

MOTIVATION - POWER

A T R U S T W O R T H Y S A Y I N G

NO. 21

All leaders possess some form of power. Using power effectively is one of the critical factors in developing into a significant leader. Leaders who learn when and how to use power can maximize their effectiveness. Strong leaders understand and use power wisely. They do not abuse power, but neither do they fear employing the power that is rightfully theirs.

The inappropriate use of power changes leaders into tyrants, but disuse of power leaves a leader impotent and ineffective. High capacity leaders are aware of the power available to them and judiciously apply it to maximize their effectiveness.

In 1959, John French and Bertram Raven identified five sources of power: **Coercive, Reward, Legitimate, Referent** and **Expert Power**. Later Raven added a sixth: **Information Power**.

Coercive power requires that others comply with the leader's demands through force and intimidation. Mao Zedong said, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." But is power that grows from the barrel of a gun the stuff that leadership is made of? When a person in a position of leadership resorts to force, threats and intimidation, he or she abdicates the nobility of leadership and descends into the abyss of tyranny.

Reward Power is the flip-side of Coercive Power. Instead of punishing people for not following the leader, Reward Power provides benefits to those who follow well. Favors are given and/or pressures removed. Sometimes these are tangible rewards such as promotions, parking spots or desired committee assignments. But more often rewards are intangible: smiles, words of encouragement, expressions of gratitude and pats on the back.

Legitimate Power is associated with title and position. A referee in an American Football game may weigh only half as much as some of the players, but his striped shirt and whistle make him more powerful than any player on the field. Legitimate power generally extends only to the position and not necessarily to the person. Once the game is over and the referee's stripes are taken off, so goes the power that accompanies the position.

Referent Power is tied to admiration and charm. This type of power is based on the acceptance and approval of the celebrity. Artists, athletes, people of wealth, political leaders and other high-profile people hold Referent Power. But their gatekeepers – the ones that control access to these people – have great power as well. These people control access to those who are perceived to have prestige or significance. Similar to Reward Power, Referent Power resides in the person who decides which concert goer gets backstage passes or which person has press box credentials to a big sporting event.

Expert Power flows from the training, credentials or education. Master plumbers, attorneys, chefs, accountants, rocket scientists, airline pilots and medical doctors have power based upon the background, experience and certifications they hold. Even the perception of expertise or knowledge is a source of power. In recent years, padded resumes have unraveled the careers of coaches, politicians, doctors and professors. Trying to gain power through the perception of Expert Power is a temptation many cannot resist.

Later, Information Power was added to the list by Raven. This source of power has to do with facts and details and who has access to that information. When an individual or small group has access to information that is unknown or unavailable to others, they hold the power.

Some have said that we live in an era of waning power. Coercive tyrants are being overthrown by students networked through social media. Everyone has become an “expert” through the wisdom of Wikipedia and other on-line sources that may or may not be credible. To some degree this is true. Power may be more diffused today than in the past, but it is still a potent tool that leaders must use well to lead well.

When a leader uses legitimate power well, followers are motivated toward their desired ends. Tom Landry, former head coach of the Dallas Cowboys, once said, “The job of a coach is to make players do what they don’t want to do, so that they achieve what they want to achieve.” That’s a high caliber leader – using power well to motivate his followers to achieve their shared vision.

But not all leaders are altruistic nor do they all strive for the common goal and common good. British historian, writer, and politician Lord Acton (1834-1902) said, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”

Because leaders are human and have sinful, self-centered tendencies, they need checks and controls on their power. They need accountability, limits and reviews. The USA Constitution has endured, to a large degree, because the founders had an awareness of the human tendency to abuse power. They balanced power between the judicial, legislative, and executive branches of government and divided power between two legislative bodies.

Good leaders learn to exercise power well but avoid being seduced by its tyrannical appeal. Beyond the use of power, they learn to share power by building consensus and finding noble compromise. Instead of force, they look for creative solutions and thoughtful alternatives to overcome obstacles and keep alive unity, hope and progress around the common vision.

This lesson written by Dan Bolin is a part of a larger series on leadership called “A Trustworthy Saying.” Find more teaching/lessons available for download for free at: www.refuelinginflight.com/trustworthysaying