Power is Not a Four-Letter Word

Leaders must use the levers that raise performance levels
Do not be afraid. In today’s organizations, the concept of power is often treated as a taboo, a feared force not to be named. Yet, power is at the very root of leadership. If we shun or fear it, we can never understand how to leverage it to create high-performance organizations.

Power is the ability to act and influence and it is the essence of leadership. We have all seen people who wield power poorly, even abusively, and we almost instinctively relate to adages such as “power corrupts.” At the same time, we yearn to see power used wisely and, when it is, we celebrate with stories of great leadership and engaged followers.

Integrity plays a role in how well leaders exercise their power, of course. Unethical people are more likely to abuse power. But sometimes even well-intentioned managers misuse power because they lack detailed knowledge, deft skills or a full understanding of the situation. To improve the likelihood of success among good people who wish to be good leaders, organizations must gauge how managers exercise their power and, in areas where there are skills deficits, teach them to use it more effectively.

Those who think power can be or should be somehow “removed” from organizational dynamics fail to understand its nature. Power is complex. It does not stem only from “the boss” with his or her hierarchical authority that is bestowed by the organization. Power can, for example, be earned from followers who admire the leader due to his or her exceptional capabilities or it can also be conferred on a leader due to influential relationships.

In fact, power has a variety of both social and organizational origins (French & Raven, 1959) that can, from a practical point of view, be seen as major levers for getting things accomplished in organizations and keeping employees engaged. Sometimes these levers are mishandled, sometimes overused, sometimes ignored entirely. In fact, one recent study found that less than a third (29%) of respondents thought their organizations teach their leaders how to effectively leverage their full power (Bal et al., 2008).

The best leaders, however, not only recognize the various levers of power, they understand the context in which each lever is best used. Good leaders also grasp the fact that, without the proper exercise of power, virtually nothing happens. Employees are not engaged, priorities are not clarified, the proper actions are not taken and goals never attained. To provide insights into how the levers of power work, let’s discuss two that are often unrecognized or underutilized.

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The Power of Experts, Gurus and Organizational Wizards

Mastery is a power lever that can be used to great effect in organizations. People who display expertise (Jayasingam & Jantan, 2010) in a given area are accorded respect and social authority. Maybe mastery is based solely on person’s experience or perhaps it’s buttressed by university credentials, certifications, awards or other external signs expertise. Whatever the origins of a person’s expertise, it can be used to influence and even lead others. An expert can, for example, influence others by:

- Convincing managers to take a specific course of action
- Winning or expediting the approval of initiatives
- Modeling behaviors or attitudes by others who emulate them
- Mentoring and developing others, thereby increasing their own status as well as the engagement and skill levels of others

Of course, mastery-based power can be misused as well. Envision an expert as a kind of organizational wizard, one who can turn specialized knowledge into power. The wizard can wield dark powers if he or she chooses. An expert may, for example, convince others of a course of action before the company has done a proper analysis or properly vetted ideas. He or she may also subvert the chain of command by stalling projects, creating bad feelings about them, or failing to commit to important strategic decisions.

The Power of Leveraging Rather than Fighting Systems

There’s an old saying that “you can’t fight the system.” There’s a good reason for that – systems are powerful. Fortunately, they do not always need to be fought. Indeed, leaders can leverage system power in many ways.

A system can be defined as “group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole.” There are formal and informal systems in any organization, both of which help make up a corporate culture. Organizational and flow charts can be used to describe formal systems. Informal systems are harder to chart, though it can sometimes be done via tools such as social network analysis.

Aside from charting systems, leaders can listen to stories of how others have successfully coped with or mastered specific systems in their companies. Such stories will often help them understand how things “really happen” as opposed to how they are “supposed to happen.”

Through such stories, leaders also learn that each part of the system tends to have a constituency, with people relying on those subsystems to support their positions. As the great poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “All is system and gradation. Every god is there sitting in his sphere.”

Once a leader has firm grasp of the system and the constituencies, she or he can leverage this source of power by taking actions such as:

- Connecting with people with a track record for “getting things done”
- Linking new requests for resources or permissions to prior approvals
- Ensuring that all requests take the proper form so that bureaucratic or technological systems do not slow them down
- Aligning new initiatives with current priorities, strategies, or goals
- Finding an executive “champion” who will help win acceptance for new ideas or initiatives
As with other power levers, systems-based power can be abused. A corporate “bureaucrat”, for example, may impede an organizational innovation if it challenges his or her own spheres of influence. Or, a well-meaning manager with a great idea may take a clumsy approach to trying to win approval and so, by failing to understand the system, undermine his or her own innovation efforts.

**Moving the World**

In the world of physics, a lever is used to multiply the force that can be applied to another object. The great Greek mathematician and physicist Archimedes famously said, “Give me a place to stand and a lever long enough and I will move the world.” By understanding the fundamentals of power, leaders are in a much better position to leverage their own influence.

We’ve briefly discussed just two power levers: mastery and systems power. There are at least five other major levers (command, linkage, recognition, relationship and authority), each of which can be explored in depth. Leaders can use these levers – either singly or in combination – in order to achieve critical corporate objectives.

Take the objective of organizational change, for example. Corporate cultures and systems are notoriously difficult to budge. Unless managers know how to apply the proper levers to those systems, even the most dogged of attempts will come to naught. In fact, they may do more harm than good, an outcome that is all-too-common. On the other hand, if leaders know how and where to apply power, they can change the organization in ways that generate higher market performance.

Or take the subject of talent management. In a global marketplace where geography and natural resources are no longer the advantages they once were, companies base their competitive advantages mainly on talent. The problem is that using “push power” – which is usually associated with hierarchy-based authority in which the employees are simply told what to do by their boss – can have a negative impact on top talent retention when used in the wrong situation. For example, if a talented employee asks why a specific decision has been taken, it is not usually wise to say, “Because that’s the way the executive team wants it.” In such cases, other varieties of power – sometimes grouped together as “pull power” (Nye, 2004) – will be more effective at retaining and engaging talented employees. Displaying good communication, relationship-building skills and mutual interests are the ways to wield power.
Understanding and Exercising Power

This short article cannot detail the various models and methods associated with the management of power, but it is possible to outline a basic framework for approaching the issue.

1. Conduct and assessment of selected leadership development candidates to determine the depth of their knowledge and usage of power levers.

2. Educate leaders and potential leaders about the fundamental concepts associated with power levers in organizations.

3. Provide trainees with detailed insights into how each lever works, providing examples of both the use and misuse of power.

4. Create exercises in which trainees discuss the various power levers and how they might be put into practice in their organizations.

5. Provide one-on-one coaching or mentoring in areas where the assessment and workshops indicate there are deficits or misuse problems.

6. In some designated period after training is complete, conduct another assessment to see if there have been improvements in participants’ understanding of power-related issues. Complement this assessment with other performance evaluation techniques.
For more information on the Leadership Power Levers, please write to Dr. Mary Lippitt at mlippitt@enterprisemgt.com or call 727-934-9810. You may also visit the Enterprise Management Ltd.

Sources:


