

## Types of Power\*

### **Referent Power - *The desire for a feeling of oneness and acceptance in a valued relationship.***

Referent power is based upon identification with, attraction to, or respect for the leader. Group members gain a sense of intrinsic personal satisfaction from identification with a referent leader. This kind of power relationship is dependent upon the inclination to work harder for someone who is liked or admired. To gain and maintain a leader's approval and acceptance, a follower is likely to do what the leader asks, develop a similar attitude, and even imitate the leader's behavior.

Leaders who are charming and trustworthy tend to possess and use referent power more often than those less personable. By showing genuine concern and demonstrating a general level of respect for others, referent power tends to increase early in the relationship between leader and follower. However, if the charisma of a leader is never connected to genuine integrity and strength of character, referent power is easily lost.

In organizations, referent power is most easily seen in the charismatic leader who excels in making others feel comfortable in his or her presence. Staff typically express their excitement about work in terms of their attraction to their leader's personal characteristics and charisma. The reason they commit to their work is because of the leader's likeability, and they base their self-esteem and sense of accomplishment on their leader's approval.

Charismatic leaders who lack the integrity and depth of character to match their charm and charisma often leave organizations within a few years, and frequently leave a path of destruction in their wake. Their insecurities eventually manifest themselves in the form of erratic decision-making and defensiveness that can alienate the leader from their staff and their colleagues. If left unchecked or used as an exclusive source of influence, referent power's benefits quickly decrease and destructively give way to its liabilities.

### **Expert power - *The extent of specialized skills or knowledge followers attribute to a leader.***

Expert power derives from group members' assumptions that the leader possesses superior skills, knowledge, and abilities. This expertise enables leaders to perform tasks and provides them with a better understanding of the world around them. However, expertise is only a source of power if others are dependent upon the leader for the skill, knowledge or ability the leader possesses. The more important a problem is to the follower, and the more the leader is perceived to be an expert in that area, the greater power the expert leader will have.

Like referent power, expert power may come more easily in the short term yet prove troublesome in the long term. Initial perceived expertise is typically strong, but a leader must balance expertise with wisdom and not to exaggerate the extent of his or her expertise. As time progresses, followers learn more, and a leader's expertise is questioned and challenged - the power of expertise can diminish.

While expertise can be maintained through continual formal study and training, research suggests that a convincing way to demonstrate expertise is by solving problems important to followers and providing sound advice on a consistent basis. When a leader has a lot of expert power and is trusted by followers as a reliable resource for wisdom and information, the leader can have tremendous influence over the long-term.

Leaders are generally granted expert power in the fields in which they have reputable experience and education. While the ability to understand and effectively communicate educational content might be an obvious example, the ability to communicate experience and wisdom about interpersonal problem solving and life skills also serve as areas in which a leader may influence due to expertise.

### **Legitimate power - *The authority granted to someone stemming from a position in a group or organization.***

Legitimate power stems from an authority's legitimate right to require and demand compliance. Legitimate power stems from a leader's formal authority over activities. This type of power is dependent upon the official position held by the person exercising it. Legitimate power may be derived from prevailing cultural values that assign legitimate power to some individuals (i.e., respect for one's elders), accepted social structure that grant legitimate power to some people (i.e., British royalty), or through one's position in a hierarchy.

While referent and expert power are tied to the individual, legitimate power is tied to position. In this context, the amount of legitimate power a leader might have is likely related to one's scope of authority. For example, managers

typically have more authority than staff, and a staff member typically has more authority in relation to relation to community members. *Yet it is not uncommon for a leader to make requests of someone who may technically fall outside their scope of authority, and for that person to willingly comply.*

A leader's scope of authority is usually defined in the work environment by documents such as organizational charts, contracts, and job descriptions. Ambiguity about the scope of a leader's authority is, however, common. If managers, staff members, and the community define the boundaries of legitimate power differently, then conflict is likely to develop. This conflict can interfere with the accomplishment of an organizational or educational purpose.

Legitimate power can easily lead to tension because of its close association with position and not the person. In addition, the power of the position itself may grant power to uncooperative and difficult people. However, over time legitimate power becomes less useful if it is not practiced in a manner consistent with agreed upon norms of behavior and in an environment where communication is clear.

While the position of leader holds respect and authority, the personal nature of the position frequently does not allow a leader to wield a great deal of legitimate power. Leaders generally have the authority to ask much their staffs, but must do so in a way perceived to be fair and respectful, which often involves the use of referent and expert power. So, *while the position itself grants the leader some legitimate power, exercising legitimate power exclusively is not likely to be useful over time.*

### **Reward power - *The ability to reward***

Reward power is based on the belief that a leader controls important resources and rewards that the follower wants. Reward power not only depends on a leader's actual control over rewards, but also on the follower's perceived value of those rewards. Reward power has been shown to be most effective when followers see a direct connection between performance and reward.

Leaders most commonly use reward power with a promise to give staff something in exchange for carrying out an assigned task, e.g. a grade, a special privilege, a form of recognition, etc. Precisely how this is carried out can significantly affect the outcome. When leaders offer the *right* rewards, that is - rewards that are valued, fair, and in line with what they can deliver - reward power is effective. In addition, being true to one's word and using rewards in a non-manipulative fashion is also essential.

The over use of reward power by a leader may drive followers to view the relationship in purely transactional terms (e.g. "I will do X because you will give me Y.") Rather than using rewards in an impersonal way, the most effective way leaders can use rewards is to recognize accomplishments within the context of referent power.

### **Coercive power - *The ability to punish if expectations are not met.***

Coercive power is the capacity to dispense punishments to those who do not comply with requests or demands. People exercise coercive power through reliance upon physical strength, verbal faculty, or the ability to grant or withhold emotional support or tangible resources from others. Coercive power provides a leader with the means to physically harm, bully, humiliate, or deny love, affection or resources to others. Examples of coercive power in the workplace include the ability (implied or real) to fire, demote or transfer to undesirable positions.

Coercive power can be useful for deterring behavior detrimental and at times when compliance is absolutely necessary, such as in a crisis situation. However, in most situations coercive power should be used predominantly as a last resort as it has significant negative side effects. Coercive methods have been linked to a number of dysfunctional group processes, including dislike, anger, resentment, rejection, conflict, and decreases in motivation, and self-esteem.

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Based on work by French, J.R.P & Raven, B. (1959). "The Bases of Social Power," in D. Cartwright (Ed.) *Studies in Social Power*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan. pp. 150- 167.