POWER IN THE WORKPLACE …

“PUT YOUR IRON HAND INSIDE A VELVET GLOVE”

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Outwardly, you must seem to respect the niceties, but inwardly, unless you are a fool, you need to learn quickly to be prudent and do as Napoleon advised: “Place your iron hand inside a velvet glove.” In the highly competitive business environment, it is clearly no longer enough to be smart by having a high IQ (intelligence quotient) and nice by having a high EQ (emotional quotient). A good manager or leader will also know how to use power skillfully and wisely.

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“All businesses and organisations are set up for conflict. Our worst competition may not be the pharmacy down the street. It may be the pharmacist standing next to you in the dispensary. Why? In any organisation, there is a limited amount of money, promotion opportunities and bonuses. People in the organisation compete with each other for these limited resources. Although this may sound unhealthy, it is not necessarily always negative because internal competition is a ruthless way of discovering where the real talent is to enable the organisation to allocate its scarce resources efficiently.”

“Justice and power must be brought together, so that whatever is just may be powerful, and whatever is powerful may be just.”

Blaise Pascal

POWER DEFINED

Power is the ability (or the potential) of one person to influence the behaviour of another person. It is to get someone to do something you want done, in other words to make things happen the way that you want. Power requires one person’s perception of “dependence” on another person. Most people have power they do not use and/or may not know that they possess. In an organisation, organisational politics can be described as the use of power, with power viewed as the ability to manage relationships.

Power is an emotionally-laden term, because to label a manager as a “power seeker” usually is to cast doubt on that
manager’s motives and actions. Some of these negative views about power originated from older views that have suggested that power is evil, that it corrupts people, and that it is limited in supply. Yet, power can be a highly effective instrument for the good of people if it is used appropriately.

Influence is related to power. Influence is what you have when you exercise your power. Influence is expressed by others’ behavioural response to your exercise of power.

THE NATURE OF POWER IN ORGANISATIONS

Traditionally there have been different types (or sources) of power in organisations:

- **Legitimate or formal power:** This type of power results from a person being placed in a formal position of authority. A responsible pharmacist, for example, has legitimate power. Legitimate power therefore results from a person occupying a certain position in the organisational structure (hierarchy) and being granted legitimate authority in such a way that individuals feel obliged to do what the manager says. Formal power includes, *inter alia*, control over budgets, staff, decisions and resources.

- **Reward power:** Reward power is derived from a person’s ability to reward another individual using extrinsic and/or intrinsic rewards. It can be formal (for example, the manager’s ability to facilitate a pay increase for a worker) or informal (for example, an informal group may reward a person through acceptance into the group by co-workers).

- **Coercive power:** Coercive power is derived from the ability to deny desired rewards, to administer sanctions, or to punish or recommend punishment. Examples of coercive power are to formally dismiss a worker, or when an informal group punishes an individual by imposing “silent treatment”.

- **Expert power:** Expert power derives from a person possessing special knowledge, skills, experience and/or judgement that the other person needs but does not have. Although the person with expert power may have limited formal authority, he or she will have considerable influence. Expert power is effective and attractive, but is weak. An example is technical experts that become so good at their particular skill, that they become trapped by it in a “prison of success”. A computer programmer may be so good in his job as a programmer that he cannot be moved into a management position, because the company argues that they cannot afford to lose his skills in the computer department.

- **Referent power:** Referent power refers to the ability to provide another person with a feeling of personal acceptance, approval, efficacy or worth. This form of power is based on a liking or a desire to be like the power holder. The personality and characteristics of a person will affect the degree to which other people wish to identify and be associated with that person. It can be enhanced by linking it to morality and ethics and a long-term vision. Nelson Mandela, for example, has referent power.

There are also other types of power. **Information power,** for example, refers to access and/or control of information. The control over information flow is usually based on legitimate power and relates to the communication network (hierarchy). It is common in centralised structures. People will often “protect” information in order to increase their power. Another type of power is **representative power,** namely the formal right confirmed by an organisation to speak as a representative for a potentially important group composed of individuals across departments or outside the organisation. The media liaison person of a pharmaceutical company, for example, has representative power. **Network power** is said to be the strongest form of power which a manager can acquire. Politics is described as a network of interaction by which power is acquired, transferred and exercised upon others.

THE CURRENCY OF POWER

Traditionally, there have been two ways of exercising power – by being feared or by being liked. Machiavelli wrote 500 years ago that “it is better to be feared than loved”. In a command and control workplace there is little choice about who you work with and there are many managers who still use the fear principle. But fear earns compliance, and not commitment and loyalty. It does not bring out the best in people over the long term.

Many leaders want to be liked because they think that being liked is necessary for success. These leaders are of the opinion that if they are charismatic and inspirational they will create devoted followers who will love, honour and obey them. But it has been said that for every charismatic leader who leads you to the “promised land”, there are a dozen who will lead you straight back into the desert. The charismatic leader makes him- or herself look good at the expense of others and usually fails in creating a sustainable organisation. None of these two approaches are effective in the long run.

Nobody wants to work for a person that they do not trust. In a world where formal hierarchies and control mechanisms are breaking down, **trust** is becoming the currency of power and influence. Building trust takes time. Trust consists of three components, namely:

- **Values:** Do you share common interests, values, experiences and aspirations with the people over whom you want to have power? If you do not, you will have to start working on finding a common interest. It can range from people that you know in common, places that you have visited, to places that you have lived or worked.

- **Credibility:** Even if you know a person well and you get along well on a social level, it does not necessarily imply that you trust each other. If a person is all talk and no walk, there is no trust. Both parties must be convinced that they deliver what they say.

- **Risk:** Risk can be described as the largely submerged, unseen iceberg which has the potential to sink relationships and sink decisions. It is also the reason why trust builds incrementally. Credibility must be demonstrated on small things first, and then slowly build up to larger things before risk can be minimised.

CONSEQUENCES OF POWER

Power can be intoxicating. People fight for it, die for it, and even kill for it. One just has to consider the political history of
many countries to realise the effect that a powerful leader can have. Compare, for example, Adolf Hitler with Nelson Mandela. The consequences of power are illustrated in Figure 1.4

Empowerment is a further positive outflow of power. It creates conditions where subordinates can feel powerful, especially those who have a high need for power. Leaders empower their followers and subordinates through a process that provides direction, intellectual stimulation, emotional energy, developmental opportunities and appropriate rewards. It is therefore power sharing, the delegation of power or authority to subordinates in the organisation. It is about helping others to acquire and use the power needed to make decisions affecting themselves and their work. To achieve this, the power source (the manager or leader) must have enough confidence to consider power as something that can be shared by everyone working in flatter and more collegial organisations. It requires high involvement and participation of the leader in the decision making process, modifying and adapting her or his ideas to include suggestions from others, involving others in strategy formulation and implementation, looking for creative and innovative solutions that will benefit the whole organisation, and instilling confidence in those who will implement the solutions.

THE TEN LAWS OF POWER

Leaders with high power display certain behaviours. These behaviours are so universal, that they can be called “The ten laws of power”1, namely:

1. **Take control:** Leaders with power know where they are, where they are going and how they will get there. These people take control when necessary and have a clear agenda creating clarity, focus and purpose for everybody in the organisation. They are not scared to take the lead.

2. **Build your network:** Leaders must build trust by developing mutual understanding (shared values) and mutual respect (delivering on commitments). Trust is the core of professional relationships.

3. **Act the part:** If you look and act like a junior employee, you will be treated like a junior employee. There are interesting books, DVDs and courses available to teach a person how to dress for success (power dress), how to chair power meetings, how to make power presentations, how to use the language of power, and how to create the appearance of power. Sir William Lyons, the founder of Jaguar, insisted that the hallmark of all Jaguars should be “pace, space and grace.”1 It is said that the hallmark of an effective power manager is also pace, space and grace.

4. **Strike early:** By acting pre-emptively, leaders with power take control and set the agenda on their terms. While others wait nervously on the sideline, the leader with power will take control. For example, the earlier a crisis is sorted out, the less severe it usually is. If you have a plan for sorting it out, you retain control. Acting late means the crisis gets worse and you risk losing control.

5. **Pick your battles:** Battles are said to be endemic to organisations. People come to work with many goals, not just the one unified vision or goal of the organisation. These goals invoke conflict and competition among workers for the use of scarce resources. Because there are never enough resources, this competition leads to power games and politics, inevitably leading to conflict. Sun Tsu, the Chinese philosopher, wrote The Art of War approximately 2 400 years ago.1 He laid down the following three rules of warfare saying that one should only “fight” for something if:

   - There is an outcome worth fighting for.
   - You know you will win.
   - There is no other way of achieving your goal.

6. **Be selectively unreasonable:** Leaders with power know when and how to stretch people to achieve things they did not think were possible. They set high standards, and then they help the team achieve them. In this way, they grow and develop the organisation. When you accept excuses, you accept failure. Leaders with power know how to build long term performance by being unreasonable selectively.

7. **Go where the power is:** Every organisation has centres of power (where key decisions are made and that drives the organisation – that is where all the future leaders of the organisation are groomed). This is a demanding and uncomfortable place to be, but it is the best

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Figure 1: Consequences of Power

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10. **Use it or lose it**: The better a person uses the power he or she has, the more formal power he or she will acquire. Many managers acquire formal power, but then play it safe. The only instance when this is a good strategy is when the goal is survival. If you want to excel, you must make a difference.

**CONCLUSION**

“Survival means following the herd; success means leading it.”

Charles Caleb Colton

The old management system of command and control and strict hierarchical organograms is changing rapidly. Organisations are becoming more fluid and networks are becoming more important than strict hierarchies. This is an uncomfortable world for many managers who are used to the certainties of the old command and control world. However, this can also represent huge opportunities for those managers who are prepared to take positive action to shape and control their destiny.

Power over others is an inevitable part of leadership, but it also carries with it the risks associated with the misuse or abuse of power. Any person who is not familiar with the literature of power may at first think that it is the skillful use of devious tactics to play power games. Yet, the skillful use of power is not about stabbing your peers in the back to get the promotion you think you deserve. It is about understanding how an organisation works, and developing an ability to make things happen in a world of increasing ambiguity, responsibilities and competition, combined with decreasing authority.

**REFERENCES**