

Lecture 9: Power

This week, we will consider the relationship between Critical Thinking & Language Skills, on the one hand, and Power and Development, on the other.

Today, we focus on Power – the ability to influence the behavior of others/ course of events.

The most common account of **Sources of Power** lists five different kinds of Power:

1. **Coercive Power** (when people are *forced* to obey)
2. **Reward Power** (when one has something that others want)
3. **Legitimate Power** (authority by status/ social hierarchy /position)
4. **Referent Power** (personal charisma, charm, influence, fame)
5. **Expert Power** (power of knowledge).

Coercive power

This is the power to force someone to do something against their will. It is often physical although other threats may be used. It is the power of dictators, despots and bullies. Coercion can result in physical harm, although its principal goal is compliance. Demonstrations of harm are often used to illustrate what will happen if compliance is not gained.

Coercion is also the ultimate power of all governments. Although it is often seen as negative, it is also used to keep the peace. Parents coerce young children who know no better. A person holds back their friend who is about to step out in front of a car.

Other forms of power can also be used in coercive ways, such as when a reward or expertise is withheld or referent power is used to threaten social exclusion.

Reward power

One of the main reasons we work is for the money we need to conduct our lives. There are many more forms of reward -- in fact anything we find desirable can be a reward, from a million dollar yacht to a pat on the back.

Reward power is thus the ability to give other people what they want, and hence ask them to do things for you in exchange.

Rewards can also be used to punish, such as when they are withheld. The promise is essentially the same: do this and you will get that.

Legitimate power

Legitimate power is that which is invested in a role. Kings, policemen and managers all have legitimate power. The legitimacy may come from a higher power, often one with coercive power. Legitimate power can often thus be the acceptable face of raw power.

A common trap that people in such roles can fall into is to forget that people are obeying the position, not them. When they either fall from power or move onto other things, it can be a puzzling surprise that people who used to fawn at your feet no longer do so.

Referent power

This is the power from another person liking you or wanting to be like you. It is the power of charisma and fame and is wielded by all celebrities (by definition) as well as more local social leaders. In wanting to be like these people, we stand near them, hoping some of the charisma will rub off onto us.

Those with referent power can also use it for coercion. One of the things we fear most is *social exclusion*, and all it takes is a word from a social leader for us to be shunned by others in the group.

Expert power

When I have knowledge and skill that someone else requires, then I have Expert power. This is a very common form of power and is the basis for a very large proportion of human collaboration, including most companies where the principle of specialization allows large and complex enterprises to be undertaken.

Expert power is that which is used by Trades Unions when they encourage their members to strike for better pay or working conditions. It is also the power of the specialist R&D Engineer when they threaten to leave unless they get an exorbitant pay rise or a seat by the window.

So what?

So use these categories as a checklist to determine what forms of power you and others have available. It is a common negotiating mistake to assume you are powerless or have less power than the other person.

http://changingminds.org/explanations/power/french_and_raven.htm

Is Powerlessness a *Kind* of Power?

The opposite of having power is powerlessness, which is a remarkably common illusion.

Self-image

Many people have a self-image of powerlessness, believing that they are not able to achieve anything. This may take the form of needing to ask for approval to take any action (I am not authorized to decide). It may also come from a self image of being unable to achieve goals (I do not have the skill or knowledge to do anything).

A low self-image can thus have a crippling paralyzing effect on a person, preventing them from even beginning any action.

Fear of failure

Another root of powerlessness is the fear of *failure* which, in turn, is often rooted in the fear of persecution, rejection, ridicule, etc.

The person typically projects forward into the future, sees themselves failing and then continues to imagine others criticizing or ostracizing them. The illusion may continue into feelings of guilt, shame and loneliness.

Internal conflict

Internal conflict can lead to powerlessness, for example where a manager wants to discipline an employee but also wants to be liked -- the result can be a stasis of inaction.

When equal and opposite forces pull against one another, the net movement is zero.

The power of powerlessness

Curiously, powerlessness is a form of power. If I feel powerless, then this gives me the power to ask for help. I can be powerless like a child and hence demand help from an adult-figure.

Begging uses powerlessness to persuade.

Do not get trapped by powerlessness. You always have power. When you are in a powerless state, you can always use it to play from the child state.

Using Power

Confronting Life's problems, we should try to analyze and understand our channels and sources of power. What physical strengths do we have? What material things? What information or control of access to information? What emotional sway?

We must also understand

- ⇒ Our intent: are we intending harm or help?
- ⇒ Where we can act proactively and when we can only react (or perhaps choose not to react).

Then we can make deliberate choices as to what power we will use or not use, why, and in what way.

We should apply the same analysis to other people, and try to work out ways to neutralize their negative power.

http://changingminds.org/explanations/power/three_dimensions_of_power.htm

http://changingminds.org/explanations/power/power_types.htm

Toffler's 3 Forms of Power

Futurist Alvin Toffler describes three forms of power and shows how these have changed over time.

Violence

The most basic form of power is violence, or physical forms of power. 'Might is right' is their watchword and it is close to the law of the jungle in operation.

The basic promise is 'do as you are told and you won't get hurt'.

Those who gain the power of violence do so by controlling the mechanisms of physical domination, from armies and police forces to the ownership of specific weapons.

Wealth

Money is a more flexible form of power than violence as it can be exchanged for pretty much anything you want, from goods to services of all kinds.

Money can be viewed as 'stored time/action': you work and are given money, then give the money to others to save time/action. The trick in acquiring wealth is to invest the money in ways that it provides a maximum return on investment.

Those who gain wealth do so largely through a superior ability (or sometimes luck) in investment, taking controlled risks and gaining disproportionate returns.

Knowledge

Knowledge is the ultimate form of power and can be used to acquire both wealth and violence, if applied in the right way. 'Knowledge is power' is a common saying that highlights this.

The evolution of power

Violence was the basic power of the nobility in ancient times, where a powerful elite worked largely through domination that threatened violence to those who did not comply.

In the industrial revolution, violence gave way to wealth, as the merchant classes became more powerful and gained control of critical resources and channels.

Today, in the Third Wave, the power of knowledge is replacing commercial wealth as the primary source of power. If you have the right knowledge, you can get a lot done without recourse to money. Power is thus moving to the educated elite (and masses). The internet is a great leveller of power in this regard.

So now what?

Seek knowledge in order to acquire and manage power today. Money is still useful, but knowledge is available (like on the Web!)

References

Alvin Toffler, (1980). *The Third Wave*, Bantam Books

Alvin Toffler, (1990). *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century*. Bantam Books

These notes are based on material retrieved in May 2006 from http://changingminds.org/explanations/power/toffler_power.htm

End Notes: Language, Power, and National Development

In this course, we have examined

- ⇒ the relationship between Language and Thought,
- ⇒ the ‘critical’ role of Critical Thinking in our decision-making,
- ⇒ the importance of Logic in Persuasion, and
- ⇒ the sources of Power in our society.

The collective power of any society to create a comfortable life for all its members stems from the knowledge and expertise of all its members. I remember a Japanese economist being interviewed on Latvian Radio several years ago, in which he said that Japan has no natural resources that could be exploited to create wealth; instead, he said, Japan has the most important prerequisite for social development – Human Resource! Highly skilled, expert workforce is the driver of national development; without it, no amount of natural resources will create an affluent, well-to-do society: some developing nations in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the South Pacific, despite their vast natural resources, have not yet achieved the standards of living in most ‘developed’ nations. **Why, do you think?**

Apart from accumulating scientific knowledge, we must learn to think critically, outside-of-the-box, to be able to solve all the complex problems life throws at us – as individuals, and collectively, as a society. Now, we learn everything through Language – everything that we learn through formal education and social interaction. That is why language instruction is so crucial in formal education: basic literacy is necessary for all further learning.

In the multilingual PNG society, we see many conflicting interests at play: on the one hand, there is a need to preserve and explore the wealth of linguistic and cultural traditions; on the other, there is the urgent need to develop the national economy and raise the living standards of all Papua New Guineans.

Talking Points:

1. With its focus on the preservation of the endangered languages and cultural traditions, how has the Educational Reform affected
 - ⇒ The spread of literacy in PNG?
 - ⇒ English language skills of university students?
 - ⇒ National development?
2. Why is proficiency in English important at university level?
3. How can PNG languages and traditions be preserved and celebrated without slowing down the nation’s economic and social growth?

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Talking Points:

4. With its focus on the preservation of the endangered languages and cultural traditions, how has the Educational Reform affected
 - ⇒ The spread of literacy in PNG?
 - ⇒ English language skills of university students?
 - ⇒ National development?
5. Why is proficiency in English important at university level?
6. How can PNG languages and traditions be preserved and celebrated without slowing down the nation’s economic and social growth?