

# **The Power Dynamics that Facilitate or Inhibit Organizational Success**

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*The purpose of this manuscript is to identify and define key power dynamics facilitating or inhibiting organizational success. Composed of qualitative and experiential research based on fifteen years of corporate business experience and graduate-level coursework, it is a conceptual paper based on one person's experience; therefore, the leading limitation is generalizability, but is overcome by research based on references. This manuscript discusses multiple power dynamics but focuses primarily on French and Raven's five identified power dynamics (coercive, referent, legitimate, reward and expert powers), provides corporate-based examples and links to short YouTube video clips for demonstration, analysis, insight and understanding.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Power is the potential that one has over another person or group(s). In general, the one with the power has control over something the other person or group may desire (Robins and Judge 451). Leadership and power are compatible and complementary but not synonymous or interdependent. In the late 1950s, John R. P. French and Bertram Raven, two social psychologists, concluded that there are five power dynamics – referent, legitimate, expert, reward and coercive (French and Raven, 1959). Simply stated, coercive power is the ability to penalize others, while reward power is the ability to incentivize and compensate. Expert power is based on one's knowledge in a given field based on education and/or experience. Legitimate (sometimes referred to as positional power) is authority (or power) based on a given hierarchical structure or formal status within an organization or culture. Referent (or personal power) is based on acquired respect and veneration one has gained over time. While some of the five recognized power dynamics require positional power, two can be exemplified at any level within an organization. These power dynamics are further discussed in the manuscript.

Bolman and Deal (203-4) identify additional power dynamics. They agree on position power (legitimate), control of rewards (reward), coercive power, information and expertise (expert), but they include others and break down the definition of referent into multiple categories. These categories include reputation, personal power, alliances and networks, access and control of agendas, and framing: control of meaning and symbols. Further explanation of the meaning of these additional dynamics is as follows: The power dynamic indicating "reputation builds on expertise. ... (states that) opportunities and influence flow to people with strong reputations, like the Hollywood superstars whose presence in a new film sells tickets" (Bolman and Deal, 2008, 203). Personal power is defined as "individuals who are attractive and socially adept – because of charisma, energy, stamina, political smarts, gift of gab, vision, or some other characteristic – are imbued with power independent of other sources" (203). Another power dynamic is through building alliances and networks. When these types of alliances and networks materialize, it is

usually based on one's ability to satisfy goals based on the relationships built in a given organization. Once a strong network is established in a given organization, the organizer may become a valuable resource even though he or she may be reliant on making decisions and act as an unofficial representative of some groups or point of view. Access and control of agendas allows varying political circles to be present in meetings to not only have face time, but also time on agendas to share ideas and input. Possessing social, or a network-type power, may lead to more actions and proactive behavior, whereas lacking power may lead to inhibition (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, *Psychol Rev* 110: 265-284, 2003) (Smith, Jost & Vijay, 2008). The last added power dynamic is framing: control of meaning and symbols. Here, "elites and opinion leaders often have substantial ability to shape meaning and articulate myths that express identity, beliefs and values," promoting "meaning and hope" (Bolman and Deal 2008, 204). The intent of these "additional" power dynamics was developed to explain the "power gap" between those who demonstrate legitimate power but are incapable of motivating others and thus must use other forms to achieve the necessary objectives. For purposes of this manuscript, the focus will remain on French and Raven's researched five power dynamics – coercive, reward, expert, legitimate and referent power.

## **THE POWER DYNAMICS**

### **Coercive Power**

Coercive power has been used in organizations throughout history. It is a formal power dependent on threats and/or fear (Robins and Judge 452). Managers who had the legitimate authority to negatively impact others by use of their position too often took advantage of it. Examples of coercive power often include not approving vacation time, publicly reprimanding employees (warranted or unwarranted), salary reductions, demotions, termination and withholding critical information. Moreover, it could be assumed that those managers may have had managerial styles with characteristics similar to those of Douglas McGregor's Theory X (Bolman and Deal 125) – a theory that presumed that most people did not enjoy work and needed to be specifically directed in order to meet organizational objectives. As a consequence, many of these managers with Theory X characteristics threatened punishment in their effort to motivate employees. Whether working at a Fortune 10 organization or a mom and pop shop, the capability for this power to exist is dependent on both the character of the person and culture of the organization. In general, the larger the organization, the more likely for there to be stricter controls around a manager's behavior and for the organization's core values to be exemplified by managers because of the established norming that continues to evolve with longevity. To create an environment that discourages this type of power in a significantly smaller-scale organization, provide guiding principles but do not dictate behavior (Pratto, Pearson, Lee and Saguy 182). Regardless of the size of the organization, coercive activity should not be acceptable. This power often greatly inhibits an organization's success.

Another example of power displayed in a very realistic fashion is on the YouTube video entitled *Coercive Power* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQEMZ9eQlZE>). After watching the video clip, it can be seen how legitimate power can be used in an unhealthy way by using it in a coercive manner. The manager said the employee's reasoning was "nonsense" prior to hearing the rationale for the late assignment. He ordered the employee not to leave the office until the assignment was complete, despite not having the necessary resources for a successful outcome. Moreover, the manager threatened the employee by providing an ultimatum – either stay all night or apply for another job – believing it would serve as motivation to complete the assignment.

### **Reward Power**

Reward power has also been used throughout history and has not only proved effective and up to a point, motivational. The ability "to give or withhold rewards based on performance is a major source of power that allows managers to have a highly motivated workforce" (Jones and George 333). Examples of exercising reward power include the percentage allotted for a given bonus or pay raise, granting comp time, expressing praise and appreciation for hard work verbally or in writing, publically or privately. Good managers know whether it is appropriate to provide intrinsic or extrinsic rewards, depending on the

associate and the intensity of situation. Both “coercive power and reward power are ...counterparts of each other. If you can remove something positive of value from another or inflict something of negative value, you have coercive power over that person. If you can give someone something of positive value or remove something of negative value, you have reward power over that person” (Robbins and Judge 452). McGregor’s Theory Y can be exemplified here as well. This theory states that managers generally believe people enjoy work and want to succeed in their roles. Managers with this mindset are more likely to empower their employees. Empowerment is often a major form of leadership that can be motivational and create a positive work environment. Many managers use reward power, but it is often reflective of the size of the organization. The smaller the organization, in general (with the assumption being lower revenue dollars), the lower the manager’s ability to distribute significant pay raises. The larger the organization (with the assumption of a greater workforce and higher revenue dollars), in general, the manager can provide a more substantial distribution of pay or allotment of bonuses. Therefore, it can be assumed that, over-all, extrinsic rewards such as these often come in greater packages from larger organizations. However, any organization can reward its associates through praise, recognition, competitive benefits and time away from work. One issue a manager can encounter is that their respective power may be limited by the hierarchy within the organization, or the organization itself. For example, a manager’s power can weaken if the organization performed poorly financially and is unable to reward associates even if the team or department’s goals were achieved. Because of this, the manager cannot award associates appropriately, or as expected, implying the manager is in a less powerful position. However, by and large, this power dynamic can significantly facilitate an organization’s success.

The YouTube video entitled *The Big Bang Theory – Sheldon Trains Penny* ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qy\\_mIEnnlF4&nohtml5=False](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qy_mIEnnlF4&nohtml5=False)) demonstrates reward power in everyday situations. Sheldon uses chocolate to (extrinsically) reward Penny to reinforce certain behaviors. In doing so, Penny recognizes that she was talking too much. After becoming aware of her behavior, she realizes she should step into the hallway when taking a telephone call.

Leonard then confirms that Sheldon is using chocolate to influence Penny’s behavior. Sheldon indicates that Operant Conditioning is another way to reward and also influence behavior. Once confirmed, Leonard forbids Sheldon from training Penny and in contrast to reward power, is then squirted with a water bottle by Sheldon (exercising coercive power). Here, if Sheldon were to reward Penny in a non-materialistic manner (intrinsically), he could: use words of praise, bend rules from the Roommate Agreement and allow her to sit in his spot on the couch, for example. Moreover, Sheldon could choose to remove a negative, to maintain influence. In doing so, he could potentially create an unpleasant environment and remove the unpleasant experience when the right behavior is exhibited.

### **Expert Power**

Expert power is based on specific experience(s), job knowledge and/or educational background. This power is not dependent on one’s position in an organization. With this power dynamic, “expertise has become one of the most powerful sources of influence as the world has become more technologically oriented. As jobs become more specialized, we become increasingly dependent on experts to achieve goals” (Robbins and Judge 453). These respected positions include web developers, those who create patches to solve for computer viruses, as well as doctors, lawyers, tax accountants, to name a few other positions. Expert power can be found throughout organizations. For example, a finance manager needs to understand the impact of financial forecasts when functional areas make adjustments to proposals or close gaps in other areas within the organization; marketing teams may need to understand that the bigger the campaign, the more sales will increase and ensure that the organization is scalable to accommodate these increases; front-line managers need to understand the impact of hiring and terminating employees and should obtain additional expertise from human resource managers; lastly, quality audit managers need to establish and ensure the highest quality products and services are developed and distributed to customers to maintain competitive advantages and reputation, but at the same time, balance quality with cost using a cost benefit analysis. When used properly and for organizational purposes, this expert power dynamic will

often add value to any organization and may become a catalyst for facilitating the organization's future success.

*Expert Power* is a video clip on YouTube from the movie *The Devil Wears Prada* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-fkTrT6t5s>). In this scene, expert power is illustrated by the manager (Glenn Close) proving she can easily identify various shades of the color blue (blue sweater) and states historical facts by providing examples of usage of the color. Furthermore, she makes recommendations on creating an outfit which looks classy, elegant and respectable. The caution for managers is that the delivery of expertise can make you unlikeable. Many people can be a highly respected expert in their industry or field, however, they may not be liked because of their communication delivery, demeanor or character.

### **Legitimate Power**

Legitimate power is directly related to the position held in a given organizational structure (Robins and Judge 452). Authority over others is granted by span of control allotted to a given manager. Examples of this power generally include the ability to hire and terminate employees, assign roles, delegate special projects, conduct performance appraisals and provide professional guidance. This type of power can be an umbrella for other powers such as reward and coercive, but because managers often have the authority to provide positive or negative value over another's position within the organization it becomes incumbent upon them to determine when which type of power is both practical and effective. The misuse of coercive power or the devaluing of positive opportunities with frivolous examples tends to prove detrimental. Legitimate power, and those who hold it, is inherent to any formal organization. It is imperative for organizations to hire executives with characteristics of those that align with the organization's core values and verify that they are in-fact aligned, because, and unfortunately, some managers may take advantage of this positional power and without a whistleblower, it may be difficult to detect. To create an environment where this behavior is not acceptable, executives must ensure that there is an open door policy and regular 360-degree performance evaluations performed on a regular basis. This not only can create a culture of trust, but a healthy atmosphere that promotes organizational values, while growing and developing its workforce, are as important as the product or service the organization provides. Legitimate or positional power is a required element for any organization to function, but has also been many organizations downfall when the wrong people are in the wrong positions doing the wrong things. When holding legitimate power, managers need to be conscious that if the position is eliminated, legitimate power can instantly disappear because others were influenced by the position and not the person. Properly utilized, legitimate power can enhance an organization's success.

Another example on YouTube is a video entitled *Legitimate Power – Big Bang Theory Style* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4LIADSF93c>). In this video clip, Sheldon holds the authority, as articulated in the Roommate Agreement. He exercises the Roommate Agreement in various scenarios, and he provides examples of consequences for not following procedure, as outlined in the Roommate Agreement. The person with the power is in a given position with others in a more submissive role; this can be through formal power in an organization or in a friendship-type role as seen in this video.

### **Referent Power**

Referent or personal power is often "more informal than the other kind of powers. Referent power is a function of the personal characteristics of a leader; it is the power that comes from subordinates' and coworkers' respect, admiration and loyalty" (Jones and George 335). In general, these people often desire to work with, please, or in some way align themselves with the person with the referent power. This idea may be one of rationalizations about the phenomenon for "why celebrities are paid millions of dollars to endorse products in commercials. Marketing research shows that people such as LeBron James and Tom Brady have the power to influence your choice of athletic shoes and credit cards" (Robbins and Judge 453). If a non-celebrity delivered the exact same sales pitch, the expected outcome could be drastically different. Oprah Winfrey was able to use her referent power to develop a phenomenon of her "favorite things." While she wasn't an expert in beauty products or clothing, her positive influence sold millions of

products. Whether or not one is in a formal leadership position, referent power is often illustrated through “their charismatic dynamism, likeability and emotional effect” (453). This power can be found throughout almost any organization, or group, regardless of the size of the group, organization, company, or position of the person. For those looking to increase their hierarchical position within an organization without having legitimate power, referent power can be displayed, demonstrating the ability to lead and begin to showcase tangible results. One potential issue with this power is that it can be abused if someone is likeable but lacks integrity, he or she could hurt and/or intentionally alienate others to gain personal advantage. Referent power can often motivate a workforce to create a culture that helps facilitate an organization’s success.

There is a clip from the movie *Facing the Giants* on YouTube entitled *The Death Crawl Scene from Facing the Giants* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sUKoKQIEC4>) which not only exemplifies referent power, but each of French and Raven’s other four power dynamics. Referent power is illustrated by Brock’s attitude towards the upcoming game, demonstrating he was ready to quit and accepting the buy-in from his teammates. Brock is a football player on the team and in no formal position of authority. However, he is natural leader on the team. Referent power is shown in the coach’s behavior, as he encouraged Brock to push down the field. The coach physically gets on his hands and knees to crawl alongside his player (Brock) as he moved down the field. Lastly, the conversation the coach has with Brock in the end zone is another example of the coach positively using reward power to motivate his player. The coach uses legitimate power in developing the exercise with Brock and for the team to see. One could argue that he also uses coercive power to perform the death crawl (and blind-folded); further questioned by Brock when he asked “Am I in trouble?” The coach also uses expert power in this scene. His knowledge of his players to demonstrate the power of attitude and value of team leadership is displayed powerfully and results in a unified, motivated team.

## CONCLUSION

Robbins and Judge (2009) categorizes the five power dynamics into two groups – formal power and personal power. Formal bases of power include legitimate, reward and coercive; personal power includes expert and referent power dynamics. Their “research suggests pretty clearly that the personal sources of power are (often) most effective. Both expert and referent power are positively related to employees’ satisfaction with supervision, their organizational commitment, and their performance, whereas reward and legitimate power seem to be unrelated to these outcomes. Moreover, one source of formal power – coercive power – actually can backfire in that it is negatively related to employee satisfaction and commitment” (Robbins and Judge 453). These power dynamics will always exist. Good leaders and managers should reflect on the dynamic they most often use and ensure it has a positive impact and facilitates success for the organizations and its culture.

There is no right or wrong power dynamic, as each could potentially prove valuable in the right situation. In general, most people don’t react favorably when under a structure demonstrating coercive power, but in some situations (perhaps military scenarios), it may substantiate actions contributing to desired outcomes. In corporate settings, the other four power dynamics have demonstrated to be successful, and often proving motivational, enabling people, projects and organizations to be fruitful.

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