

Workplace Power & Influence - Me or We?



By Dr. Chance Eaton

A unique role for me as a learning and organizational development consultant is to observe work environments' culture and climate. Since leadership development is a common job responsibility, I can't help but watch leaders' levels of influence on others. I pay very close attention to employees in supervisory, management and leadership roles, and I try to understand how they use their positions to influence group performance and behavior.

I often use a thought experiment to help me understand how deep a leader's influence is. I imagine sample situations outside of work, such as a Saturday farmers' market, and imagine how different employees would react to a leader's influence. If I saw you at a Saturday farmers' market, in weekend clothes, and we crossed paths, would I step into a street vendor's booth in attempt to avoid you or, at bare minimum, acknowledge you and continue walking by? This is the result of positional power, where influence ceases to exist once we exit the boundaries of the workplace. Alternatively, if I saw you at the Saturday farmers' market, would I go out of my way to say hello, introduce you to my children and start a heartfelt dialogue? This is the result of personal power, where influence continues to exist even outside the traditional boundaries of work. This test gets to the heart of the type of power you wield.

In the late 1950s, social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven wrote "The Bases of Social Power" and identified five separate modes of power. Today it continues to be one of the most widely used approaches to understanding power in the workplace. The five modes include coercive, reward, legitimate, expert and referent power.

Positional Power

Individuals who use coercive power use threats of punishment to accomplish compliance and obedience. This is a positional type of power because when the boundaries of work disappear, so does the person's influence. As an example, I once worked with a leader whose ultimate strategy was to create an atmosphere of fear. You could see that the entire team was very prepared for every meeting, was nervous and would agree with anything the leader said. Even when there was an item up for discussion, they would know what the leader wanted to hear and would fall in line with the desired decision. They did this because they didn't want to receive punishment for being out of line. This is the mode where workplace bullies live. On the positive side, the department ran very smoothly and with little disagreement, but survey data showed that its members were disengaged and felt disrespected.

A related source described by French and Raven (1960) is reward power. Team members comply with

the leader because of their desire to receive rewards in exchange for compliance and obedience. This is another form of positional power because when the boundaries of work are left (specifically the ability to access rewards or funding), the power disappears too. Just as my kids will try to butter me up when they want money for something important to them, employees will comply with their leader in order to receive funding for projects and work activities. I once had a boss to whom I had pitched for over a year the purchase of a software service. Once he was convinced the return on investment would be adequate, he didn't say "Good job for researching an important business solution." Instead, he told me "Merry Christmas." He said this because he wanted to remind me that he was the one gifting me with something of value and it was only possible due to his spending authority. In essence he was reminding me that he held influence due to his rewarding capabilities.

A third type of influence is legitimate power, according to French and Raven. This refers to the formal right found in traditional hierarchies, where team members comply and exercise obedience due to the sheer authority a leader holds. I once had a supervisor who would enter the work space and say "How are my children today?" He felt that he was the father of the team and that his employees, some who were of a similar age, were his children and entitled followers. I recognize legitimate power being exercised when I see employees go along with requests even though there is no personal acceptance or deep commitment to carrying out the order. The team follows because they have to – it is their job. I once had to carry out an order I deeply disagreed with. I had the support from the rest of the team and wanted to continue the conversation as a team. However, it became apparent that this was not up for discussion, and I remember saying, in a rather condescending tone, to my boss, "Well, you are the boss, so I guess I just have to do it." My boss said, "Yes, that is right." He was reminding me that the traditional hierarchy rules all and that ultimately we have to fall in line with the chain of command. Sometimes this is appropriate, but if you live in this mode of power, odds are that you will only get resistance in the long run.

Though there may be times when positional types of power (coercive, reward and legitimate power) are effective, a common reaction, according to leadership author Afsaneh Nahavandi (1997), is resistance. If a leader lives in one of these three domains, employees may grow to passively, or even actively, resist the leader's influence. Major turnover in specific work groups

is a common occurrence I see when leaders live in positional power. The employees' resistance and distress is strong enough that they begin to leave for other employment opportunities. Gallup finds similar results in its employee-engagement research. Gallup consultant Marco Nink indicates that the immediate supervisor almost always plays a role in why highly motivated people become disengaged from their work: "Quitting is almost always a statement against the immediate supervisor." (Gallup Business Journal, 2009, p. 1) In other words, the root of disengagement is simply poor management. (Gopal, 2003)

In positional power, influence is derived from the position that the individual holds. Once the title is taken away or we leave the formal boundaries of the workplace, their power disappears with it. I recently watched a formal leader with some of the company's highest levels of authority moved into a specialist role. Overnight, their influence disappeared with their title change. This signaled to me that their influence was ultimately positional.

Personal Power

The fourth type of power, according to French and Raven (1960), is expert power. Influence in this form of power is derived from the belief in the person's knowledge and subject-matter expertise. Position isn't a factor in this case; instead, it is the person. It is common for employees to bypass their formal hierarchy and seek out the person with expert power due to the valuable information they possess. I once had a work colleague who had an enormous amount of employee-relations subject-matter expertise. Consequently, when they spoke on employee matters, I would listen with great intensity. Because of their sheer competence on the subject, I trusted them and would look to them for guidance. Instead of compliance, a person displaying expert power creates an environment of commitment, where their influence is welcomed.

Finally, referent power refers to a leader's attractiveness to others in general. It includes their likability, charisma and perceived similarity and creates an urge to be part of their in-group. As a result, this type of influence can generate commitment, where the leadership influence is welcomed and accepted. This is well demonstrated when you see, at the Saturday farmers' market, a co-worker who commonly uses referent power. Instead of avoiding them, you will go out of your way to say hello to them and start a meaningful dialogue. They are a role model, and due to the respect they have earned in the workplace, their in-

fluence leaves with them when they leave the formal boundaries of the workplace. This personal power, versus positional power, leads to a deep commitment to organizational mission and vision.

The Danger of Positional Power

As a general rule, when you can lean on personal power versus positional power, personal commitment will increase and team members will accept your ideas and decisions. However, this requires study and practice in the basics of leadership and influencing a shared movement. In my line of work, I commonly notice that leaders misinterpret their team members as being committed when in reality they are simply being compliant. I know this because I will often hear a leader comment on their team's commitment to them, but in one-on-one conversations with the employees, I hear the employees say something entirely different. It also shows up in the data. I've seen leaders comment on their teams feeling respected, but 360-degree reports show a majority not feeling respected or heard.

Being in a position of authority is a dangerous thing if you do not understand how to truly influence people at a deep and meaningful level and lean on the position itself to create the desired influence. Research shows us that when people have an inflated sense of power over others, they will assume they have a privileged perspective to information and draw inaccurate assumptions; in essence they will anchor too heavily on their own vantage point, distorting clear messages. (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi and Gruenfeld, 2006)

Empowerment

Being in a position of power can have unintended consequences. If unchecked, an inflated sense of power can hurt a leader, the employees and the entire organization. The real secret to being influential is not to have power to influence others but to empower others. In fact this is the crux of leadership – hiring, developing and motivating those around you to be leaders. Empowerment is all about sharing your power and giving it to your team members to perform their job functions. It is all about creating an atmosphere of responsibility, self-efficacy, honesty, integrity, trust and collaboration. Empowerment is all about creating an atmosphere of listening to understand before being understood, support, risk tolerance, reward and celebration of success, sharing and driving towards a vision and continuous human-to-human dialogue.

This all starts with an ego check. Who is this really about? Me or we? When I work with a leader who can't seem to let go of their positional power, I know I am dealing with an ego that needs to satisfy their self-identity as someone who is in control and, in some cases, has low self-esteem. Alternatively, when I work with a leader whose goal is to turn their team members into leaders themselves, I know I am working with someone who truly wants to influence a shared movement. So you have to ask yourself "When it comes to power, is it about me ... or we?"

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