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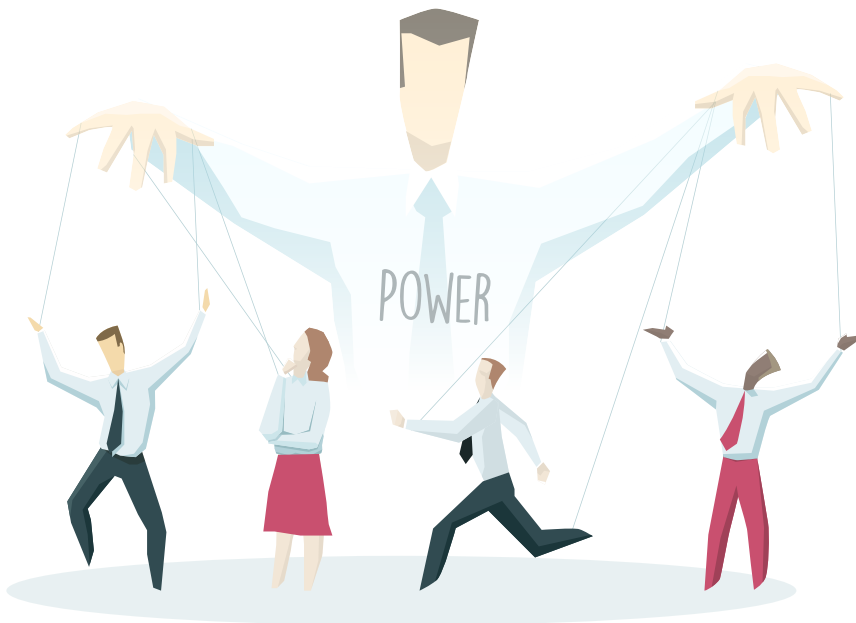
- ▶ The influence of power on prosocial behaviour
Chris Murray talks with Marius van Dijke
- ▶ Why trust in the workplace matters and how to cultivate it
By Stefano Tasselli and Martin Kilduff
- ▶ The benefits of combining drones and trucks for deliveries
By Niels Agatz
- ▶ Is it better to look inside or outside for innovation?
By Justin Jansen and Vareska van de Vrande
- ▶ How independent research can improve investment decisions
By Egemen Genc and Marno Verbeek
- ▶ Online product reviews and whether to believe them
By Christilene du Plessis



The influence of power on prosocial behaviour

Chris Murray talks with **Marius van Dijke**

The familiar quote that ‘Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely’, is a commentary on the negative relationship between power and what scientists call “prosocial behaviour” – that is, taking action above and beyond one’s duties for the good of the team or the community to which one belongs. In the context of business, someone voluntarily helping a colleague without any expectation of reward or recognition is engaging in prosocial behaviour, also known as organizational citizenship behaviour or OCB.



‘You could say that OCB is perhaps the best researched type of prosocial behaviour in actual organizations and, also, the type of behaviour that interests managers most,’ says Marius van Dijke, professor of behavioural ethics at RSM.

In a paper published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Prof. Van Dijke and three colleagues detail the influ-

ence of power on prosocial behaviour in organizations. Their research breaks with previous research by focusing on organizational context and breaking down the different types of power. The results of their study offer managers new ways of understanding how to promote prosocial behaviours in their organizations.

Power and personality

As Prof. Van Dijke explains, previous studies have led to contradictory results concerning the relationship between power and prosocial behaviour. Some studies show that power indeed corrupts: more power leads to less willingness to engage in selfless acts that offer no self-benefit. In other studies, however, power seems to *encourage* greater prosocial behaviour.

Scientists have explained this discrepancy, Prof. Van Dijke says, by concluding that power amplifies one’s personality. ‘The relationships between personality and power are complex,’ he says, ‘but there is some research that quite convincingly shows that power makes who you are come out more.’ If you tend to be less selfish, in other words, power will make you more prosocial. If your tendencies are the opposite, then power amplifies those negative tendencies, and you are less prosocial.

However, this “dispositional” explanation of power’s impact on prosocial behaviour is only part of the story, Prof. Van Dijke says. For the past 10 years, he has been studying an element in the equation that has been for the most part ignored in previous research: the organizational context of prosocial behaviour. Specifically, Prof. Van Dijke has been focusing on an organization’s *procedural justice*, that is, people’s perception of whether leaders of the organization are making decisions fairly.

The fairness of leaders

As he explains, people want to help their organizations succeed by going ▶

The influence of power on prosocial behaviour (continued)

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beyond their required and remunerated duties. At the same time, however, research shows that people don't want to be taken advantage of, or somehow undermine their own success through their selfless actions. In short, he says, people will act prosocially if they are convinced that management is *trustworthy*, which is why procedural justice is important.

'When you're at the bottom of a hierarchy, you have absolutely no idea of the real intentions of your leaders,' Prof. Van Dijke says. 'You have probably never met them in person, let alone spoken to them. You need some kind of indirect information of whether or not they will take advantage of you, of their trustworthiness.' Procedural justice, he says, concerns the fairness of 'far-reaching decisions being taken, for instance, about your salary, about promotion opportunities, about how the organization is organized. It gives us information about the integrity of top-level management.'

Two types of power

Prof. Van Dijke notes that he is not the first to link procedural justice to prosocial behaviour. However, when he began to research the influence of power

on this process, he realized that previous researchers had not differentiated between feeling powerful and actually being powerful – a critical difference, he says. 'If you carefully look at what these power research studies actually do, they do not manipulate actual power,' he says. 'They manipulate how powerful you *feel*. That was the start of my exploration for this research.'

Actual power, in Prof. Van Dijke's terminology, comes from being in a hierarchical position of power: you have been given the authority to exercise power. However, someone without the power of an authority position may still feel a sense of power, perhaps from their experience and knowledge, the respect of others, or the ability to influence others. And people in a position of authority may actually feel powerless, for example, if they do not have the respect of their followers.

Having differentiated hierarchical position power from the subjective *sense of power*, Prof. Van Dijke and his colleagues then explored whether the two different types of power would have a different impact on the issue of procedural justice and thus prosocial behaviour. Their conclusion is highlighted in the title of their pa-

per, *Ranking Low, Feeling High: How Hierarchical Position and Experienced Power Promote Prosocial Behavior in Response to Procedural Justice*.

According to Prof. Van Dijke, the results show that people who are in a *lower hierarchical position* of power are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour than people in a higher position. On the other hand, people who have a *higher sense of power* – who subjectively feel powerful – are more likely to be prosocial than those who feel less powerful.

Being willing and able

The reason for these opposite effects, Prof. Van Dijke explains, is that procedural justice will impact prosocial behaviour only when people are paying attention to procedural justice. 'If you don't look at something, it's not going to affect your perceptions, of course. So being in a *low* hierarchical position makes you more likely to look at the fairness of procedures because you feel more vulnerable.' On the other hand, he says, 'in order to effectively act upon your intentions, you need to feel powerful, and that's what a sense of power does.'

Another way of looking at the three-way interaction between procedural justice, low hierarchical power and high sense of power 'is in terms of being willing and being able,' he explains. 'Being in a low position, low in the hierarchy, makes you look at procedural justice. It makes you *willing* to act upon the fairness of treatment, but you're not able yet. The high sense of power makes you *able* to act upon that.'

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“It's not because employees don't want to benefit their organizations. They're simply sometimes afraid to do so...”

At the beginning of the research, Prof. Van Dijke expected that hierarchical power and a sense of power would influence in different ways whether or not a person engaged in prosocial behaviour. What he did not expect, he says, is that the two different types of power would interact – that the combination of low hierarchical power and high sense of power would ‘strengthen each other’s effect even further.’

Management lessons

There are a number of lessons that leaders and managers can draw from this research, he says. The first clear lesson is that managers must pay attention to perceptions of trustworthiness in general and procedural justice in particular. ‘Scientists may know that procedural justice promotes prosocial behaviour, but managers don't seem to always know that,’ Prof. Van Dijke says.

Although intuitively, it would seem that leaders would want to maintain positive perceptions of management decision-making, in reality ‘there are various reasons why they don't want to be procedurally just,’ he says. ‘For instance, giving people a voice in decisions, which is one aspect of

procedural justice, is time consuming – and you may be afraid of giving away secrets to people who don't need to know about them.’ Nevertheless, ‘this is one paper that shows that procedural justice is really valuable in promoting organizational citizenship,’ he says.

Another lesson is for managers to better understand the fear or wariness of employees that can hold back prosocial behaviour. ‘Managers sometimes tend to forget that employees, even those they work with on a daily basis, are, to some extent, scared of those managers,’ he says. ‘That explains why sometimes employees don't act the way managers want them to act. It's not because employees don't want to benefit their organizations. They're simply sometimes afraid to do so – or, very often, feel incapable of doing so.’

In short, managers must not simply assume that the lack of prosocial behaviour reflects a lack of engagement. They need to explore alternative motivations that might be undermining the organizational citizenship of their employees. For example, do lower-level employees feel powerless? Have upper-level managers lost the motivation to engage in prosocial behaviour?

While the positive impact of procedural justice is well-documented, Prof. Van Dijke's research exposes the psychological nuances of the different types of power that explain why CEOs who do everything to ensure fair leadership decisions and behaviour will see their efforts rewarded by employees who go above and beyond.

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The paper *Ranking low, feeling high: How hierarchical position and experienced power promote prosocial behaviour in response to procedural justice*, written by Marius van Dijke, David De Cramer, Gerben Langendijk, and Cameron Anderson, is published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol 103(2), Feb 2018, 164-181. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/apl0000260>

Marius van Dijke is Professor of Behavioural Ethics, Department of Business Society Management, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, and Scientific Director, Erasmus Centre of Behavioural Ethics. [EMAIL: mvandijke@rsm.nl](mailto:mvandijke@rsm.nl)

