

Spotlight on Power



Power is the ability to achieve purpose. Power is the ability to affect change

Martin Luther King (1968)

What is Power?

Singh (2009) defines power as simply “the ability to get things done the way one wants them to be done”. It is often linked to influence as power in organisations can be about getting people to do things they might not want to do, or to persuade people to achieve a goal or objective. A leader uses their powers of persuasion to gain buy-in from team members, or they may use the authority that comes with their position to get people to conform, depending on their preferred leadership style.

Power is about a relationship between people and, in leadership, the exercise of power depends on the “beliefs, perceptions and desires of the followers” (Buchanan and Huczynski 2004). French and Raven (1959) proposed that leaders have different sources of power that they may exercise, dependent on the situation – sometimes using different bases of power in different situations with the same person. They also point out that anyone can have power in an organisation and that power doesn’t simply come with a job title. They identified five different sources or “bases” of power that a person may use dependent on the situation and the resources they have available, and Raven, B. H. (1965) later identified ‘Informational Power’ as a sixth base:

Reward Power – this power is related to the belief of the followers that the leader has access to rewards that they can award in return for people following instructions/achieving goals

Coercive Power – this power is based on the ability of the leader to administer “unwelcome penalties or sanctions” if followers don’t conform or follow instructions. This can be seen as a negative form of power if followers are fearful of the leader

Referent Power – another word for this power base might be charisma. Followers believe that the leader has qualities or abilities that should be copied, and the leader is able to influence others due to this belief as they want to be like the leader

Legitimate power – this can be described as position power, where followers are influenced by the authority of the leader due to the position or title the leader holds. Followers believe the leader has the authority to issue orders and they are obliged to follow them

Expert power – the leader exerts power because of some knowledge they have, for example they are an expert in a particular process or subject. Followers are influenced by the superior knowledge of the leader, and rely on them because of their expertise

Informational power – resulting from a person’s ability to control the information that others need to accomplish something

Power as a Motivator

Power can be a motivator for a leader as they have “the desire to have an impact, to be strong and influential”, as well as a motivator for the team, where morale tends to be higher where the leader has power as a motivator: “The managers who are motivated by a need for personal power are somewhat more effective. They are able to engender a greater sense of responsibility in their divisions and, above all, create a greater team spirit” (McClelland and Burnham, 2003).

McClelland, D. and Burnham, D. (2003) also identify two other leader motivators which, they argue, are less effective than a leader’s “power motivation”:

Achievement as a motivator	Leaders who are motivated by achievement “focus on personal improvement” and therefore tend to “want to do things themselves” rather than empowering the team to complete tasks
Affiliation as a motivator	These are leaders who are concerned for others and want to be liked – this can cause challenges if it impacts on decision making and undermines the leader’s objectivity.

McClelland, D. and Burnham, D. (2003)

Power and Empathy

The word ‘power’ can have negative connotations when associated with leadership – there are examples of leaders where the use of power, and the position of the leader, becomes all-encompassing, with empathy and compassion being forgotten.

That is, such leaders rule by fear and followers feel compelled to take actions, not because they want to, but because they are afraid of the consequences. Hougaard, R. et al (2018) explain that “... it’s not that power makes people want to be less empathetic; it’s that taking on greater responsibilities and pressure can rewire our brains and, through no fault of our own, force us to stop caring as much as we used to”.

They argue that all is not lost, but that leaders can be “rewired” to be more compassionate having the “intent to contribute to the happiness and well-being of others” and proactively building better “human connections at work” (Hougaard, R. et al, 2018).

References

- Buchanan, D and Huczynski, A (2004) **Organisational Behaviour, An Introductory Text**, Prentice Hall
- French, J. and Raven, B. (1959). **The Bases of Social Power** https://www.researchgate.net/publication/215915730_The_bases_of_social_power 1st May 2007
- Hougaard, R., Carter, J. and Chester, L. (2018). **Power Can Corrupt Leaders. Compassion Can Save Them.** <https://hbr.org/2018/02/power-can-corrupt-leaders-compassion-can-save-them>
- Luther King, M. (1968). **Speech Given to Sanitation Workers Striking In Memphis.** <http://www.nowcrj.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/King-Speech-Excerpts-1968-03-18-FINAL.pdf>
- McClelland, D. and Burnham, D. (2003) **Power is the Great Motivator** Harvard Business Review January 2003 <https://hbr.org/2003/01/power-is-the-great-motivator>
- Raven, B. H. (1965). Social influence and power. In I.D. Steiner & M. Fishbein (Eds.), **Current studies in social psychology (pp. 371–382)**. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston.
- Singh, A (2009). **Organisational Power in Perspective** [https://ascelibrary.org/doi/full/10.1061/\(ASCE\)LM.1943-5630.0000018](https://ascelibrary.org/doi/full/10.1061/(ASCE)LM.1943-5630.0000018)