Power and Leadership: A Discussion

Gillian A. McKnight-Tutein

Cluster 32

ITDE 7001 Dr. Baker

December 12, 2003

Nova Southeastern University
Abstract

Power and leadership has been examined and discussed throughout history in every venue from the stage to the board room. While there is no shortage of literature on the subjects of power and leadership, the present discussion will summarize some of the well-navigated routes of others who have studied the topic. Incorporated in the document findings, is the writer’s opinion on the following topics: Power as per the French and Raven Model, sources of power, power of subordinates, power and empowerment, and power and influence.
Power and Leadership: A Discussion

Dahl (1957) defined power as the ability of one person or group to get another person or group to do something they would not otherwise have done. Other definitions of power include the following: (a) the ability to influence others to carry out orders (Korda, 1975); (b) the ability to achieve goals or outcomes that power holders desire (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1975); and (c) the ability of a person or department in an organization to influence other people to bring about desired outcomes (Daft, 1986).

Based on the definitions, it is understandable that power is, in many instances, used interchangeably with two other terms: authority and influence. The writer found that while the terms are closely related, they are not synonymous.

Authority

Authority, like power, has an abundance of definitions. Some of these are as follows: (a) authority is a tool for achieving desired outcomes by using influence, but only within the confines of organizational hierarchy and reporting relationships (Banner & Gagne, 1995); (b) authority is the legitimate prerogative to make decisions binding on others (Bolman & Deal, 1997); and (c) the right to command and to induce compliance (Bass, 1990). In 1943, the National Research Council (as cited in Bass, 1990) aptly described the relationship between authority and power by stating, "No amount of legal authority over the grizzly bears of British Columbia would enable you to get yourself obeyed by them out in the woods" (p. 307).
Influence

Influence, like authority, has been used interchangeably with power, with much of the same reaction from researchers in the field. Peiró and Meliá (2003) stated that it is necessary to dissociate power from influence phenomena. Bass (1990) stated, “Unfortunately power often is used synonymously with influence” (p. 226). Bass went on to say that leadership and influence are a function of power, and that power is the potential to influence. Leadership is the process of influencing others to act in a way that will accomplish the leader’s objectives and the objectives of the organization (Preston, 2001). Preston asserted that leaders, especially at the top, influence others in a “cascade” that sculpts the actions of everyone around them. A simple failure in one part of the “power grid” can cause a cascade of similar failures. Conversely, Preston claimed that “a single collision of fissionable material at the atomic level can cascade into an output of colossal energy. In many ways, it's the same with leadership” (p. 62). The writer associated best with Castro, Douglas, Hochwarter, Ferris, and Frink (2003), that influence tactics involve attempts by one individual (the “agent”) to change the behavior, attitudes, or beliefs of another individual (the “target”). The definition was the simplest to understand in its assignment of a source and its intended mark.

Bases of Power

Power can derive from one’s person or one’s position (Bass, 1990). Although it is possible for a leader to have both personal and positional power, they can be mutually exclusive.
**Personal Power**

Personal power has several key characteristics. These characteristics include personal accomplishments, integrity, and ability to punish. Although accomplishment is one of the factors of power, Maxwell (2001) alleged, "We respect these individuals not only for what they have accomplished, but also for who they have become. They have shaped our ideas and our understandings and have maintained a profound connection to the people that they mentor" (p. 20). It is the opinion of the writer that the key characteristic of a person that has personal power is integrity. He or she can reward by giving of himself and developing his personality. Those with personal power can also punish others by becoming more distant, formal, cold, and businesslike (Bass, 1990).

**Positional Power**

In 1960, Bass claimed that position power stemmed from a person's formal position and implied the legitimate authority to use positive and negative sanctions such as reward and coercion (Bass, 1990). Maxwell (2001) stated that for a positional leader, security is based on a title that is arbitrarily bestowed, not talent. It is the belief of the writer that a positional leader must work more diligently to gain personal power, if personal power is not the base from which he gained the position.

**French and Raven Model**

A classic study by French and Raven identified and explained at least five power bases (Banner & Gagne, 1995). Reward power derives from an individual’s ability to dispense reward in order to get another person or group to
do something. Coercive power is obtained from the ability of the power holder to punish or deprive another person or group if the power holder’s needs are not met. Legitimate power comes as a right of the office or position in the hierarchy. Expert power is acquired from the presence of special skills or knowledge. Referent power is attained from the recipient’s identification with the power holder.

Peiró and Meliá (2003) have formulated and tested the Bifactorial Theory of Power based on the sources of power identified by French and Raven. Peiró and Meliá grouped French and Raven’s bases of power into two dimensions: formal power and informal power.

Formal power grouped reward, coercive and legitimate power sources because these were based on structural power sources related to hierarchical positions. Informal power which was based on personal power sources grouped expert and referent power sources.

The Bifactorial Theory of Power stated that formal power is exercised in a top-down manner (Peiró & Meliá, 2003). Superiors exert formal powers on the subordinates while the opposite is not the case. Informal power is based on positive interpersonal relations, involving the exchange of social support, referent relationships, or knowledge. Because informal power is not associated with formal structure, it can flow in all directions.

Power of Subordinates

Power can flow both ways in the superior-subordinate dyad. The exchange theory can be viewed as a positive relationship between investments
and returns (Yammarino & Dansereau, 2002). Yammarino and Dansereau stated that dyadic partners are in a “balanced” relationship where the amount of giving and receiving for each party is similar.

The subordinate does not always recognize that he also has access to power. Banner & Gagne (1995) discussed the lower-order participant power. This type of power may manifest itself in a variety of ways: (a) information access, (b) persuasion and manipulation, (c) physical location, (d) specialized expertise, (e) forming coalitions, and (f) strict adherence to rules.

Chaleff (2003) stated that follower is not a term of weakness, but the condition that permits leadership to exist and gives it strength. He claimed that:

As followers, our formal powers are unequal to the leader’s, and we must learn to participate effectively in the relationship despite this. We may have far more power than we imagine, however, and too often fail to exercise the power we do have. It is critical for followers to connect with their power and learn how to use it. To maintain and strengthen power, it must be used; otherwise it will wither. (p. 31)

Empowering

Murrell and Meredith (2000) define empowering as enabling someone to assume greater responsibilities and authority through training, trust and emotional support. Followers’ expectations about what they can accomplish can be increased if their leader obtains or shows them how to obtain the resources that will enable them to reach higher goals.
The power to make decisions should be located at the place in the organization where the optimal amount of information exists on which to base the decisions (Clark & Clark, 1996). Today’s leaders should teach followers to lead themselves (Yagill, 2002).

In the opinion of the writer, it is empowering that allows an atmosphere that allows the subordinate to use their own power in a positive manner that benefits them and the organization.
References


