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Chapter

Power Asymmetry, Negotiations and Conflict Management in Organizations

Kyriaki Fousiani

Abstract

Relationships are seldom equal. In fact, social interactions involve most of the times power asymmetric relationships. Especially in organizations people are daily faced with situations where they are either in a powerful or in a powerless position compared to others. Power stems from various sources and takes several forms. For instance, people are powerful when they can administer punishments or rewards, when they are in a hierarchically higher position than others, when they have knowledge and expertise, when they are admired and respected, and when they have alternative options which enable them to make choices. Importantly, power determines the way people interact with each other and subsequently, the way they engage in conflicts and conflict resolution. Power-holders are best able to asymmetrically enforce their will and therefore, they have the capability to determine the process and the outcome of a conflict. In this chapter, I present the major sources of power and the main differences between them. Consequently, I elaborate on the impact of power on conflict management based on the negotiation literature. I conclude by touching on the necessity to distinguish between two contradictory faces of power: power as opportunity and power as responsibility.

Keywords: power, negotiation, conflict management, power as opportunity vs. responsibility

1. Introduction

Imagine that you are a manager in a large organization. You ask your subordinate employee for her help with a new project, but she refuses to help out because she has been working on a tight deadline and currently, she does not have any time for extra tasks. You are annoyed by the employee's reaction and there has been tension between you two ever since. You ask her to meet up and discuss… How do you think the meeting will go? How will you react to the employee and how do you think that the employee will respond?

A key element to take into account before trying to think of possible answers to these questions is that between the two persons, you and the subordinate employee, there is one big difference: power asymmetry. You, manager, have power over the employee, which enables you to punish, reward, or enforce your will to her, whereas the employee does not have power over you. Power asymmetry is a decisive factor in how all kinds of relationships develop and how conflicts are handled and resolved.

Power makes the world go round. Power enables people to enforce their will over others and as such, it determines people's attitude towards a conflict and the way they choose to resolve it. In this chapter, I will delineate the role of power in conflict management focusing on conflicts in organizations in particular. First, I will explain how power is defined and which are the main sources of power. Consequently, I will present research-based evidence on the role of power in conflict management. Finally, I will touch on the importance of distinguishing power that is construed by the power-holder as opportunity from power that is construed as responsibility.

2. What is power and what are its sources?

Power is pervasive and as such, it is difficult to give it an accurate and clear-cut definition. For instance, power can be seen as the access to valuable material (food, money) or social (knowledge, information, decision-making opportunities) resources [1, 2], as the capability to achieve personal goals and influence other people's outcomes, as the capability to administer punishments and rewards, or as the potential to influence others and modify their attitude and behavior [3].

Power may stem from various sources. For example, a senior manager may rely on their ability to punish or reward others to get things done. A renowned expert in a field may rely on their knowledge and expertise, and a person who is admired by others for their skills or achievements may rely on personal qualities to influence others.

Social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven [4] studied power more than half a century ago and suggested that power can arise from various sources. French and Raven have grouped the forms of power into two broad categories, namely *positional* (or structural) and *personal* power. Positional power refers to the type of power that people have because of their status or position in an organization or society. This type of power aims to ensure that individuals and teams conform and work together towards predetermined outcomes and common goals set out for the group. Positional power includes the following three sub-types:

Legitimate power is derived from holding a formal title in some organization or in society and using the power that comes with that title. A country president, a senior manager, a CEO, or a prime minister have legitimate power. However, this type of power is unstable because when the title or position is lost, power instantly evaporates.

Coercive power is derived from one's ability to punish others for not complying with the rules and regulations or for not doing what needs to be done. Threats and punishment are standard coercive tools. For instance, when people imply that someone will be denied privileges or will get demoted or fired, they use coercive power.

Finally, *reward* power is derived from one's ability to reward others for doing positive things or for doing what needs to be done. Some examples of reward power include salary raises, promotions, compliments, and desirable assignments.

Although positional power enables power-holders to get things done and ensure that everyone works towards the same goal, it is not the type of power that inspires people. It is personal power that wins the hearts and minds of people, inspires them, and prompts them to commit to tasks. In other words, personal power inspires people to rise to greater heights, set the bars high, and perform as well as possible. Personal power includes the following two types:

Expert power is derived from having unique, in-depth information, expertise, or knowledge about a subject or a topic. When one has knowledge and skills that enable them to understand a situation, use solid judgment, and suggest useful or practical solutions, people trust them and eventually do what they say or want.

Finally, *referent* power is derived from the respect or admiration a person commands because of their personality traits and personal qualities. For instance,

celebrities have referent power, which is why they exert such an influence on how laypeople think, feel, or behave. Actors, singers, and famous artists can influence everything from what people like or buy to which politician they vote. In the workplace, a person with referent power is a person who often makes everyone feel good and inspired, so that person has a lot of influence on their colleagues.

Apart from the above sources of power, which stem from either one's position or one's personal qualities, people may possess a different type of power, the so-called *Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement* (BATNA). The term BATNA was originally used by Roger Fisher and William Ury in 1981 in their book "Getting to Yes: Negotiating Without Giving In" and it involves a type of power that is inherent in conflict management and negotiation situations in particular. BATNA is defined as the most attractive alternative that a person can take if conflict management (i.e., negotiation) with a partner fails and an agreement cannot be made. In other words, one's BATNA is what one's best alternative is if negotiations do not succeed. In fact, having an attractive alternative enables people to be less dependent on others, which is translated into increased (sense of) power [5, 6]. For example, "*think for a moment about how you would feel walking into a job interview with no other job offers — only some uncertain leads. Think about how the talk about salary would go. Now contrast that with how you would feel walking in with two other job offers. How would that salary negotiation proceed?*" ([7], p. 52) In the first situation, your BATNA is unattractive (you have no other job offers

Source of power	Description and examples
Positional power	
Legitimate power	*Description:* Holding a formal title in some organization or in society and using the power that comes with that title. People are influenced by the power-holder's position rather than by the power-holder as a person. *Example:* A president, a CEO, a prime minister, a king.
Coercive power	*Description:* Ability to punish others for not doing what needs to be done. People comply out of fear. *Example:* Use of threats and punishments.
Reward power	*Description:* Ability to reward others for doing what needs to be done. People comply in order to get rewarded. *Example:* Raises, promotions, desirable assignments, training opportunities, compliments.
Personal power	
Expert power	*Description:* Possession of in-depth information or knowledge about a subject. People are actually influenced by the power-holder's claims and change their attitude and behavior based on the power-holder's attitude and behavior. *Example:* Suggestion of effective solutions, use of solid judgment, outperforming others.
Referent power	*Description:* Respect or admiration of a person based on his/her personality traits and personal qualities. People "follow" (oftentimes uncritically) the power-holder no matter whether they agree with him/her or not. *Example:* Celebrities and people with a "charismatic" and inspiring personality and attitude.
Contextual power	
Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement	*Description:* The most attractive alternative that a person can take if negotiation or conflict management with a partner fails and an agreement cannot be made. People comply with the will of others more if they have no other attractive alternatives. *Example:* Going to a job interview while having already another attractive job offer.

Table 1.
Major sources of power.

and thus no other good alternatives), which increases the likelihood that you accept a low salary in case you are offered the job. In the second situation, however, you have a strong BATNA (you have two other job offers), making you less dependent on your prospective employer and enabling you to negotiate a higher salary. The difference between the two examples is "power" (see **Table 1** for a brief description of all sources of power) (for a review of types of power, see also [8]).

3. Why is power important in conflict management?

Research suggests that besides their content-based differences, all kinds of power have a main characteristic in common: "dependence". Regardless of the specific sources of power that are involved, it is the level of *dependence* between individuals that allows power to occur [9]. Accordingly, the less one is dependent on the other, the more powerful one is, and the more one is dependent, the more powerless one is. As such, whether it is positional, personal, or contextual (e.g., BATNA), power should influence the direction of a conflict and conflict management process in the same way.

To test this hypothesis, Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, and Manstead [10] conducted five studies. In Study 1, power was operationalized as one's possession of an attractive alternative (BATNA). Participants were recruited in the lab and were assigned into one of the two experimental groups: high or low-power groups. All participants were assigned to the role of a phone seller and were told that two buyers were interested in the phones they were selling. The first buyer had already made an offer and participants had to negotiate the price with the second buyer. Participants in the high-power group were given an attractive offer (alternative) by the first buyer (the first buyer's offer would give them 570 points, while the maximum points they could reach were 760 points). However, participants in the low-power group were given an unattractive offer (alternative) (the first buyer's offer would only yield 190 points). Subsequently, participants had to negotiate the phone price with the second buyer and make a counteroffer. Importantly, participants got informed about the buyer's (opponent) emotional reaction to their counteroffer. More specifically, buyers were presented as having reacted happily or angrily to the participants' counteroffer. Results showed that low-power participants made more concessions than high-power participants, and also, the buyer's emotions (angry or happy) influenced them to a greater extent. Specifically, low-power negotiators conceded more to an angry buyer than to a happy one, whereas high-power negotiators were immune to the buyer's emotional state.

Van Kleef et al. [10] replicated these findings in four additional studies, where power was operationalized differently. For instance, in one study, high-power participants had a managerial position in an organization (legitimate power). In contrast, low-power participants had a junior-trainee position. In another study, high-power participants had the full support of the top management for the negotiation to come. In contrast, low-power participants did not (i.e., note that in conflicts in organizations), the availability of support increases individuals' sense of power because it enables them to form coalitions with others in order to get their way and assures them that they do not stand alone in the conflict [11]. These findings suggest that regardless of the power source, the mere existence of power asymmetry between negotiators determines the negotiation outcome: The low-power negotiators are more likely to concede to their powerful opponent than the other way around. It is noteworthy, however, that in none of these studies did the researchers operationalize personal power. All five studies used positional power or BATNA to operationalize power and therefore, there is no evidence about how referent or expert power of power-holders influences an opponent's reaction in the conflict.

An important reason for which power is such a determinant factor of conflict management is that power directs people's willingness to search for information about their partner [12, 13]. Information gathering involves questioning one's partner and "asking for information" to test one's beliefs and assumptions [14, 15] and as such, it is central to conflict management. Importantly, questions can be diagnostic or leading. Diagnostic questions aim at providing evidence for or against one's beliefs or assumptions, whereas leading questions have the purpose to yield answers that confirm one's beliefs or assumptions, regardless of whether those beliefs and assumptions are valid or not [16]. Subsequently, diagnostic questions allow negotiators to better understand their partners and their wishes than leading questions [17–19]. In three experiments, De Dreu and Van Kleef [20] investigated the effects of power on people's willingness to search for information about their negotiation partner. Participants were placed in a high or low-power position (relatively to their partners) and were also told that their partners had competitive or cooperative personalities. Just before negotiations began, participants were given the opportunity to write down questions they would like to ask their partners. Participants' questions were then content-coded as diagnostic or leading.

In line with their predictions, De Dreu and Van Kleef [20] found that low-power participants indicated a stronger drive to understand their partner, which prompted them to ask more diagnostic than leading questions, especially when their partner was described as competitive. These findings provide evidence that low-power individuals, especially when faced with a competitive partner, feel less comfortable and are more likely to develop an accurate impression and opinion about their partner. However, high-power participants did not indicate such motivation regardless of their partner's (competitive or cooperative) personality. These results might also shed light on why low-power negotiators are more influenced by powerful people's emotions and why they concede more (as was shown by [10]).

Besides the differential outcomes that powerful and powerless individuals can achieve in conflicts and negotiations (e.g., more or less concessions of the opponent), power can also shape people's emotional expression during a conflict. For instance, Petkanopoulou, Rodríguez-Bailón, Willis, & Van Kleef [21] carried out three studies to investigate how power shapes anger expression and what are the motives of high- versus low-power individuals to express anger at others. In line with their predictions, researchers found that high-power individuals are more prone to express their anger directly at their target as compared to low-power individuals, who are more likely to express their anger indirectly (e.g., by sharing it with other people rather than with the target of the anger). Moreover, low-power individuals expected that expressing their anger directly would elicit reciprocal anger in the powerful and would cause negative consequences to them. In contrast, high-power participants expected that both direct and indirect anger expressions would elicit fear rather than reciprocal anger in the powerless.

Based on the above, one would conclude that holding power, no matter what the source of power is, makes people appear tougher in conflict management processes, more immune to the others' emotions, and more focused on self-interested goals. A fundamental question that arises here is: "Is power inherently "selfish", and what is its functionality in organizations?" This is a very interesting question as power is inherent in organizations, in human interactions and relationships, and of course, in all kinds of conflict.

In real-life, we see that the effects of power on people's behavior are not uniform. For instance, laypeople frequently rely on powerful others, seek advice, or count on their help whenever they need it. In the following, I present two contradictory functions of power in order to illuminate this issue: power as opportunity versus power as responsibility.

4. Is power an opportunity or a responsibility?

In the above, we defined and examined power as one's capability to influence one's outcomes, as one's access to valuable material and social resources, as one's capability to administer rewards or punishments to others, and as one's potential to influence others. As such, power prompts power-holders to view their advantage over the powerless as an opportunity to achieve personal goals instead of taking care of the powerless. Indeed, power-holders frequently show less caring and affection towards the powerless and treat them as a means for goal attainment [22, 23]. The opportunistic propensity of power-holders is nicely depicted in the activation/inhibition system theory [2]. which suggests that possessing power frees people up from external constraints as power makes them feel that their resources approach or even exceed the demands of a situation. Therefore, power-holders have the luxury to experience situations predominantly as opportunities to achieve their own goals and therefore, construe others through a lens of self-interest [2]. In contrast, low power activates an "alarm system" that makes people experience situations and social inter-actions as a threat. Accordingly, low-power people are more sensitive to powerful others' potential constraints and become more attentive to the interests, desires, and goals of the powerful. Subsequently, powerless people often become easier targets of power-holders' aggression, dominance, and self-interested behavior [24, 25].

Based on the above, one would conclude that some paranoia about the powerful seems to be reasonable. There is evidence, however, that the effects of power are not uniform. In fact, we often observe that in real-life (e.g., within an organization) powerful people are more benevolent than they are thought to be, attentive to the others' needs, and show concern about other people's goals and interests [26, 27]. Indeed, rather than being careless or selfish, power-holders often see their power as responsibility towards others and as an inner obligation to take care of things that need to happen (e.g., ensuring that important goals are met [28]). For instance, we frequently see in organizations that leaders do show concern for their followers' outcomes and use their power not only to serve their own goals but also the needs and desires of their followers [29, 30]. All in all, power, apart from giving power-holders the opportunity to act upon will and behave self-servingly, it also entails responsibility towards the powerless [29, 31].

A fundamental and interesting question is "when do power-holders see their power as responsibility or opportunity and how does the differential perception of power influence conflict management"? To the best of my knowledge, there is no empirical evidence to test this hypothesis directly. However, recent research shows that power-holders do not behave opportunistically when their power is stable and safe, that is when they do not fear that they might lose it. In contrast, when their power is unstable, power-holders are more susceptible to act self-servingly [32]. Indeed, prior research in the field of leadership suggests that when leaders are threatened by the prospect of losing power, which goes together with losing access to valuable resources, they react negatively to the prospective loss (see [33]). In a similar vein, research in the field of conflict management revealed that power-holders show more concern for their low-power partners' needs when their power is not in jeopardy.

Fousiani et al. [34] conducted two studies to come to this conclusion. In the first study, participants were put in dyads and were told that they would negotiate some issues/disagreements with their partner. Participants were split into two groups: high and low-power groups. Participants in the high power group were assigned to the role of a powerful manager who had the ability to make decisions that affect employees. Participants in the low power group were assigned to the role of a powerless employee who had to follow the managers' decisions. Most importantly, the issues or disagreements that participants were invited to negotiate with each

other were not always the same. Dyads were invited to negotiate (in random order) power-related disagreements, that is disagreements about power possession in the decision-making processes, and task-related disagreements, that is disagreements regarding the coordination of work activities. Researchers found that high-power negotiators accommodated (gave in) their low power negotiating partner especially when the disagreements at hand touched on task-related but not power-related disagreements. According to the researchers' interpretation, these findings point out power-holders' motivation to accommodate the powerless when their powerful position was safe, and theis inclination to maintain the status quo and keep their power position intact [35–37]. In other words, high-power negotiators do not mind using their power in favor of the powerless and accommodating them as long as their power position is safe, but they do mind if their power position is in jeopardy.

Overall, these findings reveal that power-holders are not as opportunistic or competitive as they are believed to be. In fact, whether power-holders collaborate, accommodate or compete with the powerless in conflict situations seems to depend on how stable and safe their power is perceived to be. Based on the above, one would expect that power not only is it not inherently "selfish" but it is used responsibly and benevolently, especially when power-holders perceive their position as safe.

5. Concluding remarks

This chapter presented the impact of power on organizational conflict and conflict management in organizations based on the negotiation literature. Power is pervasive and as such, it has a great impact on conflicts in organizations. People usually associate power with unethicality and immorality, self-interested attitude and behavior, and win-lose outcomes [34, 38]. Indeed, empirical evidence supports this postulation and shows that power-holders are less empathic to the powerless and unaffected by their low-power partners' emotions, less willing to search for the beliefs, needs, and desires of the powerless, and they always demand the larger piece of a pie.

However, we should be careful with overgeneralizing these findings as power is also associated with providing help and support to the powerless, taking care of things that others cannot take care of, and treating those in need with responsibility and benevolence. As such, power asymmetry in organizations is desirable and functional and may promote win-win outcomes for the involved members, especially when power-holders feel that their powerful position is safe and not subject to changes. This suggests that organizations should encourage interventions geared at fostering power-holders' (e.g., leaders) sense of safety regarding their positions (see also, [39, 40]) in order to enable them to see their power as responsibility towards others rather than as opportunity and pay more attention to the needs and goals of the powerless (e.g., subordinate employees). Although power as responsibility is less attractive to power-holders and power as opportunity is particularly alluring [31], organizations might consider fostering the positive sides of being responsible for the outcomes and achievements of the powerless. This is the best way to ensure fairer outcomes and effective conflict management between those involved in asymmetric power relationships.

Conflict of interest

"The author declares no conflict of interest."

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