
Dynamics of Power in the Workplace

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1. Introduction

Scholars have researched and debated the concept of power for centuries. There is no shortage of theories explaining how this influential force manifests itself within an organization. The writer will discuss the reviewed literature covering concepts of leadership, culture, and power, how these organizational factors interact, the different types of power and its sources or bases, and the dynamics of power in the relationships among supervisors and employees.

2. Culture, Leadership and Power

Every organization has a system of shared meaning called its culture. Culture is “a set of unwritten norms that members of the organization accept and understand, and that guide their actions” (Robbins & DeCenzo, 2006, p. 399). In the decision-making process of a workplace political situation, individuals must evaluate the organizational culture and the power distribution within the organization, including the powers of others and their own power (Robbins & DeCenzo). The author further discussed the degree of difference in power; a person may be very powerful on some issues but relatively not so powerful on other issues. It is important to ponder who are the powerful individuals or groups in a given situation (Robbins & DeCenzo).

Culture affects leaderships by ways of employees; a leader is constrained by the cultural conditions of his or her employees for determining which leadership style will be most effective. According to Robbins & DeCenzo (2006), authoritarian leadership styles are more compatible with cultures where power is unequal such as those found in Latin countries; while a collaborative leadership style is likely to be most effective in cultures where power is more

equally distributed including Norway, Finland, and Sweden. The culture of North American and Scandinavian countries with different power criteria tends to accept more participative and empowering leadership styles.

A bureaucratic organization has been described as an organization where rationalizing structures and decision-making give a sense of stability (Birnbaum, 1988). The author discussed that bureaucratic organizations are generally rigid and change reluctant. The vertical structure portrayed in the organizational charts evidences a division of labor, rights and responsibilities of those employed in the organization (Birnbaum, 1988). In the political organization, power is negotiated developing a “super-coalition of sub-coalitions with diverse interests, preferences and goals” (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 150). The members of a political organization develop and use power to obtain individual or group preferred outcomes (Birnbaum, 1988). A large number of individuals or groups in the political organization operate autonomously, but are interdependent; this social exchange and mutual dependence is also a characteristic of the political organization in higher education (Birnbaum, 1988).

One of the leadership characteristics is the exercise of power. Supervisors are to understand what legitimate power they have been given by the organization to direct the activities of others (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001). This legitimate power posited the authors, is the authority to act and expect others to follow your directions. It is a supervisor’s obligation to know when to assert his or her authority and to recognize that all the members of the organization are different not only in their talents, the job readiness, and as individuals (Hersey et al., 2001). Leadership effectiveness does not depend only on style; it is also a matter of the power bases available (Hersey et al., 2001). The authors also referred to the dynamics of growing organizations where the use of power bases is in evolution, shifting from “power over, to gaining power with” (p.254) employees.

Power and leadership are being redefined. Linking leadership with force and power with dominance is not accepted anymore, and in some advanced corporations

power is shifting from “I-Centric to We-Centric” (Glaser, 2006, p. 16), requiring a commitment and a plan of action. Traditional models of leadership are becoming obsolete because of the interaction of demographic, technological and economic changes (Helgesen, 2008). The interaction of these trends is shifting the scene, and the power and influence of leaders depend on the efficiency of their organizations (Helgesen, 2008). Leadership is becoming disengaged from the power of position, and will be vested based on the power of earned personal authority (Helgesen, 2008).

3. Defining Power

Power is the fundamental concept in social science and is associated with “(a) positive effect, (b) attention to rewards, (c) automatic information processing, and (d) disinhibited behavior” (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003, p. 265). In contrast, reduced power is associated with “(a) negative affect; (b) attention to threat, punishment, others’ interests, and those features of the self that are relevant to others’ goals; (c) controlled information processing; and (d) inhibited social behavior” (Keltner et al., 2003, p. 265).

Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson (2003) defined power as “an individual’s relative capacity to modify others’ states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments” (¶ 6). Status is the outcome of an evaluation of attributes that produces differences in respect and prominence. Status in part determines the allocation of resources within groups and, by implication, each individual’s power. However, it is possible to have power without status and status without relative power (Keltner et al., 2003). Authority is power that derives from institutionalized roles or arrangements but power can exist in the absence of formal roles (Keltner et al., 2003). Dominance is behavior that has the acquisition of power as its end, yet power is attainable without dominance; thus, status, authority, and dominance are all potential determinants of power (Keltner et al., 2003).

Cross and Parker (2004) supported the benefits of power from a network perspective, instead of the vertical formal structure of organizations (Cross & Parker, 2004). The

authors posited that the ability to communicate and the energy derived from individual and groups “connectivity” (p. 7) are hidden powers of social network. People gain knowledge and power when placed in specific positions in a network; those who energize others are more likely to be heard and have their ideas put into action (Cross & Parker, 2004). People can be energized by the vision of someone who has integrity and stands for more than his personal gain, while the same vision articulated by someone without integrity can be de-energizing (Cross & Parker, 2004).

Social power defined as “the ability to gain favorable outcomes at another’s expense” (p. 46). Sell, Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, and Wilson (2004) further supported the “power dependence” (p. 47) theory of Emerson (1962) and it expresses relationship because it means having power over someone. Reuver (2006) is consistent with Emerson’s (1961) power dependence theory. Reuver further addressed that those with more power are able to satisfy their own needs and desires, while the less powerful would be more dependant. When one of the parties in conflict starts to act the conflict becomes a dynamic process of “action and reaction” (Reuver, 2006, p. 589). The hierarchical structure guides the conflict resolution strategies among members, involving “dominance and submissiveness” (Reuver, 2006, p. 591).

Yukl (2003) posited that the essence of leadership is influence over followers, and defined influence as a two directions process between leaders and followers. Leaders influence followers, who in turn also have some influence over leaders (Yukl, 2003). In large organizations, the effectiveness of middle-level and lower-level managers depends on their influence over superiors and peers as well as their influence over subordinates. Power generally refers to an agent’s capacity to influence a target person or groups, which could be the target person’s behavior, attitude, or both (Yukl, 2003). Because it is difficult to measure potential influence some people define power as the amount of influence actually exercised by the agent, or “enacted power” (Yukl, 2003, p. 4). Influence is (Robbins & DeCenzo, 2006) a good beginning for power assessment. The meaning of

influence ranges from the “dominant and authoritative, to the more important and significant” (Glaser, 2006, p. 16). Glaser explained that at one end, it is being influential because of coercion, and at the other end is being influential out of recognized importance, for the contribution to the greater benefit.

Osland, Kolb, Rubin and Turner (2007) discussed McClelland (1961) theory of needs including “achievement, power, and affiliation” (p. 104). In his needs theory McClelland defined power as the need to influence and lead others being in control of one’s environment, and discussed two faces of power: “socialized power” (p. 105), defined as the use of power for the good of others; and “personalized power” (p. 105), or the concern for personal dominance (Osland, et al., 2007). According to McClelland’s theory people with “high need of power” (p. 105) are competitive, preoccupied with their reputation, influence and impact (Osland et al., 2007).

4. Power Types and Sources

Efforts to understand power usually involve distinctions among different types of power in organizations and its sources. Geisler (2003) pointed out that leaders may have power but not use it wisely, recommending the analysis of the sources or bases of power to select the proper leadership style.

Yukl (2003, discussed French and Raven (1959) taxonomy of types of power according to their source. The taxonomy comprises: (a) reward power: when the target person complies in order to obtain rewards; (b) coercive power: the target person complies in order to avoid punishments; (c) legitimate power: the target person complies because he or she believes to have the obligation to comply; (d) expert power: the target person complies because he or she believes that the agent has special knowledge about the best way to do something; and (e) referent power: the target person complies because he or she admires or identifies with the agent and wants to gain the agent’s approval (Yukl, 2003).

Reward power can reinforce employee's attitudes and behaviors; supervisors can use the bases of social power, namely expert and referent power, to promote employee's perceptions of organizational support (Keltner et al., 2003). Geisler (2003) posited that legitimate power is *the just for leaders* territory, because all the other types of power discussed can be used by individuals at all levels of an organization.

Yukl (2003) also discussed Bass (1960) conceptualization of power sources in "position power and personal power" (p. 5) derived from the opportunities intrinsic in a person's position in the organization, and the characteristics of the leader and follower relationship. Position power includes the "potential influence derived from legitimate authority, control over resources and rewards, control over punishments, control over information, and control over the organization of the work and the physical work environment" (Yukl, 2003, p. 5). Personal power refers to the potential influence derived from "expertise, friendship and loyalty, and a leader's persuasive and charismatic qualities" (Yukl, 2003, p. 5). Skillful leaders move followers to "their emotional rhythm" (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002, p. 24). However, the authors posited some leaders use this same ability to manipulate followers eliciting negative emotions including fear and anger, with a "negative resonance" (p. 24).

Another important source of power is control over information involving both the access to vital information, and control over its distribution to others (Yukl, 2003). The information revolution is transforming organization, posited Nye (2008), hierarchies are becoming flatter, and people are less respectful to authority. Control over information is a source of both upward and downward influence, as well as lateral influence (Yukl, 2003). Subordinates may have exclusive access to information needed by superiors to make decisions and may use this advantage to influence over the superior's decisions (Yukl, 2003).

5. Dynamics of Power in the Workplace

Followers often play multiple roles in their relationship to leaders intensifying the complexity of the leader follower

dynamic (Bennis, 2008). Positive followers formulate the culture and policies of the group and help their leaders modulating inevitable human flaws; less dynamic relationship leads to mediocre performance (Bennis). The shift from a hierarchical authority to a more personal and laterally distributed leadership and consequently power, demands a change in the leader's mindset (Ancona, Backman, & Bresman, 2008). The result is a whole network of leaders in alignment for moving the organization toward success by influencing and empowering those who are best able to lead at any given time (Ancona et al., 2008). It is not a simple change in the individual leader's behavior; furthermore, share or distributed leadership influences the workplace dynamics because power and authority relationship renovate (Ancona et al., 2008).

In social relationship, power is frequently a cause for conflict. Sell et al. (2004) discussed that conflict, power, and status are present in most human interactions. The authors defined conflict as "awareness, by the parties involved, of differences, discrepancies, incompatible wishes, or irreconcilable desires" (p. 46). Sell et al. further discussed "positive approaches" (p. 46) to conflict promoted by problem-solving strategies

Technology is changing the leader-follower dynamic (Kellerman, 2008). In spite of the strong organizational structures, power and influence are shifting due to technology and "those in the middle and bottom now have new and different tools that enable them to take on or circumvent those at the top" (Kellerman, p. 4). Followers, posited Kellerman, are able to communicate with each other and be listened, making leaders vulnerable in unusual ways.

The research findings of a study conducted by Murphy and Wright (2005), included supervisees' perceptions of supervisors' positive and negative uses of power. The research informants reported that a positive use of power by their supervisor, was discussing either directly or indirectly to define and clarify each one's roles in the relationship (Murphy & Wright). Examples of negative use of supervisor's power included (a) "favoritism" (p. 289) that occurred when the supervisor displayed relationship with a particular

supervisee; (b) supervisors meeting their own needs above those of supervisees; and (c) the imposition of styles or perspective on supervisees (Murphy & Wright).

6. Summary

Leaders must know that the exercise of power is inherent to their directing role. Leader's success will no longer depend on their personal power. Leader's efficiency will be decided by his or her ability for connecting more conscientious followers, for achieving the organization's goals. The culture, power distribution, and the diversity of the followers will be determinants of the leadership style. Adding to the discussed factors of technology, demographic, and economic factors, the dramatic economic crisis, and the strong support for political change would have an impact on the power distribution both socially and in corporations.

7. References

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