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GROUP BEHAVIOR

Power Basics

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EMPOWERING LEADERS IN KENTUCKY

Regardless of the positive or negative aspects of power, in any situation a good working knowledge of power basics is important for effective leadership to occur.

Power is all around us. It can be found in groups, organizations, communities and even households. One might think that because it is so common everyone understands and defines power the same.

Within any situation, a good working knowledge of power basics encourages active communication, assists in relationship development, and ultimately plays an important role in effective leadership. This publication will address the basics of power—how it is defined, basic individual and organizational power sources, how to identify community power structures, the distribution and price of using power, and finally some of the more common misconceptions about power. By adding this knowledge to your leadership toolkit, you can more effectively interact with individuals, groups and organizations.

> *A leader always has some measure of power, but many power holders have no trace of leadership.*
>
> —Howard Gardner

The Fundamentals of Power

Power plays a significant role in the workings of leadership. It is important for all leaders to have an accurate working definition of power. Differentiating between *power, authority* and *influence* is also important, as these terms have slightly different meanings that make them unique in leadership situations.

For the purposes of this document, we will use the following definitions.

Power—Control or command over others

Influence—Ability to affect or sway the course of an action

Authority—Power vested in a particular position

Generally, power and influence go hand in hand. People at any level of an organization can have power and influence. Authority is often seen as formal power within an organization or group—CEOs, managers, volunteer leaders, etc. You may have a specific type of power (without a formal title or position) even though you may not possess any authority to make decisions, delegate work or tell a subordinate what to do.

Individual Sources of Power

An important aspect of power relationships is the source of the power. The source can be individual or organizational, depending upon how the interaction occurs. One of the most classic power theories is French and Raven's Individual Sources of Power. Under this model, power can come from five different sources (outlined below):

LEGITIMATE POWER

‣ **Legitimate power**—Derived from a formal position of power or authority

REWARD POWER

‣ **Reward power**—Offered as incentive for excelling or achieving a set goal given by the leader

COERCIVE POWER

‣ **Coercive power**—Used to threaten and/or punish if specific goals are not met

EXPERT POWER

‣ **Expert power**—Given to an individual because of their expertise in a specific context or arena

REFERENT POWER

‣ **Referent power**—Offered to individuals because of their personal characteristics (attractiveness, friendship with others)

Some of these individual sources of power are granted by the organization, community group or committee; others are purely due to the individual's passions and interests. *Legitimate, reward* and *coercive power* are all dependent upon the position held within the relationship or organization. Specifically, titles provide the ability to influence others; compliance or resistance is the usual outcome of the interaction. (For further explanation see *The Price of Using Power* below.)

Expert and *referent power* are different; these types of power cannot be granted by the organization but rather are based on the individual. Individuals decide what they will or will not become experts on, as well as who they feel referent power toward. In certain situations, followers will bypass formal types of authority to consult with those who have expert or referent power. The outcomes of interaction when operating under these types of power are often commitment and ultimately acceptance in the most ideal situations.

Organizational Sources of Power

Power sources can also originate from organizations, and these sources of power are generally granted to groups of people within the organization. The four organizational sources of power are:

‣ **Coping with uncertainty**—Possessing the ability to reduce uncertainty for others

‣ **Centrality**—Performing a function central to the organization's mission

‣ **Dependency**—Supporting others who depend upon your group to complete work and finalize projects

‣ **Substitutability**—Providing a unique service to others

Having any of these types of power gives you and your group leverage within your organization. Individuals who play a role in groups with organizational power are less likely to be let go in a financial crisis, often have more control over decision-making within the organization, and in general feel more empowered. As the leader of a group who has the power of dependency or centrality (or any others listed above) it is vital to stress to group members the importance of remaining on top of their game and relevant. Organizational power may be hard to obtain, but is all too easily given away.

Community Power

Because of unique aspects and issues within communities themselves, power within communities is defined a little differently. *Community power* is the ability to affect the distribution of both public and private resources within the community. Often, community power can be augmented by outside connections, perhaps with other leaders or communities. Who possesses this power and how widely available it is (to community members) can greatly affect the future and quality of life in the community.

Because community power depends so heavily on resource distribution, it is particularly important to make sure the right people are involved in activity planning and decision-making processes. The most effective way to bring the right people "to the table" is by identifying community power structures, then naming participants accordingly. Both individual and organizational sources of power can still be found within communities; but identifying local power structures is particularly important, especially when trying to identify stakeholders, making decisions that affect the local community, and undertaking other community action initiatives.

Understanding power and being able to identify community power structures and decision makers allows us to bring the right people to the table when taking on community action and encourages communities to have more actively involved residents. But it is important to identify the right residents and not leave out important players when making community-wide decisions. Fundamentally, there are five different approaches one should consider when seeking to identify the power structures within a community.

Positional approach—Focuses on identifying individuals within the community who hold formal leadership positions within various fields—economic, social, voluntary governmental, political, and religious. This approach is based on the idea that power lies within positions of formal community organizations and institutions; the individuals holding such positions make the important decisions that ultimately impact the community and control valuable local resources. By also acknowledging the specific leadership position that is held within the community, assessments of individual power can also be made.

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> Control or power over people is not necessary when followers are driven by a sense of pride in their jobs; then the ultimate outcome is a feeling of ownership over the results. As today's leaders, we can remove the negative connotations associated with power by employing factors such as empowerment, delegation and shared decision-making within our groups and organizations.

Reputational approach—Based on selecting knowledgeable community residents to suggest community leaders according to their reputation for power. At the heart of this approach is the assumption that power exists and plays a significant role in all social relationships. The reputation of leaders is seen as an indicator of their potential to affect community decisions, have access to valuable resources and ultimately shape local life. The value behind this method is that leaders operating behind the scenes, as well as visible leaders, can be identified.

Decision-making approach—Traces the history of a local decision or action and identifies power holders through their active participation in the process. This approach is based on the notion that the social power to affect decisions can be identified through participation in the local decision-making process. Employing this method allows one to identify local power holders who have been formally active in local issues.

Social participation/social activity approach—Centers around volunteers within the community, including those holding formal offices. Through this method, it is assumed that the power to impact community decisions is obtained through actively participating in and holding offices in the area's voluntary associations. This is done by identifying various civic and voluntary organizations within the community and completing a list of individuals holding leadership positions. People serving within multiple agencies are then identified. These individuals are likely to hold power due to their diverse ties to positions of authority within numerous organizations.

Growth machine approach—Centers around individuals with landed interests—owners, developers, real estate and banking control local decision making. More simply, the individuals with money in the community have influence and power over major issues. The power or influence in this situation comes from having land, money, connections or longevity in the area (i.e. my family has owned land in this community for the last 150 years). Often, these people should be indentified and consulted, no matter if they hold a vested interest in the activity/decision or not. It is much more difficult to get these power-holders' support once they are aggravated (for not being included in the initial development stages) than it is to spend the extra time initially reaching out to them, only to find out they are not interested.

The approach one uses is completely up to the individual or group leading the process. Still, it may be beneficial to discuss which approach might be most appropriate to the situation; in some situations, it may be beneficial to use more than one approach to get at different types of power-holders.

The Price of Using Power

Many actions and feelings, both positive and negative, can result from the use of power. Obviously, a goal of any good and ethical leader is to use power so that it culminates in a positive outcome. To ensure this positive outcome, the leader must determine what type of power is appropriate for the specific situation. Followers can be expected to react in one of three ways to uses of power.
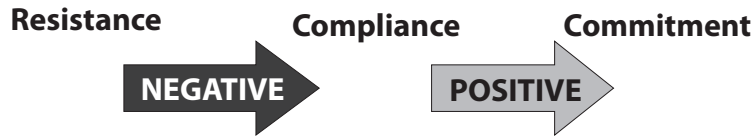
Resistance   **Compliance**   **Commitment**

NEGATIVE ➤   **POSITIVE** ➤

- ▸ **Commitment**—Followers accept power as reasonable and legitimate
- ▸ **Compliance**—Followers accept the process and go along with it, although they don't feel deep commitment to it
- ▸ **Resistance**—Followers don't agree with the attempt at influence and resist it

As mentioned above, power sources associated with positional authority—*legitimate, reward* and *coercive powers*—are generally considered to be harsher sources of power. Often these types of power are used to manipulate or control people, which is the primary reason followers interact at only resistance or compliance levels.

Expert and *referent powers* are not granted by an organization but are dependent upon an individual's passions or interests. Within certain situations, followers will bypass positional authority to consult those with expert or referent power. These power sources have been found to be related to higher follower satisfaction and performance, and, as a result, followers often interact at the commitment level.

Power Distribution

A primary issue with the concept of power is the perception that power is scarce. Traditionally, power in organizations or groups has been found to be concentrated within a few positions. This encourages the belief that without a formal title, an individual is not trusted with power. Ironically, research suggests that the more equal power distribution is within a group, the more successful it is.

Consider the previous paragraph for a moment. Why do you think there is a positive relationship between a more equal distribution of power and group success?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Many actions and feelings, both positive and negative, can result from the use of power.

Power distance is the differential between the highest and lowest levels of an organization. To illustrate this more clearly, contemplate the number of individuals within your organization that you have to communicate through to get a comment or suggestion to the CEO. If that number is high, there is a high power distance. If few individuals stand between the newest employee and the CEO, the power distance is low. This power distance is particularly apparent when looking at the cultures within different countries. In Australia and the United States the power distance in organizations is generally low or medium. Japan and China traditionally have high power distances in their organizations.

The Most Common Misconception about Power

Today's community leaders must be aware of the most common misconception about power—the idea that power, once given away, lessens a leader's own power or control of a situation. Many leaders enjoy the perks of leadership—and often one of these perks is operating with a certain degree of power over various constituents. The misconception that a leader loses power when sharing power with others not only works against the idea of empowerment but is completely false.

Sharing power (the essence or definition of empowerment) encourages individuals to take on more responsibility, creates a better work environment and ultimately improves the organizational culture. Within groups, sharing power among group members can create "synergy" where the sum of the whole is greater than its parts. This synergy allows for a more productive team and ultimately a superior product.

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STEP OUT & APPLY

Consider your group or organization for a moment. Use the blanks below to identify examples of where these sources of power may be found within your organization.

Coping with uncertainty: _____

Centrality: _____

Dependency: _____

Substitutability: _____

Review the *Community Power* section, then note which approach you most frequently employ to identify your community leaders.

_____

_____

Using the lines below, name two activities in which you are currently involved (or wish to be involved) within your community where you would need to identify leaders through local power structures (for example, identifying individuals who need to be "at the table" to discuss how to build a community sports field). Once you have identified the activities, list the type of power structure identification you would use (from the five listed in the *Community Power* section) as well as the reasoning behind choosing that approach.

Activity 1: _____

Identification approach: _____

Reason: _____

_____

_____

Activity 2: _____

Identification approach: _____

Reason: _____

_____

_____

References & Background Reading

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