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DEVELOPING PERSONAL POWER—A REQUISITE FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

There is often much confusion between the words *authority* and *power*. This article attempts to distinguish between them and focuses on the value of power over authority. Results of the extended use of authority are highlighted in the article, as well as ways of identifying and attaining various types of power. The article also discusses how power is lost and, in some cases, never regained, and the consequences that often follow lost power.

The word *power*, like the word money, or the word sex, evokes different responses from different people. Most likely, however, the word power is perceived as something sinister: "bad," "not good," "negative"—something with which one should not become involved, something to be avoided. When we hear from a significant American politician that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac—greater than sex—it is no wonder the concept is perceived with such awe and fear. Yet power is very desirable and must be attained to some significant degree if we are to be successful in life. Power is *essential for an individual to acquire* if s/he is to be successful in leading an organization.

For the last thirty years I have been involved with several hundred organizations worldwide and, in this capacity, have interacted with tens of thousands of employees from factory floor sweepers to supervisors and department heads to vice presidents, presidents, chief executive officers, and chief financial officers. Working with this array of individuals over the last three decades has given me some insight into the concept of power I would like to share with individuals interested in organizational behavior and leadership.

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POWER AND AUTHORITY *ARE* DIFFERENT

First, I would like to clarify, from my observations and experience, an important distinction between *authority* and *power*. To my way of thinking they are not the same; they are fundamentally different. *Authority* is the legitimate right of the leader to force, make, require, demand, or coerce people to do what s/he (the leader) wants them to do. *Power*, on the other hand, is the leader's *capacity* to influence others, to move others, to motivate others, to entice others, to persuade others to attain specific goals or engage in specific behavior. Authority is given by an organization or it can be forcefully taken; power can never be taken. It is granted by subordinates, colleagues, or even one's supervisors. *It must be earned.* Power can never be assumed nor taken for granted; *it is earned every single day.*

Authority is given to an individual, usually in some type of hierarchical organization, and is often referred to as position power [1]. Since I want to keep the concept of power distinct from the concept of authority, I will simply refer to the *legitimate* (legal/organizationally sanctioned) designation of the right to coerce (or reward) others to attain organizational goals as *authority*. The organization and its leadership have decided how much authority goes with each position in the hierarchy. So we will call the legitimate right to force others to do things, or suffer the pain of punishment should they refuse, *position authority*, for all positions in a hierarchy do not have the same amount of authority. Surely position authority differs from that of a supervisor or department head and factory manager, or from sergeant and captain, etc. Yet all have been designated a certain amount of authority in their organization's hierarchy, with the concomitant right to use some kind of force to back them up to obtain desired outcomes, should such coercion be necessary.

Apart from the organization distributing position authority, authority can be forcefully taken and imposed upon others. For example, when a general invades a territory, defeats it, and captures it, subordinate leaders now set themselves up as the legitimate authorities, establish rules, and assign a certain amount of position authority to their subordinate leaders. In this situation initial authority was taken—stolen or robbed if you will—but nonetheless is still there, and violators will be prosecuted or even executed—an extreme form of coercion. Position authority will be respected, regardless of the organization and regardless of how it was obtained, because once the organization establishes itself and distributes the authority now vested in its cascading positions, these positions and the authority vested in the holders of these position have the force of law—the organization's laws/codes. For example, does anyone question the authority of a policeman who stops a speeding automobile? Who would say to the officer, "What right do you have to stop me?" The authority inherent in this organization (law enforcement), passed down by superiors, gives the officer position authority with which only a

fool would argue. The officer has the authority to jail the individual on the spot, and that authority is observable immediately in three ways: 1) an authoritative vehicle, 2) an authoritative uniform, and 3) a weapon (usually a side arm).

CONSISTENT USE OF POSITION AUTHORITY AND ITS PROBLEMS

In spite of the above treatise on authority and how effective it can be in coercing others to accomplish the tasks a leader needs or wishes to accomplish, my observations are *the best leaders* I have been associated with over the past thirty years *shy away from the use of the position authority they, in fact, have.* They use this authority only as a last and final option, when all other options have been exhausted and have failed. Rather, they develop power and learn how to use power skillfully. And, from historical observations, it appears the use of power far exceeds the capability and effectiveness of authority in goal attainment. The power I wish to refer to is *personal power.* Personal power, to me, is defined as that power which is developed, generated, and sustained through various types of admired and/or desired behavior. *Power is influence potential* [1, pp. 202-203]. It is a key resource a leader *must* develop, *then retain* if s/he is to be truly successful, in the sense that employees *willingly* give the organization 100 percent performance toward goal attainment *because they choose to give it.* It is rare that employees will be so motivated working with a leader who uses strictly position authority to entice employees to attain group or organizational goals. On the contrary, authoritarian leadership usually develops two types of employees who quit the organization: those who *quit and leave* (if they can) and those who *quit and stay.* The latter are most difficult to truly motivate and hence learn many types of "tricks" to deal with authoritarian leadership. My experience has shown they:

- lie to protect themselves
- fabricate reports
- cut corners
- blame others for their mistakes
- "set up" fellow colleagues to look good themselves
- develop a covert operation to " spy" on others and report their observations to the leadership
- look for favors from the leadership for being loyal
- develop poor morale
- take no risks
- experience much interpersonal conflict

- produce only what is required—no more
- refuse to take chances—hence creativity, for all practical purposes, is dead
- often seek revenge, should the opportunity present itself, on other employees or the leadership
- trust virtually no one
- produce products of less than adequate quality
- have difficulty adhering to forecast schedules
- develop high scrap rates—which they often conceal or even bury (the scrap)
- move against the organization and its leadership, should the opportunity present itself
- assist a competitor in an effort to strike back at their own organization
- never volunteer anything—and ridicule those who do
- have personal agendas, usually dysfunctional to the organization's goals and purposes

The above-mentioned qualities have been found in numerous groups of employees with whom I have worked, usually working under a tough, authoritarian leader. Usually employees with these behaviors choose to become unionized (where unions are permitted)—so as to become affiliated with a strong organization that will protect them, much to the chagrin of the organization's leadership, who, in general, usually are strongly opposed to allowing a third party, such as a union, to enter the foray. But once the employees have decided on such an organization to protect them, there is very little an organization can do to stop it. It becomes a fact of life; a fact the organization and its leadership must accept and adapt. What leaders apparently forget is *the need for unions or other types of intervention are created by an organization's leadership* [2]. If employees are treated with dignity, respect, and equality, there will be no need for some type of intervention. In effect, *outside interventions are the creation of an organization's leadership.* However, very few organizations and their leaders, in my experience, ever will accept this axiom. They prefer to blame such an occurrence on "lazy employees," "not very smart individuals brought into the company," "bottom-of-the-barrel people we employed," "bad stock." It is a rare organization's leadership who would admit, "We knew this individual was tough, and we just let it go. We *have* dealt with the situation *now. But it's too late.* We messed up! We should have listened to the people. We should have acted sooner. This is our fault." Authoritarian leadership heavily depends on legitimate, *coercive* capability inherent in the leader's position. The literature makes clear authoritarian coercive leadership behavior is the least valued on the part of employees; indeed it is considered to be the seedbed for the development of hate and hostility toward the coercive leader [1, pp. 208-217].

A LEADER'S PERSONAL POWER CAN DEVELOP INTO A FORMIDABLE FORCE

Why would a leader choose coerciveness as the dominant leadership behavior when *personal power* will get him/her and the organization what they need, and with positive, productive attitudes along the way? What authority did Mahatma Gandhi have when he spearheaded the move to rid India of the British? None! But he developed substantial personal power, and hence his followers were willing to be led by him, no matter the consequences. The same with Martin Luther King Jr. What authority did he have when he decided the time had come for the United States to treat its minorities with equality? None! Yet he acquired enormous personal power whereby his followers were willing to be led by him, again regardless of the consequences. And yet he *did* succeed, without authority and only with the development of personal power. He moved an entire nation to pass legislation to ensure equal opportunity and justice for *all* citizens of the United States. Consider the following. A former president of the United States, Richard Nixon, lost personal power but still retained the authority of his position till the day he left office. Until the day he resigned the presidency, he had the authority to call out the army, the navy, the air force, etc., and they would have obeyed. But he lost the respect of the nation; he lost power, and was forced to resign. The message seems clear: *leaders need to learn about, understand, and develop personal power with organizational stakeholders and their tenure as leaders will have far greater productivity and success.* As stated earlier in the article, power is the *capacity* to influence others to action. Since *leadership* is a people business, the acquisition of personal power is an absolute necessity, unless the leader is prepared to push, punish, and force people to attain desired goals. It has already been stated and validated what the results would be should this last form of leadership be used on a consistent basis.

EIGHT BASES OF PERSONAL POWER

Leaders develop personal power in organizations by developing the following power bases: *expert power, legitimate power, referent power, reward power, coercive power, information power, connection power, and charismatic power* [1, 3-7].

A leader develops *expert power* when others in the organization perceive s/he has specific talents, knowledge, capability, information, etc., that are considered valuable and desirable. *Legitimate* power is acquired when others in the organization perceive the leader as appropriate to his/her position. This is *not* the same as position authority, whereby the organization grants the authority. Rather, in legitimate power, employees and others perceive the individual as the one who should be listened to and followed by reason of his/her knowledge, experience, status, education, etc. For example, let us say the head janitor of a company has,

on his own time, spent years studying experimental psychology and was quite conversant on the subject. Let us likewise say a group of graduate students were awaiting a new Ph.D. in experimental psychology to discuss some recent significant research on the effects of stress on corporate executives. To continue, the janitor, being well-versed in this particular area, begins to share some well-studied data, which, by the way, is entirely accurate, and to review the literature with the students. After 15 minutes of listening to the janitor, in walks the new Ph.D. in experimental psychology. Who is going to be listened to with greater concentration: the janitor or the Ph.D.? The janitor lacks two bases of power the Ph.D. is perceived to have: expert power and legitimate power. The professor is *perceived* to have the knowledge (expert power) and has legitimate power (he is a professor—the one with the legitimate credentials, experience, etc. who can occupy that post). Janitors usually cannot occupy such a post, regardless of their knowledge. So, it is not difficult to see the professor will get the students' undivided attention, even if the janitor presented the exact same information because, in this instance, the appropriate bases of power are lacking: the janitor is not perceived to have expertise nor have sanctioned legitimacy, such as a doctorate in the appropriate area.

A leader acquires *referent power* over time. When people identify with the leader's behavior, experience, standing in the profession and among colleagues, the professional offices held, accomplishments, respect received from various quarters because of wisdom, seniority, trustworthiness, personal traits and lifestyle, skill with people, and honesty and ethics, this leader has acquired referent power, which is a kind of reverence others hold for him/her. The popes of the Roman Catholic Church have survived quite well on essentially referent power over the centuries. So have nuns, priests, ministers, rabbis, grandmothers, sages, etc.

Reward power is observed in a leader through the attention, approval, and encouragement given to subordinates. This does not preclude the use of material rewards such as days off, a bonus, a promotion, etc. Doling out material rewards falls more into the province of position authority. However, when the rewards are *psychological* and *emotional* in nature, reward power as personal power is in effect. In this case, the leader with both *position authority and personal power* has an enormous amount of power.

Corecive power is acquired when the leader rejects, creates distance, acts impersonally, is cold, harsh, critical, or disapproves of a subordinate personally or his/her performance/behavior. This is not to be confused with the coerciveness that comes from position authority, which is bequeathed by the organization. This coercive power is in the *perception* of the subordinate and must be used sparingly or otherwise subordinates will learn to fear the leader who consistently behaves this way. This fear could eventually turn to hate if the leader is not careful or is unaware of what is occurring with subordinates. An interesting point was made by Heresy and Blanchard [1] and by Machiavelli [8]: If the leader is perceived to

have coercive power but never sanctions anyone, the leader loses the respect of subordinates and hence personal power, which means they would be unwilling to follow directives except when being threatened with punishment through the leader's legitimate position authority. The message seems clear: *The leader who loses the respect of subordinates loses personal power—and so must resort to force to compel people to attain organizational directives.* Research shows this is the least desirable strategy for goal attainment and the least successful [3, 6, 9-12].

Here is a case in which this author was involved personally and which clarifies the above situation. A company president had position authority but was about to lose the respect of his workforce and hence lose personal power. This was a factory of about 700 employees divided into three sections: A, B, and C. Section B depended on production in Section A, and Section C depended on production in Section B. The company president had been advised the department leader in Section A utilized a tough, bullying, autocratic leadership style and, as a result, the president was concerned that the employees of Section A might develop low moral or other problems. The president decided he wanted an outsider's perception of just how serious the problems were in Section A. The author was solicited to work with the president and the employees of Section A to provide feedback. As consultant for this project, however, it was decided it would be more appropriate to work with *all* employees and not just those of Section A. The concern was to determine what effect, if any, this dictatorial leader might have had on the *entire* factory and not just on the employees in Section A. Focus groups were held on problems within the three sections. The question was asked: "What do you think could make this company a better place in which to work, a more successful organization, a place where employees would enjoy coming to work each day?" To the surprise of this author, lack of respect for this bullying leader was *not* the real issue—not anymore. *The time for that had passed.* The issue in the perception of the majority of employees of all the groups, both hourly paid and staff personnel on salary, was their eroding respect, with potential loss of personal power (and hence *no* power, only position authority remaining) for the company president and his immediate staff. Employees throughout all three sections perceived the company president to be well aware of the dictatorial style of this Section A leader and likewise perceived that the president *lacked the courage to use the coercive capability that came with his leadership position* to modify the behavior of this manager. In other words, the president failed to remedy a bad situation when sanctions against this Section A leader legitimately were called for but not applied. Hence, the problem was no longer this bullying leader in Section A: *the problem had now shifted to the company president.* He was now perceived as impotent and his employees, including his subordinate managers, were losing respect for him, which means he was about to lose personal power. This was now a graver situation than that created by the authoritarian subordinate leader in Section A. *When sanctions are called for,* it is

clear, *if they are not delivered, employees lose respect for the leader,* consider him/her impotent and neglect directives—with the consequence often being the organization begins to fall apart. The axiom here is, concerning position authority and coercive capability: *use it or lose it.* What happened to the bully in Section A? The president regained his employees respect and his personal power; he fired the bully!

Information power is developed on the part of the leader who others perceive possesses valuable information—or has access to it.

The leader is perceived to have *connection power* when it is believed s/he has access to important persons or associates. A leader is considered to have connection power also when, through influential associates and powerful connections, *resistance to the position authority and personal power of others is usually successful.*

Charismatic power is accorded the leader who is perceived to act with sincerity, trustworthiness, expertise, and dynamism. Indeed, this leader has what might be called "presence." People *connect,* they literally "feel" him/her as though the words used were meant for them alone [13]. These eight bases of personal power are important for leaders to become familiar with, develop to the fullest extend possible, and use skillfully. Indeed, power is not an undesirable word; it is something desirable and must be understood, sought, and utilized for the leader's personal success and the organization's goal attainment.

PERSONAL POWER CAN BE LOST

There are some important points to remember once personal power has been attained. The way *power was granted* to a leader by subordinates or others, power can be taken away just as easily. Power is volatile. It must be earned through appropriate, intelligent, skillful behavior *every day.* It can be lost through just one careless act. *Power can never be taken for granted.*

Some ways leaders have behaved and lost personal power and hence had to rely on position authority to deal with subordinates are:

- *a deliberate lie*—especially one that affected a group or group member's livelihood, family, status, career, location, etc.
- *an irresponsible act*—such as driving drunk and getting involved in a serious accident, perhaps killing an innocent citizen and then being apprehended and caught. For example, recently a diplomat from the country of Georgia (of the former USSR) stationed in Washington, D.C., was driving through the city at high speeds while inebriated, got into an accident and killed a young girl. He immediately sought to leave the United States, utilizing his diplomatic immunity and position authority. Surprisingly, the president of Georgia ordered him to remain in the United States until the situation was cleared up and stated he might rescind the diplomatic immunity (and position authority)

and require the diplomat to stand trial for his behavior. This is an example of the loss of respect, and hence personal power, in the perception of the president of Georgia toward this diplomat.

- *an ugly marital split up* that destroyed family relationships and is known by the community at large and received much attention.
- *a foolish antisocial act* that led to the need for authorities to become involved or that led to even brief incarceration. For example, recently a corporate executive flying first class was refused additional alcoholic beverages because it was felt he had already drunk too much. This leader became so enraged he removed his pants publicly and defecated in clear view of all passengers. This *one single act* undoubtedly destroyed whatever personal power this leader had acquired over the years prior to this.
- *immoral behavaior* that brought much attention and criticism on the leader and his organization. The number of sexual harassment cases in the United States today is testament to the moral violations of women—with loss of power to the leaders apprehended.
- *unethical behavior*, especially behavior leading to personal gain at the expense of others and/or the organization.
- *ruthless*, brutal behavior perpetrated on employees or others.
- *physically abusing others to solve problems*, including one's family.
- *personal habits* that generally led to socially disrespected activity, such as alcohol abuse, gambling abuse, drug abuse, sexual addiction, etc. [3].
- *incarceration* for a crime with the accompanying publicity.
- *accusations by the government of illegal acts or other behavior considered unbecoming of a citizen.*

This list is not all-inclusive. Surely other examples can be added to it. The message to leaders seems clear: *leaders must guard and protect the power they have been given and understand it can be rescinded when others who granted it decide they are no longer worthy of respect, regardless of their other impeccable qualities* (such as education, family status, title, wealth, etc.).

CONCLUSION

Power is an important concept in leadership and organizational behavior. The most successful leaders, in this author's thirty years of observing and working with a wide range of leaders and their subordinates and colleagues in many parts of the world, seem to have understood the value of *personal power* and, consciously or unconsciously, have developed significant personal power bases, eight of which were identified in this article. They have learned to use these power bases to win over the respect of subordinates, who in turn became open to their influence and directives and were willing to follow their suggestions and

recommendations for organizational goal attainment, success, and survival–and with positive attitudes. *Leaders must embrace the concept of personal power.* The most successful learn to use it skillfully, understand it is volatile and can be lost, and never take it for granted. Employees, in turn, show great respect for such a leader, which then converts to personal power, allaying the need consistently to use position authority and hence coercion and force to accomplish organizational goals. Leaders who understand power do not rely on the authority of their position to create highly motivated, focused and directed work forces, who in turn are highly productive, self-monitoring, and of high quality–the dream of all leaders. *They rely on the personal power they develop with subordinates and others in their organizations.*

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