

Coercion & Control Recognition Framework™

An expanded Spirit Led Institute resource based on Biderman's Chart of Coercion

Purpose

This framework helps identify patterns that may erode agency, dignity, discernment and internal authority in relationships, workplaces, churches, ministries and organisations. It is a reflective recognition tool, not a diagnostic instrument.

Important: A single behaviour does not establish coercive control. Context matters. Look for pattern, power, proportionality, function, repetition, available alternatives, and cumulative effect on a person's capacity to choose and act freely.

Reference: Biderman's Chart of Coercion

Source basis. Albert D. Biderman's model identified eight general methods of coercion. The supplied reference reproduces the chart and a domestic-violence adaptation, citing Amnesty International, Report on Torture (1973). The concise summary below is provided for orientation; the Spirit Led Institute expansion begins on the following page.

Biderman category	Core effect / purpose
1. Isolation	Deprives social support and reduces capacity to resist; can foster dependency.
2. Monopolisation of perception	Fixes attention on the immediate predicament and limits competing perspectives or stimuli.
3. Induced debility & exhaustion	Weakens mental and physical capacity to resist through depletion and overexertion.
4. Threats	Cultivates anxiety and despair through explicit, vague or unpredictable consequences.
5. Occasional indulgences	Provides intermittent positive motivation through favours or changes in treatment.
6. Demonstrating "omnipotence"	Suggests that resistance is futile by demonstrating control over outcomes.
7. Degradation	Makes resistance costly to self-esteem through humiliation, insults or demeaning treatment.
8. Enforcing trivial demands	Develops a habit of compliance through minute rules and punishment for non-compliance.

Attribution note: The eight-category architecture and original coercion concepts belong to Biderman's model. The organisational, relational, safeguarding and internal-authority applications below are an expanded Spirit Led Institute interpretation and should not be represented as Biderman's original wording or conclusions.

Spirit Led Institute Expanded Framework

The expanded framework asks not only, “What behaviour is occurring?” but also, “What is this pattern doing to the person’s available energy, perception, agency, dignity and capacity to exercise independent judgment?”

1. Isolation & Relational Restriction

Mechanism. Reduces access to alternative perspectives, relationships, support and independent reality-testing.

What it can look like

- Exclusion from conversations or networks
- Relational gatekeeping or discouraging outside consultation
- Information being selectively withheld
- Discrediting a person to others or positioning them as the problem
- Creating dependence on one person, leader or system for information or belonging

Reflective safeguarding question Am I becoming more isolated, dependent or disconnected from people and perspectives that help me think freely?	Restorative direction Reconnection, independent support, transparent information and restored access to safe relationships.
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2. Control of Perception & Narrative

Mechanism. Narrows the interpretive field so that one person’s or system’s explanation increasingly becomes the only acceptable account.

What it can look like

- Repeated blame or reframing of events
- Selective information
- Triangulation and narrative control
- Spiritualising, moralising or minimising legitimate concerns
- Redirecting attention from substantive issues toward the person raising them

Reflective safeguarding question Am I still free to interpret my own experience, test the facts and reach a different conclusion?	Restorative direction Chronology, evidence, multiple perspectives, independent reflection and renewed trust in discernment.
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3. Exhaustion, Depletion & Boundary Attrition

Mechanism. Consumes physical, cognitive and emotional capacity until less energy remains for reflection, resistance, substantive work or maintaining boundaries.

What it can look like

- Expectations of work outside agreed hours or availability
- Repeated out-of-hours contact or manufactured urgency
- Meetings scheduled but repeatedly not attended, leaving another person waiting or continually reorganising their time
- Preparation for conversations that never occur; repeated rescheduling and follow-up without resolution

- Circular or unnecessarily prolonged meetings
- Administrative or relational demands that consume energy that should be available for the actual project
- Repeated violation of a clearly expressed boundary, requiring the person to spend their available energy defending, restating or re-establishing the boundary instead of having it respected
- A pattern in which maintaining the boundary becomes so exhausting that compliance begins to feel easier than continuing to defend it

Reflective safeguarding question How much of my available energy is being spent doing the work - and how much is being spent protecting my time, boundaries, attention or right to say no?	Restorative direction Respect established boundaries; reduce unnecessary demands; restore predictable communication; protect recovery time; pause non-essential engagement; and return energy to the substantive work or decision.
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4. Threat, Consequence & Exemplary Punishment

Mechanism. Attaches fear or anticipated consequence to disagreement, refusal, challenge or independent action. The warning may be direct or communicated by observing what happens to others.

What it can look like

- Explicit or vague threats
- Threatened exclusion, loss of role, opportunity, status or belonging
- Withdrawal of support or access
- Unpredictable consequences following disagreement
- Using another person's treatment as an example of what happens when someone does not comply
- Allowing visible punishment, exclusion, humiliation or adverse treatment of a challenger to operate as a warning to everyone else

Reflective safeguarding question Am I making this choice freely, or am I changing my behaviour because I have seen what happens to people who disagree or refuse?	Restorative direction Name the actual and implied consequences; distinguish legitimate accountability from intimidation; document patterns; create safe routes for dissent and independent review.
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5. Intermittent Reward & Relief

Mechanism. Alternates difficulty with moments of approval, warmth, inclusion or relief, which can keep a person invested in the hope that compliance will restore the relationship.

What it can look like

- Warmth after conflict
- Sudden praise or inclusion after periods of withdrawal
- Promises of change
- Temporary easing of pressure
- Opportunities or approval that appear contingent on compliance

Reflective safeguarding question Am I evaluating the overall pattern, or am I holding on because occasional positive moments temporarily	Restorative direction Assess patterns over time rather than exceptional moments; clarify expectations and look for sustained
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relieve the distress?	behavioural change.
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6. Demonstrated Power & Apparent Futility

Mechanism. Communicates that another person or system controls the outcome and that resistance, appeal or disagreement will make little difference.

What it can look like

- Decisions made without meaningful consultation
- Control of information, access, process or resources
- Invoking position or hierarchy instead of addressing substance
- Bypassing agreed processes
- Creating the impression that challenge is pointless because the decision-maker also controls the avenue of review

Reflective safeguarding question What authority actually exists here, and what authority have I assumed or been encouraged to believe exists?	Restorative direction Clarify legitimate authority, decision rights, review pathways, accountability and the limits of positional power.
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7. Degradation, Humiliation & Dignity Erosion

Mechanism. Makes disagreement or resistance costly to dignity and self-worth.

What it can look like

- Public humiliation
- Contempt, ridicule or dismissiveness
- Character attacks or name-calling
- Speaking about a person rather than directly to them
- Disproportionate criticism that shifts from conduct to personal worth
- Using shame to produce silence or compliance

Reflective safeguarding question What have I begun believing about myself because of how I am being treated?	Restorative direction Separate treatment from identity; restore dignity; insist on respectful process; seek witnesses, support and appropriate accountability.
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8. Micromanagement, Trivial Demands & Displacement of Attention

Mechanism. Directs disproportionate scrutiny toward minor matters and can condition compliance while significant responsibilities or concerns remain unaddressed.

What it can look like

- Micromanagement and unnecessary permission-seeking
- Whole meetings dominated by minute details
- Disproportionate criticism for inconsequential matters
- Excessive correction or reporting requirements

- Rigid or shifting expectations about small tasks
- Repeated scrutiny of minor errors while larger governance, safety, relational or performance issues are ignored
- Using process compliance as a substitute for addressing the substantive problem

Reflective safeguarding question Am I being encouraged to exercise judgment about what matters, or trained to concentrate on avoiding criticism over small things?	Restorative direction Restore proportionality; distinguish material from immaterial issues; define decision authority; address substantive risks first; and assess whether process serves the work or has become a mechanism of control.
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Restoration of Internal Authority

Recognition is not the endpoint. The restorative task is to recover the person’s capacity to know, choose, speak, disagree, set limits and act from conscience without having all available energy consumed by managing another person’s demands or anticipated reactions.

Recognise	Locate	Discern	Separate	Restore	Reclaim
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Central restorative question

“What has happened to my ability to know, choose, speak, disagree, set boundaries and act from my own conscience?”

Interpretive Safeguards

- Do not infer coercive control from one difficult interaction, a single missed meeting, legitimate performance management, reasonable accountability or ordinary disagreement.
- Consider the cumulative pattern: repetition, power imbalance, proportionality, predictability, consequences for dissent, respect for stated boundaries, and whether behaviour progressively reduces meaningful choice.
- Distinguish poor management or disorganisation from coercive function. Similar behaviours can have different meanings depending on context and pattern.
- Where safety, abuse, employment, legal or professional obligations are involved, use appropriate specialist, safeguarding, workplace or legal pathways rather than relying on this reflective tool alone.

Source & Development Note

Based on: Biderman’s Chart of Coercion, as reproduced in the supplied reference, which cites Amnesty International, Report on Torture (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 1973. The Spirit Led Institute expansion adapts the eight-category structure for reflective safeguarding, organisational and relational analysis, with additional attention to internal authority, dignity, boundary attrition, resource depletion, exemplary consequence and displacement of organisational attention.