

## POWER, POLITICS AND PERSUASION

Leaders must persuade others to get behind their ideas and plans. Strategies don't implement themselves. And even with a great plan, you can always expect opposition and resistance.

Successful leaders must use power, political savvy and persuasion to bring their ideas to fruition. Many executives, however, are uncomfortable with power or office politics, viewing them as the dark side of workplace behavior. They believe job satisfaction, morale and commitment erode when politics dominate the environment.

But research clearly shows that being politically savvy and building a power base pay off. In "Power Is the Great Motivator," a classic 2003 *Harvard Business Review* article, leadership consultants David McClelland and David Burnham examined managers' primary motivations and success in achieving results.

Their studies reveal managers are primarily motivated by one of three drives:

**Affiliation:** a fundamental desire to be liked

**Achievement:** the motivation to attain goals and gain personal recognition

**Power:** the desire to influence others

The most effective managers, measured by results, were motivated by power. But there's a difference between managers who crave power for personal advancement and those McClelland and Burnham deem "institutional managers" (those who place the organization's needs over personal goals and being liked).

Institutional managers:

Are highly organization-minded

Have a strong work ethic

Are willing to sacrifice some self-interest for the good of the organization

Believe in rewarding individuals who work hard toward organizational goals

### Sources of Power

There are three sources of power in an organization: positional, relational and personal:

**Positional power:** Your title and job status confer some level of formal power. You are authorized to act within a certain scope, but it's seldom sufficient to get things done.

**Relationships:** Informal power stems from the relationships and alliances you form with others. If you do a favor for someone, the law of reciprocity impacts your relationship.

Coalitions and alliances increase your relational power.

**Personal:** Some people generate power based on their knowledge, expertise, technical competencies and ability to articulate ideas or a vision that others will follow. Your communication skills, charisma and trustworthiness help determine your personal power.

## Open to Influence

Power often expresses itself as influence: the ability to change, direct or affect others' behavior without barking orders or threatening them.

Ironically, executives and managers who are open to peers' and subordinates' input garner greater respect than those who resist others' influence. An openness to influence demonstrates trust and respect, which become reciprocal and contagious.

With greater openness comes access to information and insights about the environment. You're therefore privy to signals when something isn't working, and you can rapidly adjust. Influence becomes a two-way street.

## Currencies of Exchange

In their 1989 book, *Influence Without Authority*, Allan Cohen and David Bradford introduced the term "*currencies of exchange*," a metaphor that teaches businesspeople how to acquire and expand their organizational influence.

Essentially, you can offer goods and services to a potential ally in exchange for cooperation. Currencies may take the form of technical assistance, information, lease of space or equipment, a plum assignment and the like. The key to using currencies is to understand what others want or value.

## Power without Authority

Effective use of power is becoming increasingly important, as many organizations are flatter, less hierarchical and cross-functional. This structural shift works best when leaders exert broad power and influence, without official authority.

While power skills are more important than ever, many executives shy away from developing them or fail to understand how they can expand and use them to full force.

## Avoiding Power

No matter your position or title, you need power to push through any important agenda. Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University's Graduate School

of Business and author of [Power: Why Some People Have It — And Others Don't](#), cites three barriers that cause executives to shy away from using power to extend their influence.

**The belief that the world is a just place:** If you do a good job and behave appropriately, do you assume things will take care of themselves? When others make self-aggrandizing, envelope-pushing power plays, do you dismiss them instead of watching to see if you can learn something?

Believing in a just world makes you less powerful by:

Limiting your willingness to learn from all situations and people — even those you don't like or respect

Anesthetizing you to the need to proactively build a power base — an outcome that blinds you to potentially career-damaging landmines

**Leadership literature and popular business books:** Many successful authors will tout their careers as models to emulate, but they'll often gloss over the power plays they've used to get to the top.

Their books are filled with prescriptions for following your inner compass, being truthful, letting your feelings show, being modest and self-effacing, and shunning bullying behavior.

In truth, these authors are describing how they *wish* people in positions of power would behave. There's no doubt the world would be a better place if leaders were always authentic, modest, truthful and concerned with others — but wishing won't make it so.

**Your delicate self-esteem:** People want to feel good about themselves and their abilities. Any experience of failure puts their self-esteem at risk. If you fail to actively seek and gain power, you won't view your lack of it a personal failure — a phenomenon known as "self-handicapping."

## The Power of Power

Power is ultimately defined as the ability to have things your way. When you need others to give their best efforts in the face of differing ideas and opinions, you need leverage — and powerful people use several strategies to advance their agendas.

### 1. Leverage Resources.

Whenever you have discretionary control over resources — money, equipment, space and/or information — you can use them to build a power base.

Helping people evokes reciprocity, a universal drive to want to repay a favor — even without making it explicit that there's a *quid pro quo*.

Your ability to garner support becomes self-sustaining, as people want to join the “winning” side.

Money is not the sole source of leverage. Access to information or key people can be even more valuable.

### 2. Shape Behaviors with Rewards and Punishments.

In international companies and governments, leaders reward those who help them and punish those who stand in their way. You may disagree with this approach, but it remains an important tool for building a power base.

Leaders who effectively wield influence make it clear that subordinates will reap rewards if they help and problems if they refuse to pitch in.

### 3. Make the Vision Compelling.

It's easier to exercise power when you're aligned with a compelling, socially valuable objective. Similarly, power struggles inside companies seldom revolve around blatant self-interest. At the moment of crisis and decision, clever combatants typically invoke shareholders' interests, company values and mission, and causes greater than short-term or personal interests.

## Fair Play?

You won't go far — and neither will your strategic plans — if you cannot build and use power.

Some of the people who compete for advancement or stand in the way of your agenda will bend the rules of fair play and, in some cases, ignore them entirely.

Don't bother complaining about this or wishing things were different. Part of your job is to know how to prevail in the political battles you face. You'll succeed if you understand the principles of power and are willing to use them.

## Persuasion

Persuasion has four elements:

**Credibility:** Credibility is built on trust and expertise, and it must be earned. People will

believe you have expertise and are worthy of their trust if you exercise sound judgment and demonstrate a history of success.

**An understanding of the audience:** Identify the decision makers and centers of influence. Determine their likely receptivity and personal agendas.

**A solid argument:** What is perfectly sensible to you may elude others — especially those who are already opposed to your ideas and prepared to resist.

You can improve your chances of persuading them when your case:

- Is logical and consistent with facts and experience

- Strikes an emotional cord

- Favorably addresses the interests of the parties you hope to persuade

- Neutralizes competing alternatives

- Recognizes and deals with the politics of the situation

- Comes with endorsements from objective and authoritative third parties

**Effective communication:** Don't mistakenly think that logic and rationality will win out and persuade people to your side. You may inadvertently trigger *confirmation bias*, a situation in which people become further entrenched in their own ideas.

Effective communication appeals to people's emotions, tapping into universal human values and desires. Appeal to both hearts and minds if you want to build and sustain commitment to your strategic plans.

## Office Politics

It's naive to suggest that office politics are destructive and unethical. If you define politics in such a narrow way, you overlook the value of political awareness and skill. Political savvy, when combined with the right values, can be advantageous to you, your team and your organization.

To become politically savvy and build your power base:

**Map the political terrain.** First, identify all stakeholders — anyone who has an interest in, or who would be affected by, your idea — and how they will react. Some resistance is inevitable. You must anticipate others' reactions, identify allies and resisters, analyze their goals and understand their agendas.

When you face objections, don't go to individuals' bosses or peers to undercut

their arguments. Instead, ask them questions to determine their goals. Stakeholders may:

- Share your goal, but not your implementation approach
- Disagree with your goal, but share your approach to change
- Share neither
- Share both

You can identify potential allies and resisters with direct questioning.

**Get them on your side.** Build your coalition — a politically mobilized group committed to implementing your idea because doing so will generate valued benefits.

Creating coalitions is the most critical step in exercising your political competence. How do you win support? You need to be credible. You communicate credibility by letting potential allies and resisters know about your expertise, demonstrating personal integrity, and showing that you have access to important people and information.

**Make things happen through leverage.** You must win others' buy-in by making it clear there's a payoff for supporting your efforts and drawbacks for refusing to join your coalition. Show how implementing your idea will ease stakeholders' workload, increase their visibility within the organization or help them cut departmental costs.

Once you've persuaded others to join your coalition, you've established a base that will legitimize your idea. Coalition members will then use *their* networks to evangelize for you.

Getting others to make changes and do things your way is risky and fraught with personal peril. Making your organization a better place is often at odds with personal advancement.

You can't do it without power. Just be sure to create power *in* and *with* others, as opposed to using power *over* others.