

Power: Definition, Typology, Description, Examples, and Implications

Dr. Ken Petress

- I. **Power** is the ability to influence others to believe, behave, or to value as those in power desire them to or to strengthen, validate, or confirm present beliefs, behaviors, or values.

Power is the social force that allows select persons to mobilize others; to organize others to act in concert; and to melt away resistance to leaders' authority.

- II. Power manifests itself in several forms; among these are: expert power, reward power, legitimate power, referent power, and coercive power.¹ Other power forms include information power, tradition power, and charismatic power.

- III. Expert power is based on what one knows, what experience one has, and/or what special skills or talents one has.

Expertise can be demonstrated by demonstration, by reputation, or by offering appropriate credentials certifying expertise.

Some examples include: (a) a violinist demonstrating through audition skill with music; (b) a professor submits school transcripts to demonstrate discipline expertise; (c) a bricklayer relies on 20+ years of experience to prove expertise.

Some pitfalls can emerge when too heavy a reliance is made on expertise; these include: (a) sometimes inferences are made suggesting expertise is wider in scope than it actually is; for example, an expert in antique vases may have little expertise in antique lamps; (b) one's expertise is not everlasting; for example, a physician who fails to keep up with medical technology and advances may lose expertise; and (c) expertise does not necessarily carry with it common sense or ethicality.

- IV. Reward power is based on the right of some to offer tangible, social, emotional, or spiritual rewards to others for doing what is wanted or expected of them or to deny others something tangible, social, emotional, political, or spiritual for failing to or refusing to do what is desired or expected of them.

Some examples of reward power (positive reward) are: (a) a child is given a dollar for earning better grades; (b) a student is admitted into an honor society for excellent effort; (c) a retiree is praised and feted for lengthy service at a retirement party; and (d) New York firefighters were heralded as heroes for their acts on 9-11-01.

Some examples of reward power (negative reward) are: (a) a driver is fined for illegal parking; (b) a teenager grounded for a week for misbehaving; (c) a rookie player is ridiculed for not following tradition; and (d) President Harding's name is commonly invoked whenever political scandal is mentioned.

Some pitfalls can emerge when a too heavy reliance is placed on reward power; these include: (a) some people become fixated and too dependent on rewards to do even mundane activities; (b) too severe fears of punishment can immobilize some people; (c) as time passes, past rewards become insufficient to motivate or activate desired outcomes; and (d) negative rewards may be perverted into positive attention.

¹ These five power types come from the work of John French and Bertram Raven. (1959). The Bases of Social Power. In Studies in Social Power, D. Cartwright, Ed., pp. 150-167. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.

- V. Legitimate power results from one's being elected, selected, or appointed to a position of authority. Such legitimacy is conferred by others and this legitimacy can be revoked by the original granters, their designees, or their inheritors.

Some examples of legitimate power include: a police officer's legitimacy to make arrests; a parent's legitimacy to restrict a child's activities; the President's legitimacy to live in the White House; and the Congress' legitimacy to declare war.

Some pitfalls can arise when too heavy reliance is placed on legitimate power; these include: (a) unexpected exigencies call for non-legitimized individuals to act in the absence of a legitimate authority – such as a citizen's arrest in the absence of a police official; and (b) military legitimacy can be extended criminally such as at My Lai [village in Vietnam].

- VI. Referent power stems from the affiliations we make and/or the groups/organizations we belong to or are attached to. The ethos of our associates or groups to which we belong become, to some degree, our own ethos.

Some examples of referent power are: (a) each of the last seven White House press secretaries have been paid handsomely for their memoirs relating to their presence at the seat of government; (b) Mrs. Hillary Clinton gained political capital by her marriage to the President; (c) Reverend Pat Robertson lost a bid for the Republican Party's nomination for President due, in significant part, to his religious affiliation; and (4) national firefighters have received vocational acclaim due to the association with the heroic NYC firefighters.

Some pitfalls can occur related to referent assumptions; these include: (a) guilt or glory by association where little or no true tie is established; (b) associative traits tend to linger long after real association ends; (c) some individuals tend to pay dearly for associates' misdeeds or terrible reputations.

- VII. Coercive power exists when the use of or the threat of force is made to extract compliance from another. Force is not limited to physical means; social, emotional, political, or economic force is also included.

Coercion, in our society, is seen as inappropriate; however, many victimizers and some victims fail to recognize coercion or do not know how to counter coercion when it befalls them.

Coercion typically portends fear, distrust, a lack of positive regard for the powerful, and no loyalty toward the powerful.

- VIII. Information power comes as a result of possessing knowledge that others need or want. Information possessed that no one needs or wants is powerless. This power type also extends to the ability to get information not presently held such as a case with a librarian or data base manager.

Not all information is free flowing; some information properly is in control of few people. Some examples of reserved information include: (a) national security data; (b) personnel information for government or business; (c) corporate trade secrets; (d) juvenile court records; (e) many privately settled lawsuit documents; (f) Swiss bank account owners; and (g) private phone conversations.

Of course, legally obtained phone tap warrants, spying, eavesdropping, group and group/agency member leaks can allow others not intended [or wanted] to be privy to information.

Possessing information is not, typically, the vital act; it is what one can and does do or potentially can do with the information that typically is of vital importance.

Information can, and often is, used as a weapon as in a divorce, a child custody case, a business dissolution, or in civil suits discoveries. Information has been used by some to extort action, utterance, agreement, or settlement by others.

- IX. Tradition power is that force that is exerted upon us to conform to traditional ways. Traditions, for the most part, are social constructs; they invite, seduce, or compel us to conform and act in predictable, patterned ways. Breaking with traditions put people at risk of social alienation.

Traditions can blunt rationality; they can block innovation; and they can appear to outsiders as silly when original traditions' rationales become outdated or forgotten.

The power of traditions, rather than being typically vested in particular individuals, is ordinarily focused on group conformity.

- X. Charismatic power is that aura possessed by only a few individuals in our midst; it is characterized by super confidence, typical physical attractiveness, social adroitness, amiability, sharpened leadership skills, and heightened charm.

Some charisma has dark and sinister overtones such as that shown by Adolf Hitler, Rev. Jim Jones, Idi Amin, Usama bin Laden, David Koresh, and many con men.

Others demonstrate more positive displays of charisma such as that displayed by Jacqueline Kennedy, Charles de Gaulle, Princess Diana, Michael Jordan, and Bruce Springstein.

Charisma has, in many cases, short circuited rationality; that is, others have been fooled into or lulled into not rationally considering what a charismatic requests or demands but going along as a result of the charismatic attraction.

- XI. It must be remembered that power is effective only when the target of powerful actions agrees [implicitly or explicitly] to the relevant power dynamic; we are all technically able to resist the power of others; at times, however, we may feel powerless to resist orr the social, political, personal, and/or emotional proce to be paid is too high or we fear failure in resisting.