

## Understanding power in the workplace

Power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get what you want. Many people can be reluctant to consider their power and explore how they influence, or can be influenced by others, because the concept of power can conjure negative associations, especially if people's initial associations are of abuses of power. This summary suggests that power, in its own right, is neither good or bad. It depends how you use it and from whose perspective you view it. Nothing positive would happen if everyone avoided using their power to improve situations for themselves and others. As a leader, you are more able to consider how to use your power effectively if you are consciously aware of it.

### Sources of power

In 1959, French and Raven classified five bases of power (as below). Their research still helps us to understand why some leaders influence us, how prepared we are to accept their power, and – as a leader – how you can develop new power bases to get the best from people. French and Raven's identified sources of power are:

- > **Legitimate power** – this comes from a person's formal right to make demands, and to expect others to be compliant and obedient.
- > **Reward power** – this results from a person's ability to compensate another for compliance.
- > **Coercive power** – this comes from a person's ability to punish others for non-compliance.
- > **Expert power** – this is based on a person's level of skill and knowledge.
- > **Referent power** – this derives from a person's perceived attractiveness, worthiness or earned respect of others.

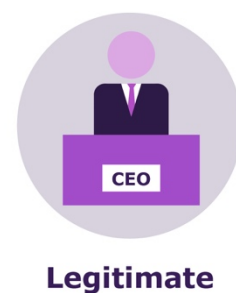
In 2009, Bauer and Erdogan identified six sources of power, one more than French and Raven, and suggested a helpful distinction between *organisational* (attributed to position) and *personal* sources of power.



## Organisational sources of power

### Legitimate power

Legitimate power is power that comes from organisational position or role. Electoral mandates, social hierarchies, cultural norms, and organisational structures all provide a basis for legitimate power. Presidents, prime ministers, monarchs, CEOs, religious ministers, police and fire officers are examples of roles with associated formal/ legitimate power. Drawing on positional power, for example, managers can arrange work to be done and assign tasks to subordinates, police officers can arrest people, and teachers can assign grades to students. Others comply with such requests/ power, whether they like or agree with the request, because they accept the legitimacy of the position.



One issue with this type of power is that it is invested in the job title or role and can be time limited. If you lose your title or position, legitimate power can instantly disappear, because people were influenced by the position you held rather than by you. Politicians, for example, experience this in the full glare of the public eye when they win or lose elections.

The scope of your power can also be limited to situations that others believe you have a right to control. If a fire officer tells people to stay away from a burning building, for example, they are likely to listen. But if the same fire officer tries to make two people act more courteously toward one another, they may ignore this instruction.

It is also the case at times that despite legitimate power, others may choose to thwart this and go around a person to get something done for themselves or to make sure that the person with legitimate power does not get what they want.

## **Reward power**

Reward power is the ability to grant a reward, such as an increase in pay, a perk, or an attractive job assignment. Reward power tends to accompany legitimate power and is highest when the reward is scarce or much sought after by the person being rewarded. Giving someone something in exchange for their compliance is another source of reward power.



**Reward**

People in power positions are often able to give rewards and this power is therefore usually, though not exclusively, associated with role. Pay increases, promotions, desirable assignments, training opportunities, and simple compliments are all examples of rewards controlled by people "in power." However, anyone can have reward power in the form of giving praise in public or private if it is valued by the receiver.

A limitation to this power base is that it may not be as strong as it first seems. One individual rarely has complete control over pay rises, managers often can't control promotions by themselves, and even CEOs need permission from their boards of directors for some actions. Also, when you use up rewards, or when the rewards

don't have enough perceived value, this power weakens. This source of power can also be abused and lead to dissatisfaction or resentment among people it's applied to or those excluded from it.

## **Coercive power**

Coercive power is the ability to take something away or punish someone for non-compliance. Coercive power often works through fear, and it forces people to do something that ordinarily they would not choose to do, or stops people from doing what they would like to do. The most extreme example of coercion is any form of dictatorship that resorts to physical harm for non-compliance.



**Coercive**

Threats and punishment are common coercive tools. Leaders use coercive power when they imply or threaten that someone will be fired, demoted or denied privileges. Whilst your position may allow you to do this, it doesn't mean you have the justification/ authority to do so. You may sometimes need to punish people as a last resort but if you over-use coercive power, research shows that people become demotivated and disengaged and often leave. (You might also risk being accused of bullying.)

## **Information power**

Information power comes from the ability to access specific information or networks. For example, knowing price information gives a person information power during negotiations. In organisations, a person's social network can either isolate them from information power or create it.



**Informational**

Having control over information that others need or want, for example access to confidential financial reports, being aware of upcoming vacancies, or redundancies, even knowing where your team is going for its annual "away day" are all examples of informational power. The power derives not from the information itself but from having access to it, and from being in a position to share, withhold, manipulate,

distort, or conceal it. People don't have to be in senior positions to have significant amounts of information power. These can include those who work in, for example, IT, HR, finance, or are PA's, organise diaries or rota's, or scarce car parking spaces, to mention a few.

This type of power can be used positively to help others, or abused as a weapon or a bargaining tool against them.

## **Sources of personal power**

### **Expert power**

Expert power comes from knowledge and skills and is based on the fact or impression of significant relevant experience or expertise compared to others. Technology companies are often characterised by expert, rather than legitimate, power. The NHS has many examples of influential roles, people, post-holders where influence is derived from expert power, including doctors, nurses, pharmacists and all sorts of clinical specialists as well as finance and Hr and many others.



**Expert**

When you have knowledge and skills that enable you to understand a situation, suggest solutions, use solid judgment, and generally outperform others in a particular subject, people will listen to you, trust you, and respect what you say because of your credibility. As a subject matter expert, your ideas will have value, and others will look to you for leadership in that area. What's more, you can expand your influence beyond your field when you build a reputation for offering constructive, sound judgements, drawing on rational and/ or emotional intelligence and applying it into other subjects and issues. Through this it is possible to build and maintain expert power, and to improve your leadership skills in a broader arena.

## Referent power

Referent power comes from the personal characteristics of a person, such as the degree to which others like, respect, or want to be like them. Referent power is often called charisma — the ability to attract others, win their admiration, and hold their attention and trust. It comes from one person liking and respecting another, or identifying with them in some way. Celebrities often have referent power with their admirers, which is why they can influence these admirers to buy particular products, sometimes even which politician or party to vote for.



Referent

Referent power carries responsibility, and, like other power sources, can be abused. Charismatic individuals can rise to power who lack integrity and honesty – and then use this source of power to their personal advantage.

## Exploring your sources of power

Anyone can hold power and influence over others: you don't need to hold a senior position, have an impressive job title or a big office. We all influence, help other people be influential or promote ideas that others follow at different times.

Recognising and getting comfortable with the sources of power you have, working at extending these, and choosing to use them humanely will help you to become a more influential and effective leader.

Here are some ways to explore your sources of power and consider how you use them now and might start or continue to use them in the future.

- > Go through each power base and write down which sources of power you are most comfortable and least comfortable receiving and exercising.
- > Notice also when and how you've used each, in what kinds of situations, with whom and the results
- > Ask yourself if you used the power appropriately? Consider the expected and unexpected consequences, and decide what you might do differently next time.

- > When you feel powerless or overly influenced, think about how you could regain your own power and control. How can you reduce someone else's illegitimate use of power over you?

## Summary: sources of leadership power

Source	Type	Influence on others
Coercive	Position	The ability to impose sanctions or punishment to gain compliance
Reward	Position	The ability to provide rewards or recognition to gain compliance
Legitimate	Position	The right to influence the activities of others based on job title or position
Information	Position & personal	Possession of or access to, valuable information
Connection	Position & personal	Access to others who can provide rewards or sanctions
Expert	Personal	Respect gained based on skills, expertise or experience
Referent	Personal	Positive personal traits or integrity
<a href="http://www.plantservices.com/articles/2011/06-human-capital-leadership-power/">http://www.plantservices.com/articles/2011/06-human-capital-leadership-power/</a>		

## References

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French and Raven's Five Forms of Power. Understanding Where Power Comes from in the Workplace [https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR\\_56.htm](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_56.htm)

<https://youtu.be/eSb06mh7EHA>

## Further reading

Human Capital | 7 sources of Leadership Power. Tom Moriarty explains the difference between personal power and position power

<http://www.plantservices.com/articles/2011/06-human-capital-leadership-power/>

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