is important for us to be *aware* of those individuals who could be *potentially* a part of our support system. This requires some skills at scanning our world and keeping an open mind about the possibility that any given person may be a relevant resource. It is helpful to be *proactive* in reaching out to locate and identify people, since it is unlikely that the appropriate people will come to us. *Size* of the resource pool is important since larger and more complicated systems require a lot of energy to sustain, while very small systems may not have the range of resources you may need. The composition or variety of people thus becomes an important criterion in building an effective system.

Drawing on people selectively requires skills in choosing appropriate persons and keeping those persons who are not particularly helpful from getting in the way. It involves taking the risk of asking for support and being rejected or let down. It may also occasionally require dealing with jealousy and competition among those people in the system who would like to be asked for assistance and feel left out when you call on someone else. Willingness and availability are also obvious requirements for those people we ask for support.

It is often difficult for many of us to ask others *to support us*. It may, for example, arouse feeling of guilt – we may think we’re “imposing.” It may feel like an expression of weakness or an admission of failure. It may also be against our values or beliefs that altruism is more important than taking for ourselves. Asking for support also opens up the fear that we may become dependant on another person rather than being self-sufficient. It does require that we be open to help, that we be willing to make demands on other people and that we be reasonable clear about the expectations we have of them.

To move in a direction of my choice requires that I be able to distinguish my goals and directions from those of other people and organizations. Then, I can move towards achieving *clarity* so that I am in a position to make a *declaration* of that direction that can be understood by others. It means making a commitment, even if it is only for a short time or is somewhat tentative.

Ideally, a good support system will *leave me stronger*. It confronts me with my own ambivalence about growth and often will generate new demands, as others perceive my strength. I am also confronted with letting others know I can do certain things without them, which means I may lose some relationships.

Functions of Support Systems

Support systems can be used for several different purposes, depending on the situation confronting an individual:

- *Re-establishing Competence*: Particularly in times of high stress or major transitions, we may find ourselves functioning at a very low level of competence. This may be because of anxiety, the energy it takes to cope with a crisis, physical and emotional difficulties, or overload of demands on us by other people. A good support system can help us cope and return to our previous level of functioning.
- *Maintaining High Performance*. It can be equally important to have access to resourceful people when one is doing well in order to maintain that level of activity. Although it may be easier to use assistance when performing at a high level, many people tend to neglect their support systems at such times, finding it more difficult to ask for help.
- *Gaining New Competencies*. A somewhat different function of support systems is to assist in developing new skills. What are needed here are persons who can challenge, serve as teachers and models and provide emotional support during periods when one may be feeling awkward or inept in dealing with new situations.
- *Achieving Specific Objectives*. Many of the objectives we strive for cannot be met without collaboration with and contributions from a number of persons. This often requires people who have skills and resources we do not have or that we do not desire to develop.

These functions of support systems are focused primarily on the individual. They often can help an individual contribute to organization goals and objectives, but it is equally important that support systems be used when individuals find themselves in conflict or opposition to the directions of other people, groups and organizations. They should function in such a way as to maintain and develop the integrity of the individual, which may include changing the organization, creating conflict or leaving a particular setting.

Support systems are particularly helpful in coping with the stress that accompanies transitions in relationships, roles and positions, or careers. Skills in establishing new support systems are essential for successful transitions into new environments.

Different Types of Support System Members

Support system members can function in a number of different ways. Some people fill a variety of roles, while others may offer only a single type of support. The following list illustrates some of the different functions of support system members:

- *Role Models* – People who can help define goals for positions one might assume in the future. Role models not only show what is possible but also are a source of valuable information about the opportunities and problems associated with a given role.
- *Common interests* – People who share common interests or concerns can be especially important in keeping one motivated, and in sorting out those problems

that are primarily those of the individual room problems imposed by the larger system and require collective activity to bring about change in that system.

- *Close Friends* – People who help provide nurturance and caring, who enjoy some of the same interests, and who keep one from becoming isolated and alienated.
- *Helpers* – People who can be depended upon in a crisis to provide assistance. These people are often experts in solving particular kinds of problems and may not be the type with whom one would choose to have a close personal relationship.
- *Respect Competence* – People who respect the skills one has already developed and who value the contributions that one makes in a given situation. They are particularly helpful during times of transition when one may be feeling unsure of oneself in developing new skills.
- *Referral agent* – People who can connect one with resources in the environment through their knowledge of people and organizations. They can refer one to those places where one can obtain needed assistance.
- *Challengers* – People who can help motivate one to explore new ways of doing things, develop new skills, and work toward the development of latent capabilities. They often are people whom one may not care for as personal friends, but who are demanding of us.

Some Principles in Using Support Systems

- *Parsimony* – An attempt should be made to keep the system as simple as possible to minimize the energy it takes to maintain it.
- *Maintenance* – It is wise to keep relationships current and up-to-date so that when you need to draw on people, they are informed and appreciative of your need for their assistance.
- *Equity* – It is important the relationship be one in which both sides feel there is a fair arrangement, whether it be accomplished by returning help, payment of money, joint sense of accomplishments, or whatever else makes sense. Guilt can easily build up when there is a sense of indebtedness that cannot be repaid.
- *External Support Base* – the primary base of support for being competent should be to the system in which one is using one's skills. This will enable a person in conflict when it becomes necessary. Leaning on people inside the system in which one is trying to be competent often leads to a sense of dependency. (Paradoxically, when one is seen as having an external support group, it is more likely that people inside the system will also turn out to be supportive.)

- *Back-up Resources* – It is wise to have several places one can turn to for particular kinds of support to reduce the sense of vulnerability one feels should an individual be unavailable or unwilling to help in a given circumstance.
- *Feedback* – It is important that feedback be given both ways to check on how each person feels about the process of giving or receiving assistance. Helping often creates resistance and/or resentment and unless there is a means of keeping track of the process, the relationship is likely to erode over time.