

# Power's Paradoxical Pattern

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Power is a fascinating concept. Babies experience power related to obtaining nourishment and comfort; adults recognize how power affects their jobs, lifestyle and relationships. As adults, many of us strive to attain and maintain power in balance. If we feel powerless across all domains, we feel victimized. If we believe our power is too strong, there is enormous stress to perform flawlessly. Sometimes, giving away power means you get more. Sometimes delineating your power boundaries is necessary for survival. That's why power is paradoxical; its outcomes are sometimes counterintuitive to the inputs.

We often wonder why we get so much of what we don't want and not enough of what we wish for in our professional and personal relationships. The law of attraction suggests a principle of cause and effect. Specifically it suggests that we influence our own reality and with it the responses we get from those around us. This principle also has a relationship to an undeniable phenomenon of human behavior—in healthy relationships, we gain power when we give it away.

The definition of "giving power away" may not be obvious. It means knowing your worth and boundaries while understanding and valuing the same in others. This type of power sharing enables all involved to give the best they have to offer to the endeavor or relationship. Acknowledging the opinions, stance or position of others does not disempower you. Surprisingly, it gives you more power because it opens others to you. So, in practical terms, being open to the point of view of another or empowering them builds your power base. Advocating for another is one of the many ways to gain power.

Power's paradoxical pattern holds the secret to one of the most potent set of skills for creating influence through communication. Social psychologists suggest that power is obtained in several ways. The types of power attainment include exhibiting superior expertise, coercion through real or implied threats, legitimately awarded power to make decisions, epitomizing the values of a group, or social power gained by influence.

Influence, in turn, hinges on trust. We often think that influential leaders are born with a certain charisma. Breaking it down, this influence that we call charisma reflects a set of behaviors. Charismatic leaders articulate their views honestly while acknowledging the apparent and underlying concerns of others. They maintain their values and boundaries and at the same time validate others'.

Masterful communication skills underlie influential power. One of the most potent set of skills for creating influence involves consciously aligning with the perspectives, needs and styles of others. These key skills are fundamental to getting what you want and need in all aspects of your life. It's sometimes a counterintuitive principle because we think influence means pitching, touting or forcing our position when in reality that usually alienates and produces defensiveness. In fact, even Machiavelli warns of the dangers of such actions, admonishing princes not to be "hated." True power is ours when we clearly acknowledge the reality of a situation, remain grounded in our values, and align with the reality of a situation. This may sound paradoxical, yet it can be the mantra for success.

So, power begins with and is retained by knowing yourself and understanding the position of relevant others. Reflect upon your ability to listen objectively to points of view different from your own. If you experience difficulty doing this, it is possible that you skip an essential step in creating openness in others to hear your point of view or see the world as you do. A key step in mastering your personal power is demonstrating understanding. As we demonstrate a willingness to listen, others are more likely to listen to us. It's really that simple.

Do you struggle to connect with or engage certain people or personalities? People feel more comfortable with and are more trusting of those who act, speak and view the world as they do. Referent power is possible when you are with others like you, and it alienates others who think differently unless they believe that you connect at some level with their points of view in a genuine way. So how do we create rapport, that communication "connection" which means two-way dialogue is free-flowing and candid, when you are in disagreement with the perspective being expressed?

Begin by determining whether influencing the other person matters to you. Sometimes managers think they can just impose a way of doing things. Then, they find that source of power is short lived. If you believe that your ability to influence arises from your position of authority alone, you might not deem rapport to be essential. Parents who wield coercive power are often startled at the behavior of their teenagers when they are away from parental oversight.

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Influence with or without formal authority is essential in all types of organizations today. If cross-functional collaboration or internal consulting is highlighted in your work, you likely appreciate the power resulting from building strong rapport. If your organization values employee engagement, you probably recognize that engagement results from a strong connection with the immediate manager, not just good expertise-based direction. Given that engagement is a strong predictor of incremental productivity as well as retaining high performers, it is certainly seen as a product of powerful leadership.

Some leaders are unaware of the important role influence through rapport and communication plays in increasing their power. Consider these questions: Do you sometimes later learn that what was said to you was not the whole story? Do you ever think you gained buy-in to an idea or plan then find others pursuing their own direction? If these ring true for you, there are opportunities for you to build sufficient rapport such that the whole story, including obstacles and objections, are out on the table.

Consider the middle manager who gets feedback about her lack of “relationship” skills. She is told that she is too directive and does not listen well. Furthermore she is made aware that these issues are a potential career derail. Colleagues don’t cooperate, employees on her team complain they do not trust her. Seldom is she given specific examples, and even more rarely is she given concrete tools for improvement. The result? Reticence to lead, another career derail.

Aligning with and engaging others can co-exist with strong, decisive leadership. In fact, it must. Powerful leaders gain diverse input then act decisively, exhibit style flexibility yet are grounded in self-awareness, and advocate their point of view while making it safe for others to disagree. These leaders are viewed as easy to work with and relate to, and they have the keen ability to influence.

In business conversations, the goal is not to dominate or win, but rather to be heard and to shape the future direction. The most effective way to do that is to welcome, rather than oppose, conflict or differing points of view. This principle is well illustrated with the use of Aikido. Aikido is a Japanese art of self-defense that employs the principles of nonresistance in order to debilitate the strength of the opponent. The strategy of Aikido is to blend or align with the attacker's energy. Aikido is non-aggressive and at the same time it is not passive. It requires that the practitioner relax and flow with the opposing energy and in doing so literally control the direction of the conflict.

Consultative selling is premised similarly. The sales representative must align with the needs, issues and even style of the client by seeking first to understand before offering solutions, if those solutions are to be considered credible. The whole process looks and feels like the client has the power, when in fact the power comes from the alignment itself. The interesting fact is that one can’t fake it. If needs are openly and clearly defined, the solution either matches or it does not.

We’ve talked about power and its antecedents of understanding, alignment and adaptability. Unless power is coercive, power and influence require flexibility and adaptability. Originating in systems theory, “The Law of Requisite Variety” states that, in any given system, the entity which is the most flexible is the entity that controls the system. There are many examples in nature. One is the proliferation of coyotes. They can live anywhere and eat just about anything. They live in arid deserts, cold mountain climates, cities and suburbs. They can eat plants, garbage or other animals. Thus, in many ecosystems, they are at the top of the food chain. Great organizational leaders understand the complexities and inter-relationships among disciplines, personalities and points of view. The leader’s magic is in orchestrating the diversity in an adaptive way as opportunities and threats change.

Great leaders courageously leverage the dynamics of power to move complex organizations in unified ways that perpetuate success. We urge leaders to learn and adopt the most sustainable approaches to power. Sheer force may produce short-term gain, but mastery of genuine listening, appropriate involvement and skillful alignment will yield a level of influence that produces productive and loyal advocates across a wide spectrum of situations.

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