



The Good Side of Power

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Misconceptions about Power

The concept of power has developed into a mostly negative attribute, especially when placed into societal perspectives; such as political power, the abuse of power, and control over resources. We have also developed a negative connotation of power in the workplace by focusing on bad management, controlling supervisory practices, or the 'stab in the back' experience. Because of our prevalent thinking about power as a negative attribute; leaders forget that power can be positive, and in fact, a necessary attribute to seek and practice. (Sashkin,1997).

In organizational development and leadership literature, the concept of power has been described since the late 1950s when two social scientists identified five types of power: Coercive, Reward, Legitimate, Referent, and Expert (French and Raven 1959.) This was later amended to include Information (Raven 1965). This and other papers describe how one obtains power, while other papers describe a choice that leaders can take to exercise that power. (Sashkin, 1987, McClland 2003, Lammers, et al. 2009).

Power and Leadership

As we explore the concept of power in leadership and our organizational culture, we can identify two choices, or 'power pathways' for understanding our personal leadership development. We can also use this understanding of power to mentor those around us.

There are two power pathways; Social or Selfish. Selfish power is described as "Vertical Individualism", which is power for advancing one's personal status and prestige. Social power is described as "Horizontal Collectivism" which is to benefit and help others. (Torelli and Shavitt, 2010). Social power is also referred to as "Empowered Leadership" and best described in the Visionary Leader:

" Leaders have a strong need for power and influence... they know that it is through power and influence that productive action is directed toward achieving organizational goals. What's more, they realize that power and influence must be widely shared, not just exerted at the top levels by a few. In effective organizations, everyone feels he or she has a lot of influence, especially over the job for which one is personally responsible. Effective visionary leaders use power to empower others, who can then use their power and influence to help construct a shared vision." (Sashkin, 1997).

Once we understand how power is integral to leadership and the culture of our organizations, we can use that information to develop ourselves and others. How we or others use the components of power determines if it is Social or Selfish. Does Selfish power exist in our types of organizations? Maybe it is rare, but it does exist. Perhaps it is more common in larger bureaucratic organizations where there are more

opportunities for individual advancement and obtaining resources.

Social Power

Empowerment, although often overused and misunderstood, is the concept of Social power in action. As soon as a person receives power, they give it back to others. This is the true definition of empowerment. As leaders we seek power for the common good for our organization's mission, actions, and sustainability. Using Social power, we naturally create a culture, systems and structure to support and grow our staff, board, and volunteers to help achieve our collective mission. Social power is open, transparent, encouraging, and honest. It is about others rather than being about oneself. Social power is about positive influence rather than negative control.

Selfish Power

Sometimes we have to use Selfish power to protect a person, or our center, but this should be for only a short term. If someone is doing something that could cause harm to themselves or others, we may exercise authority and control. We are using that power temporarily.

The use of a single factor, such as withholding Information, does not mean the person is Selfish power seeking; since there may be other factors and reasons to consider; for example, a personnel issue. Leaders should watch for patterns of consistent behavior that might identify a person seeking Selfish power. There may be events that confirm your suspicions. Example: a person who goes around you, without your knowledge, straight to the board chair with an issue that you have a different opinion. You find out about it later. If there are observed trends of this type of behavior, then this could be evidence of Selfish power seeking, and was no accident. If this was a one-time incident and after corrective measures never happened again, then it most likely was naivety.

Introversion and extroversion impact the behavior of those seeking Selfish power. Introverts seeking Selfish power will be invisible and secretive, while extroverts will brag about and flaunt it.

A Power Tool

The chart below can help us self-assess or observe others developing or trying to develop power. The relationship among the source/factors and how we use them is always dynamic and are listed in Column B. If we are truly seeking Social power, then most of our energy will be focused on Column C. People seeking Selfish power will focus their energy on Column A. Note the source or factors describing how we get power are the same for both Social and Selfish power; it is how we use those factors that determine what type of power we seek.

View the center column B first to identify the source of obtaining power, or a factor influenced by power. Look left and right to view the impact of that type of power.

A. Selfish Power (controlling)	B. Power Source/ Factor	C. Social Power (Influencing)
First resort	Coercive (punish)	Last resort
Strings attached	Reward (delegate/ recognition)	No strings attached
Expands beyond boundaries	Legitimate (by position)	Respects boundaries
Does not share credit	Referent (by reputation)	Shares credit
Controls access	Expert (Content knowledge)	Open access
Keeps	Information	Shares
Guards	Experience	Mentors
Closed/secretive	Communication	Open/transparent
Secret	Decisions	Transparent
Long term	Control (need to use)	Short term/temporary
Stockpiles	Resources	Distributes
Avoids (for self)	Risk	Assesses (for others)
Obscure	Visibility to others	Clear
Self-preservation	Goal	Organizational advancement
\$\$/title/position	Motivation	Mission/Influence
For self	Dollars	For others
Destroys	Morale	Builds
Personal enhancement	Vision	Societal benefits

Summary

When our colleagues described the concept of power in so many different ways, everyone was correct. When they spoke of fearing or avoiding power, they were referring to Selfish power. When they spoke of wanting and liking power they were referring to and embracing Social power. As leaders we seek power, not to control but to influence. We seek power not to self-promote but to advance our organizations. We use power to empower. We have a personal choice. Do we choose Selfish power, or do we choose Social power? We also have an organizational choice. Do we promote an organizational culture that promotes and rewards Selfish or Social power?

Which power type do you choose?

Resources

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