

POWER AND THE DARK SIDE OF HUMANITY



By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

It started with a newspaper ad promising \$15 per day to participate in a 2-week study of prison life. Professor Philip Zimbardo (1971) selected 24 college students (of 75 applicants) who met the criteria for normalcy and emotional stability to partake in a simulated prison study in the basement of the Psychology department at Stanford University. The makeshift prison included barred cells, beds, solitary-confinement, and area for the guards.

The participants were randomly separated into “guards” and “prison inmates”. To mimic a true situation, the “prison inmates” were arrested in public, hauled to the prison by police car, booked stripped, deloused, and dressed in prison attire. The guards were dressed in uniforms, nightsticks, reflector sunglasses, keys, and even whistles.

The rules were simple; the prisoners were to refer to themselves by their prison number, told to refer to the guards as “Mr. Correctional Officer”, routinely lined up for count, provided three meals/day, and three supervised toilet visits per day. One would expect that a group of young college men to make fun and not take the assignment seriously. But this didn’t happen at all.

At first, the prisoners were joking and even rebellious; but within a short amount of time, the prisoners became passive to their guards’ authority. The guards became filled with a sense of power, control, and authority. In fact, some of the guards became progressively abusive to the prison inmates. They were harassed, awoke during the night, taunted with insults, given pointless tasks, placed in solitary confinement, ridiculed, and even physically punished.

By the 6th day the study was terminated because one of the graduate students, Christina Maslach, Ph.D., challenged the morality of the experiment. Of all the people that were aware of the study, she was the only one who every questioned the morality of the situation. What was supposed to be a simple 2-week study observing the behaviors of guards and prisoners, with a group of men that were not prone to violence, turned destructive. Normal people became dehumanized by authority figures acting in their institutional roles. In time, the study did result in the formal recognition of ethical guidelines by the American Psychological Association.

There is a dark side of humanity that can become expressed when normal people are placed into social roles and institutional positions of authority.

Not only can people adopt tyrannical controlling styles of leadership, but they can adopt submissive, helpless, dependent, and survival like behaviors. The environment is stronger than we realize, and people are not always as independent as one would think.

Another important piece of research prior to the days of ethical guidelines comes from Stanley Milgram in the mid 1960's. He wanted to understand if Nazi killings during WWII could be partially explained by authority-obedience phenomenon.

In the experiment, via newspaper advertising, participants were promised \$4.50 to help study "memory and learning", when in fact the experiment was designed to study obedience and authority. When the participant showed up to the laboratory at Yale University, they were introduced to another participant, who happened to be a confederate (an actor in the study). To determine whether the participant would be the 'learner' or the 'teacher', they picked sheets of paper to determine which role they would play. But the random assignment was also part of the study design, as both slips said "teacher" (the actor would claim theirs said 'learner').

The participants were then sat in different rooms, one for the 'learner' (the actor), where they were attached with electrodes, and one for the 'teacher', where they sat in front of a shock generator with 30 switches ranging from 15 volts to 450 volts. They could hear each other but could not see each other. Finally, an 'experimenter' (also an actor in the study) wearing a lab coat sat behind the 'teacher'.

During the session, the 'teacher' (participant who answered the ad for \$4.50) gave the 'learner' word pairs, and then read four possible choices. The 'learner' was to press a button indicating their response. If the 'learner' answers incorrectly, the 'teacher' was to administer an electric shock to the 'learner', with the voltage increasing by 15-volt increments for each incorrect answer. Since the 'learner' was an actor, they never actually received electric shocks. To ensure the 'teacher' knew what the shock felt like, before the session began, the 'teacher' was given a sample electric shock.

The 'learner' (actor) purposefully gave wrong answers on purpose, in order to see how far the 'teacher' would go up the voltage scale. Further, the 'learner' (actor) would commonly protest, shout, ask to leave, bang on the wall, and complain of heart problems during the experiment. At the highest voltage level, the 'learner' would fall silent. If the 'teacher' objected to administering higher voltage shocks, the 'experimenter' in the lab coat sitting behind the 'teacher' prodded

them to continue. Example prods included: please continue, the experiment requires you to continue, it is absolutely essential that you continue, and you have no other choice but to continue.

Before the actual experiment, when the design was described to psychology students, psychiatrists, and Milgram's colleagues, most said the average person would stop at 135 volts, and not a single person would go to 450 volts. The actual results were very concerning – 65% of the participants (teachers) continued to 450 volts, and everyone went to 300 volts. The 'teachers' (participants who answered the newspaper ad) were uncomfortable, and exhibited varying degrees of stress. There were many variations of this study conducted, and most lead to similar conclusions.

Though the study faced many similar ethical issues seen in Zimbardo's study, it points out the power of an environment anchored to authority and resulting obedience. When normal people are placed in an environment that allows for the presence of authority, the remaining human capital can become obedient and submissive to power.

The infusion of power is also extremely sensitive. In a study by Galinsky et al. (2006), they asked participants to draw the letter 'E' on their forehead for others to view. They found that when normal people are asked to recall times where they had power over another person, they were 3 times as likely to draw the E facing themselves (backwards to an observer). The infusion of power results in people anchoring too heavily to their own vantage point, and unable to adjust to other people's perspective.

Power and resulting obedience isn't only a behavioral phenomenon – it is a biological one. Research done by Hogveen, Inzlicht, & Obhit (2014) found that brains fundamentally change how they perceive the actions of others. Using Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation to measure motor cortical output, the authors found that participants primed with power reduced their ability to mirror others, which is a cornerstone of empathy. Power literally changes how the brain responds to others. This research helps explain why authors of Bradberry & Greaves (2009) continue to find Emotional Intelligence scores become worse the higher you go up the traditional corporate hierarchy. They have simply been accustomed to being in positions of authority, followed by obedient and compliant subordinates.

So here we are today, in organizational structures that inadvertently feed the authority-obedient dynamic. A colleague recently asked me why their VP would constantly send out readings and videos on leadership

for their team to watch, when they in fact would never watch them personally. She further stated that even if they did, she knew for a fact her VP would assume they possessed all the traits and behaviors seen in the ideal leader. Why are people in authority so oblivious to their effects on their teams? It's because her leader has lost perspective, comforted by power, and subconsciously knowing that the subordinates are obedient. Today's traditional organizational structures feed authority-obedient dynamics – and I'm pretty sure employees don't need research to explain this phenomenon, they are already well aware of it.

The environment is strong; normal human beings in positions of authority can often abuse their position by creating tyrannical and controlling styles of leadership. They become deluded to the situation and assume their 'followers' are committed, when in fact that are only compliant. We know that authority and obedience are very real dynamics that take very little energy to initiate. We also know that when people gain power, they don't want to lose it. Further, when people are in the presence of power, they often submit to it. So, what is to be done?

Following are a few basic strategies to dilute the authority-obedience phenomenon:

1. **Leadership Education for the Masses.** Train Leadership basics to entire organizations, not just formal leaders. Leadership isn't the private property of a few special leaders – these practices are available to anyone, and learnable by everyone.
2. **Make EQ a Cultural Cornerstone.** Make Emotional Intelligence (EQ) a cornerstone to company culture. Develop organizational competencies around the EQ factors, create ongoing dialogue and employee performance around this basic human construct.
3. **Measure Employee Engagement.** Assess for employee engagement every 6 months. This will place pressure on formal leaders to improve their team's engagement level, as well as empower employees to begin practicing the basics of team engagement.
4. **Share the Power.** Where appropriate, let employees collaborate to participate in innovation, decision making, and change management practices. As a very basic practice, let your team members take turns facilitating staff meetings.

5. **Play to Strengths.** The best teams are made up of diverse people playing to one another's strengths. Quit playing political games to gain business buy-in, and focus on strength-based team dynamics.
6. **Create Team Goals.** When entire teams become accountable for results, everyone must be committed for team performance. It isn't about a few people taking credit for the success of their teams – it is about entire teams owning results and total success.

Human capital is the strategic advantage for the 21st century, and organizations that continue to be run by alpha male cultures deluded by the 'power' phenomenon will fail. Next generation organizations must remember that there is a dark side to humanity – and teams, communities, and collaboration is the answer.

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