

The 3 Levels of Power

by Cyndi Suarez

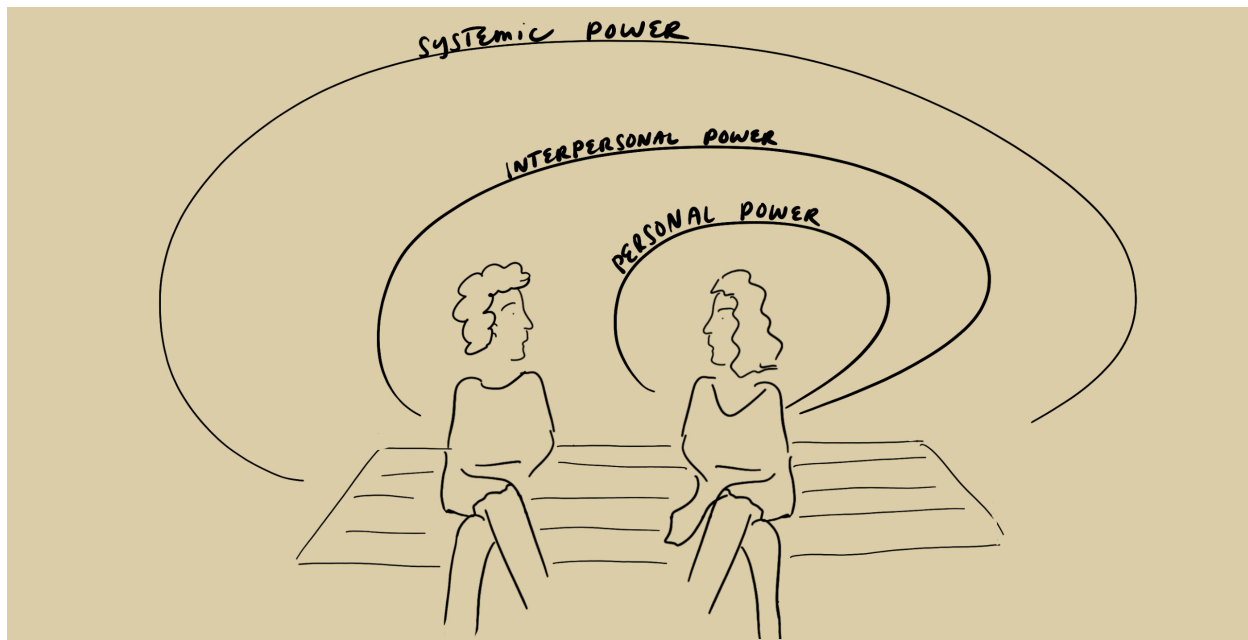


Image by Saphia Suarez

When I published *The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics* nearly ten years ago, the question I got over and over again was, “How do we use this in our work?” It was then that I realized that, though it is called the power *manual*, it is complex, and a simplified, applicable summation of its contents could be useful to the reader.

So here it is—“The 3 Levels of Power.” This is what I focus on when I advise, speak, and consult with groups to apply *The Power Manual*’s frameworks to their organizations and networks.

What Is Power?

We all want power. The power to **avoid** what we don't want, to **attract** what we want, and to **create** what we want to see in the world. It is brought to life by our actions.

Action implies relationship. A relationship with a partner, a boss, a friend, a system— how power is enacted onto us or how we enact power onto others. The core dynamic of power is relational. These relations occur at three levels— **personal**, **interpersonal**, and **systemic**.

The type of power we are referring to can often be categorized as either **supremacist power** or **liberatory power**. Supremacist power is the ability to dominate or control people and things. Liberatory power is the ability to create what we want, and is often a daily practice of transforming what we currently perceive as limitation.

Most people committed to living in harmony with those around them wish to move away from supremacist power and toward liberatory power. Liberatory power requires a commitment to living mindfully and constantly expanding our awareness. It allows us to move through the force field of relationships without participating in the supremacist power dynamics that may be present within them.

We can move from supremacist power to liberatory power by understanding how power works at the personal, interpersonal, and systemic levels, and how to enact liberatory power at each level.

Personal Power

At the personal level, power is essentially about **identity development**. Our power narrative is learned in childhood, through interactions with our caretakers and our peers. If our development process was “successful,” meaning we had largely positive experiences with trust, autonomy, and self-initiative, then we develop a strong sense of self and therefore a healthy ego identity.

As an adult, there are more complex identities beyond the ego identity created in childhood. Leadership expert Jennifer Garvey Berger calls these identities **mind forms**, or ways of making sense of the world, and identifies four. She finds that moving through these mind forms requires the ability to integrate increasing complexity, or difference.

The simplest is the **self-sovereign** mind form, in which beliefs and feelings remain constant over time.

Then, there is the **socialized** mind form, which occurs when we begin to subordinate our perspective, or will, to that of the group, as we move towards affiliation and expertise.

The most common, the **self-authored** mind form, is when we begin to question what we know, learn to hold different perspectives, and make decisions according to our values.

Few make it to the outermost mind form, the **self-transforming**, where we learn to see the similarities hidden inside difference.

*Shifting mind forms requires **transformational learning**—learning that changes **how** we think.*

The Essential Personal Identities

I propose that there are two essential identities—**powerless identities** and **powerful identities**.

We are **powerless** when we internalize the idea of power as **dominance**. No matter whether we are dominant in these power dynamics or not, we are subject to the idea that dominance is the best position to be in. However, we are never truly powerful when our idea of power relies on the other being subordinate.

We are **powerful** when we **refuse domination**—to dominate or be dominated.

Interpersonal Power

At the interpersonal level, power is about interactions. The goal of liberatory power is **effective interactions**. These are interactions that **disrupt dominating behavior** (the taking of more than one's share) and **generate mutuality** (which includes transforming as a result of our interactions with others).

Feminist philosopher and psychoanalytic theorist Teresa Brennan finds that our interactions are laden with exchanges of **affect**, or emotional responses. Humans essentially toggle between the **two main states** of emotional affect—**anxiety** and **joy**. You can identify whether the affect being exchanged is liberatory or dominant based on how you **feel in your body**.

The typical interaction between a dominant and subordinate is one in which the **dominant offloads anxiety** and the **subordinate uploads that anxiety**. On the opposite end of the spectrum, effective interactions in which liberatory power is present have a much greater capacity for an exchange of **joyful affect**.

We can **build our capacity** for effective interactions by interrupting unequal power dynamics rather than contributing to them. The point at which an interaction becomes laden with either dominant or liberatory power is the **point of difference**—the moment at which difference becomes apparent. The way we relate to difference determines our response.

Dealing with Difference

People who are not attracted to difference often respond to it with domination patterns; while those who are attracted to difference respond in a more liberatory manner.

The **supremacist** approach to power offers two options for dealing with difference—**ignore** it, or view it as a cause for **separation**.

The **liberatory** approach views differences as **strengths** and entertains **interdependence** as an option.

Effective interactors striving for liberatory power know how to cross the thresholds of difference. We can deepen the practice of effective interactions by understanding the **key interaction patterns** of **domination** and **resistance**. These are outlined in my book.

Systemic Power

At the systemic level, power shows up as **self-location**, how we orient towards society. Sociologist Thomas Henricks identifies four patterns of self-location. He finds that people tend to have a self-location preference in their interactions in society.

Self-Location Patterns

Privilege is, simply put, the **possession of special rights**, an advantageous position in relation to valued resources. It reflects an imbalance of claims and counterclaims, rights and responsibilities. This position is valued in Western societies.

Subordination is **being the object of obligations**, constrained at every turn. A subordinate person's boundaries and meaning-making tend to be defined by others. This position is not valued in Western societies.

Marginality is **separation from others**. Marginalized people do not impose their will on others and avoid the will of others, relatively speaking. When marginality is

forced, as with minoritarian groups, the position is not valued. When it is chosen, as it is with the rebel, it is valued.

Finally, **engagement** is **being fully engaged in interactions**. To be engaged is to participate in challenges that we find worthy, balancing self and others, rights and responsibilities. This position is the most productive for human relationships. It **promotes joy**, defined as expanding the self through meeting others.

What happens at any one of these levels affects the others. For example, a person in an organization who has a powerless identity may have charged interactions with others in which he uses dominant interaction patterns, yet feels himself to be the victim. This could, in turn, affect his position in the organization in that he may be perceived as unleaderly and kept in a subordinate role. Thus reinforcing his powerless identity.

Conversely, someone with a powerful identity could enter an organization in a subordinate role in which she is fully engaged and interact with others in effective ways. She may then be perceived as leaderly and treated accordingly. Thus reinforcing her powerful identity.

Power is not defined by your role; it is defined by your actions. Power is enacted. To enact liberatory power: understand the power you have, work to expand or develop it, and use it for the good of all.

Perhaps it is also your job to help others do this.