

Leadership As A Function Of Power

Gary Yukl's research on leadership provides us with insights into the use of power and how its components can influence the behavior of subordinates and peers.

By R. Dennis Green

How can power be used to influence behavior? How many types of power exist? Which are most likely to produce the compliance and commitment we seek from subordinates and peers? These kinds of questions have been studied and discussed for centuries. A scholarly analysis of recent research is offered by Gary A. Yukl, State University of New York at Albany, in his several textbooks on leadership. Specifically, his textbook, *Leadership in Organizations*, Second Edition, published in 1989, reviewed the research to date on power and how it influences behavior and leadership effectiveness. Two of his tables on the subject and selected short excerpts are included here.

Yukl considered whether effective leaders have more power or different sources of power than ineffective leaders, and whether they exercise power in different ways. His findings are particularly germane to proposal management professionals who may correlate persuasion and influence as one and the same.

RESEARCH ON POWER AND EFFECTIVENESS

Yukl found that most research classified five different types of leader power, relying upon the power taxonomy proposed by French and Raven in their *Studies of Social Power*. Their classifications are listed in Table 1 on the following page.

Table 1. Power Taxonomy

Type of Power	Description
Reward power	The target person complies in order to obtain rewards he or she believes are controlled by the agent.
Coercive power	The target person complies in order to avoid punishments he or she believes are controlled by the agent.
Legitimate power	The target person complies because he or she believes the agent has the right to make the request and the target person has the obligation to comply.
Expert power	The target person complies because he or she believes that the agent has special knowledge about the best way to do something.
Referent power	The target person complies because he or she admires or identifies with the agent and wants to gain the agent's approval.

Taxonomy from J. French & B.H. Raven, *Studies of Social Power*, Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor, MI (1959).

GUIDELINES FOR INFLUENCING SUBORDINATES

How do these types of power influence behavior and what type of outcome does each produce? Yukl's findings are summarized in Table 2. "By drawing upon a diverse literature in the social sciences that includes research on power, leader behavior, motivation, communication, counseling, supervision, and conflict resolution, it is possible to develop some tentative guidelines for leaders," he writes. "These guidelines vary in degree of empirical support; some are fairly well supported, while others are mostly speculative. However, for managers faced with the immediate necessity of influencing others, the guidelines provide the best advice possible... The guidelines are usually phrased in terms of leader influence attempts with subordinates... but most of the principles' underlying guidelines apply equally well to influence attempts with peers, and many apply to influence attempts with superiors."

Clearly, as persuaders, we have an interest in gaining compliance with our requests and objectives. **Compliance** is one of three potential outcomes. The two types of power most likely to produce compliance are *reward power* and *legitimate* or *position power*, such as that attendant to positions of manager or chief.

In the context of **legitimate power**, Yukl explains that authority is exercised by making a legitimate request, either verbally or in written form. A polite request is more effective than an arrogant demand. Compliance with the request is more likely if it is perceived to be within the leader's scope of authority. An illegitimate request is likely to be ignored, or otherwise resisted, especially if the requested

activity is tedious, dangerous, or unpleasant. Legitimate requests should be made in a clear, concise manner, using language that the target person can easily understand.

Reward power is most commonly used by making an explicit or implicit promise to give a person something under the leader's control for carrying out a request or performing a task. Compliance is most likely if the reward is something valued by the target person. Recent research also suggests that effective managers provide sincere, public recognition to subordinates in the form of awards, ceremonies and special symbols. Significant rewards accompany the recognition, but the focus is on the person's contributions and achievements, not on the reward. Used in this way, reward power can be a source of increased referent power over time.

Commitment is an even more desirable outcome because of the trust and emotional pledge that it engenders. Commitment is most likely when the powers used are expert and referential.

Expert power "is commonly exercised in the form of rational persuasion. The leader presents logical arguments and supporting evidence for a particular proposal, plan, or request. Success depends on the leader's credibility and persuasive communication skills in addition to technical knowledge and logical or analytical ability. Proposals or requests should be made in a confident manner, and the leader should avoid making contradictory statements or vacillating between inconsistent positions."

Expert power is based on a knowledge differential between the leader and the target person. Rational persuasion is most effective when the target person shares the leader's objectives.

Table 2. Sources of Leader Influence over Subordinates and Likely Outcomes

Source of Leader Influence	Type of Outcome		
	Commitment	Compliance	Resistance
Reward Power	Possible—if used in a subtle, very personal way	LIKELY*—if used in a mechanical, impersonal way	Possible—if used in a manipulative, arrogant way
Coercive Power	Very unlikely	Possible—if used in a helpful, non-punitive way	LIKELY*—if used in a hostile or manipulative way
Legitimate Power (or “Position” Power)	Possible—if request is polite and very appropriate	LIKELY*—if request or order is seen as legitimate	Possible—if arrogant demands are made or request does not appear proper
Expert Power (or “Skill” Power)	LIKELY*—if request is persuasive and subordinates share leader’s task goals	Possible—if request is persuasive but subordinates are apathetic about task goals	Possible—if leader is arrogant and insulting, or subordinates oppose task goals
Referent Power (or “Friendship”)	LIKELY*—if request is believed to be important to leader	Possible—if request is perceived to be unimportant to leader	Possible—if request is for something that will bring harm to leader

*Indicates most common outcome.

“The most common way to exercise *referent power* is merely to ask the target person with whom one has a friendship to do something... It is useful to indicate the importance of the request because a request that is important to the leader is more likely to result in subordinate commitment.”

Resistance is the most likely outcome when *coercive power* is used by a leader. “It is best to avoid using coercion except when absolutely necessary, because it is difficult to use and it is likely to result in undesirable side effects such as anxiety and resentment. In work organizations, the most appropriate use of coercion is to deter behavior that is very detrimental to the organization, such as illegal activities, theft, violation of safety rules, reckless behavior that endangers others, and direct disobedience of legitimate requests.”

YUKL’S SUMMARY

“Research on the use of different forms of power by leaders suggests that effective leaders rely more on personal power than on position power. Nevertheless, position power is still important, and it interacts in complex ways with personal power to determine a leader’s influence on subordinates. The potential to use position power for influence attempts with peers or superiors is much more limited, and here personal power is clearly the predominant source of influence.”

“Descriptive research on influence behavior usually deals with influence tactics such as rational persuasion, exchange tactics, pressure tactics, legitimate requests, and personal

appeals (including ingratiation). The research finds that the selection of influence tactics varies with the relative status of the target person and the purpose of the influence attempt.”

“The success of an influence attempt depends greatly on the manner in which power is exercised. Effective leaders are likely to use power in a subtle, careful fashion that minimizes status differentials and avoids threats to the target person’s self esteem. In contrast, leaders who exercise power in an arrogant, manipulative, domineering manner are likely to engender resistance.”

“The amount of position power necessary for leader effectiveness depends on the nature of the organization, task, and subordinates. A leader with extensive reward and coercive power is tempted to rely on them excessively, instead of using referent and expert power. This path leads to resentment and rebellion. On the other hand, a leader lacking sufficient position power to reward competent subordinates, make necessary changes, and punish chronic troublemakers will find it difficult to develop a high-performing group.” APMP

SOURCE: *Leadership in Organizations*, Second Edition, By Gary A. Yukl, State University of New York at Albany. 1989, 1981 by Prentice Hall, Inc. (Reference pages 34-53.)

Also see Yukl’s other books, including: *Leadership in Organizations*, Fourth Edition (1998) and *Skills for Managers and Leaders: Text, Cases and Exercises* (1990).