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Eight Fundamental Elements of Power: Information for Policy and Leadership Courses

by

Dr. David B. Ross

When people use power, they must be aware of the many characteristics and philosophies for which it possesses. A policymaker and/or a leader/manager, you must know the following, but not limited to knowledge, wealth, capacity to act effectively, recognition, achievement, and growth, which are just some of its definitions. The eight fundamental elements discussed in this short informational paper, deal with the ability to effectively communicate and influence other people. Please note that as you read forward, I am using informational power. In addition, some information was gathered from Dawson's book, *Power: Understanding It and Gaining It*, as he mentioned the powers of many United States Presidents. Please note that this paper has been written to assist my class students in leadership and policy; in addition, there are no sources as this is clearly an anecdotal review.

The first element of power is *legitimate* power, commonly referred to as *title* power. Some people in positions hold certain titles, whether you are the President of the United States or president of a small company, the title given to an individual suggests power with the authority to make the elite or top-level decisions. To develop legitimate power, use your title if you have one. For instance, you may have a title as a faculty member such as *professor* or *doctor*, but are fine with your students calling you by your first name. However, in a different environment, the students call you by your title instead of your first name. As we move forward in this paper, all powers can be adjusted based on the circumstances.

The second element of power is *reward* power. Anyone who has the perceived ability to reward you has some level of influence over you. The person who can give you raises,

promotions, or even time off from work will have a much greater influence on you than one who cannot. We act differently and tolerate more from people who have this element of power over us. This element of power can easily be lost or given away. For example, a top-level executive giving promotional authority to a mid-manager. Subordinates will see the mid-manager as the more powerful individual because the mid-manager directly influences their ability to receive a promotion. Another example of this power could be when an individual has a position in office supplies and could be viewed as very powerful because he and/or she has the ability to hand out the supplies to those who want or need them to complete a task as well as create a productive environment. An example I use regarding how to reward from a leadership perspective is in the school district when a principal recognizes a teacher who is working extremely well in the classroom, yet needs a break due to the nature of the job. A principal who is conscientious and has a pulse on the school and staff can reward any teacher by giving them an hour break while that principal teaches the class. This is a reward for many individuals as the (a) teacher receives a break and is well-influenced by the principal, (b) principal has the opportunity to share thoughts with students, and (c) principal also has the chance to revisit how the classes are since their last days in the classroom as a teacher.

The third element of power is *coercive* power, commonly referred to as *punishment* power. Anyone who you perceive that has the power to punish you has control over you. The two most effective punishments we know of is the power to intimidate and the power to embarrass people. Often individuals, groups, and even entire nations are controlled through the power of intimidation. Typically, people can be easily controlled if you have knowledge that will embarrass them or damage their character or credibility. Reward and punishment power usually work hand in hand. Although reward power shared early can be beneficial, yet

punishment power shared early can be detrimental. Some individuals who use legitimate and coercive power most likely to lack other powers to influence people compared to controlling them. In the workplace or anywhere to be honest, it is more beneficial to *ask* than to *tell* people to complete a task or other issue.

The fourth element of power is *reverent* power. This is considered for anyone who has a *consistent set of values* such as religious leaders of all faiths, and we would hope for *all* political individuals no matter their political affiliation. These certain individuals need to understand that they represent all people. People admire and respect a consistent set of values. When a person has consistent people will follow you even if they do not always agree with you. People strongly relate consistency with security. President Reagan had reverent power, because he was very consistent; he did not change his stand on issues since he was Governor of California in the 1960s. When examined side by side, his speeches were very much aligned for his many years in politics. When a person is consistent in their values, they build trust with others and able to collaborate on accomplishing goals. A person who has reverent power can also have opposing thoughts and never will agree with you, but you can trust them, as they are consistent in their viewpoints; there is no sugarcoating.

The fifth element of power is *charismatic* power. The individual who possesses this power usually has an overwhelming personality. Although this element is associated with entertainers, we need to look beyond this group to the true mentors of our lives. Because of the tremendous personality of an entertainer, they receive recognition from others based upon the view of their position (e.g., sports, television, literature, etcetera). For example, when a child looks up to their sports heroes, we are hoping that the child is influenced more than their visual charisma, but their philanthropy and other world issues that they stand for the greater good.

The sixth element of power is *expertise* power. When you project to people that you have expertise in certain areas than others, you develop power over them. I hope that the person who shares their expertise with others will be to benefit all stakeholders; this power becomes influential compared to withholding expertise in order to control others. We look at our medical personnel and legal counsel for this element of power, especially based on the nature of when their services are needed. They develop their own special language that most layman cannot understand in order to protect us.

The seventh element of power is *situational* power, which is probably the least important, but most widely used and possibly annoying. This person works at the post office or any other repetitive and/or mundane job. In most interactions involving their work and life, they are powerless, but in these particular situations or others you could state, can have power over you. Think about standing in a long line awaiting service; based on this situation, the service person can give you a great or bad experience. This person now possess power over you because of the situation and most of the time they love to use it. This is also very prevalent in large organizations where workers do not have much latitude, but when they obtain this power, they feel recognized for their achievements and self-worth. When there is a struggle for control and you reach a situational power play, you are probably going to lose based upon the other power players you could deal with. Compromising is very important; it would be best to pass on to an area where you have more power to take control.

The eighth element of power is *informational* power. This is different from having more expertise in a particular area. With expertise power, you want to tell and share your knowledge to develop your power. Information power works off the need to know principle; withholding information tends to intimidate people while sharing information could form a bond between

individuals. Some management develop control over their employees by obtaining secrecy. The positive side of information power is to share the knowledge, plans, ideas, and goals with the employees, which leads to shared goals.

Roger Dawson, the author of *Power: Understanding It and Gaining It*, believed that each element can be developed and that if you possess four or more of these elements, you can be a very powerful individual. In business negotiations, Dawson commented that the most important elements are reverent power because people will tend to build trust, charismatic power because people will like you and expertise power because people will perceive you know more about a specific topic than they possess. The four critical elements of power for the majority of life are legitimate, reward, reverent, and charismatic powers. Once you recognize the elements of power being used against you, its power over you becomes limited to insignificance. Examine in your life the people who have had the power over you or with you, and which elements do they possess.