Power and Leadership: An Overview

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Abstract

In attempts to define power and leadership perspectives are not only shaped by those who have researched theory but inevitably by one's own experience. The author of this document will attempt to focus on various sub-topics within the larger whole of power and leadership. Such topics include individual definitions of power and leadership, sources of power, power of subordinates, power and influence and the French and Raven model.
Power and Leadership: An Overview

Theorists and researchers attempted over the course of time to define the roles power and leadership have in politics, industry, and education. In this quest to define leadership Bass (1990) found:

Leadership has been conceived as the focus of group processes as a matter of personality, as a matter of inducing compliance, as the exercise of influence, a particular behaviors, as a form of persuasion, as a power relation, as an instrument to achieve goals, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, as an initiation or structure, and as many combinations of these definitions. (p. 11)

In speaking of power no less than twelve individuals have asserted their opinions on its definition. Bierstedt (1950) spoke of power as the "ability to employ force" and Wrong (1968) called power "the intended successful control of others". As outlined in Bass and Stogdill's *Handbook of Leadership* Cartwright, Janda, Gardner and Russell also maintained clear opinions on power, the latter defining power as "the production of intended effects" (Bass 1990). It is with these definitions in mind that one must conclude that power and leadership are closely intertwined.

Many who have analyzed the relationship of power and leadership spoke of the structure of power in terms of A and B in which each represented a specific role. The generally accepted rule of practice assumes that A would be the individual perceived as the leader or that entity which holds the most power. B would then be in the subordinate (or less powerful) role.

Specifically, Simon (1957) perceived the relationship as "the power of A over B equals the maximum force which A can induce on B minus the maximum resisting force which B can mobilize in the opposing direction." (Bass, 1990). Reflecting on the A/B relationship Dahl
(1957) stated "A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do".

Lastly, Richard Emerson (1964) spoke of power in terms of interdependent relationships between both party A and B. In Emerson's theory of power and dependency he outlined three central concepts.

1. As it relates to power "The power of actor A over actor B is the amount of resistance on the part of B which can potentially be overcome by A"

2. In speaking of dependence "The dependence of actor A upon actor B is (1) directly proportional to A's motivational investment in goals mediated by B, and (2) inversely proportional to the availability of those goals outside the A-B relation."

3. Lastly on power equaling dependency "The power of A over B is equal to, and based upon, the dependence of B upon A."

Based on the Emerson theory, what is created is a flexible basis for leadership where the amount of power for each party involved revolves based on levels of dependency. It is the writer's opinion that based on the above description of such a relationship that power is not an absolute value but rather fluctuates depending on the power of others.

Sources of Power

Based on the definitions above it has been established that power can be flexible and shaped by different forces. Similarly, sources of that power can be just as adaptable. In evaluating these sources one will see that two distinct categories appear, personal power and positional power.
Personal power has a foundation based in the actual leader him or herself or that particular leader's position within an organization. As stated in Bass (1990):

Although it may seem otherwise, the evidence to date suggests that prospective followers tend to consider the personal power of the highly esteemed expert more important than the legitimacy and power to reward and punish that may derive from appointment to a position of leadership.

Knowledge is power and having particular expertise in a specified area solidifies the role the expert takes on as leader. This authenticity as an expert then far outweighs the ability the leader has to reward or punish subordinates. Of importance when speaking of personal power is the fact that it is derived mainly from emotion. Personal power has bearing on "affection, consideration, sympathy, recognition, and secure relationships and attachments to others" (Bass 1990).

Positional power, on the other hand, is status based. Leadership directly relates to the position held within the organizational hierarchy. Leaders holding positional power are in charge and as such control reward and punishment, task assignment, as well as movement of positions within subordinate ranks.

Power, Influence and Subordinates

A central theme continuing through this document is the fact that power is not absolute. The percentage of power held by leaders and those considered underlings (or subordinates) is flexible. This flexibility is in direct correlation to influence exerted by and on all involved. Bass (1990) speaks of influence in the following way:

Members of a group tend to be more influential than other members if they perceive themselves to have more power. Moreover, then tend to be more
satisfied than are members who have little power. They are also better liked, and their attempts to influence are better accepted. (p. 230)

As it is stated above, influence then becomes a role within power. Whether this marriage of power and influence is positive in nature is dependent on the role being held by the participant viewing this relationship. Creating a clear division between the two allows individual participants in a relationship the ability to achieve superiority in either one role or both. In such division theories power would be based on the ability to acquire and maintain resources, while influence would directly relate to perceived competence (expertise) and expectations outlined by third parties. (Willer, et. al, 1997)

In his article, Subordinate Teacher Power in School Organizations, Bruce Barnett names the individuals involved in models of power. The superordinate is the individual or group who maintains a majority (or dominance) of power. Those holding the remaining power available are subordinates. For the remainder of this discussion the author will continue to use this terminology.

"There is some evidence" Barnett states "that the power of subordinates in any organization resides in their resource access and the resulting dependency relationship which emerge". Barnett goes on to say:

Many times superordinates have to cope with problems with insufficient resources and no satisfactory alternatives. Because organizations strive to reduce uncertainty in their operations (Cyert and March, 1963), those subordinates capable of providing the necessary assistance in helping superordinates solve their problems can attain power over them. (p. 44)
It has been said that power begets power. In the above theory, it is outlined how in using the dependency system of power, subordinates can acquire more resources and thus increase their own base of power. In doing so the percentage of power is shifted in the direction of the subordinate over the superordinate.

French and Raven Model

In 1959 French and Raven introduced a theory that outlined five bases of power. The five bases being coercive, reward, expert, referent, and legitimate. These five distinct categories quickly became a way for theorists to define the type of power individuals were holding. To define each base of power the author has relied heavily on an article written by Donald Warren (1968) titled *Power, Visibility, and Conformity in Formal Organizations*.

Coercive power lends itself to the subordinate party's perception that the influences of the superordinate party have a direct relationship to penalties for non-compliance.

One of the key elements is that people subject to coercive power are either indifferent to, or opposed to, the wielder of authority. As a consequence, the wielder of authority must have some way of observing the actions of the people being "coerced". (p. 4)

Diametrically opposite of coercion one sees reward power as the ability of one party (superordinate) to provide compensation or accolades to another party (subordinate). "Reward power depends on the power wielder (individual or group) administering 'positive valences and reducing or removing negative balances'" (p. 4).

Expert power is defined as one party's (superordinate) ability to maintain control based on the other party's (subordinate) perception that the leader maintains a particular level of expertise. Of this type of power Warren states:
The extent of expert power is not clearly a function of the face-to-face interaction or the personal quality of that interaction between role partners' it may be a function of the knowledge possessed by the power wielder, not his presence. (p.4)

It is the opinion of the writer that in working with expert power roles are more easily defined. One either holds the level of expertise to be superordinate or not, it is very black and white. In holding the higher-level knowledge the superordinate need only worry about subordinates maintaining the same level of expertise to challenge power.

It is also the opinion of the writer that this is the best type of power to achieve. Having expertise in the area in which a superordinate leads allows for at the very least knowledgeable decision-making. While the leader in this particular situation may not be charismatic or well liked he or she works well within the selected industry or organization.

The remaining two bases of power tend to be more emotional in nature. Referent power directly relates to being revered or having a perceived commonality with subordinates. Legitimate power is based on values and common beliefs held by party's involved.

Specifically, referent power is based on the superordinate party's ability to make others identify with or like him or her.

If referring to a group, then an individual seeks membership in such a group or has a desire to remain in an associate already established. Referent power reflects the idea of "attractiveness" for a social setting or the individuals within it. Identification is expressed by the behavior, beliefs and perceptions of he power recipient and the power wielder. (Warren, 1968)
Being part of the crowd has always been an important part of many individual's lives. In achieving referent power the leader not only maintains that status but also rises to a new level of popularity. The problem with such power is that when leadership becomes a popularity contest many times the most popular candidate is not the individual who can lead those involved to the best possible results.

Legitimate power, as described by Bass (1990) is based on the internalization of common norms or values. This power is:

Induced by norms or values of a group that individuals accept by virtue of their socialization into the group…. Legitimacy is dependent upon relationships between social positions, not on the personal qualities a role incumbents.

Legitimate power does, however, involve the perceived right of the person to hold office. (Warren, 1968)

In what seems to be one of the more difficult bases of power to achieve those who claim to hold such power include royalty, religious leaders and in some cases politicians. The superordinate that holds legitimate power is born into his or her role. He or she is not hired, elected, or a taker of such power. Legitimate power would be considered a divine right ordained by a higher power (such as god).
Conclusion

Over the course of this document the writer has presented fact as well as opinion on topics surrounding the concepts of power and leadership. While only skimming the surface one can conclude that each of these topics and theories is of value to leaders and followers alike. For those that strive to gain power or those who serve under powerful leaders reading of the theories and concepts contained herein can help each better understand themselves and others.
References


