

Understanding Power in the Organisation

Understanding power in all its guises in an organisational context is crucial for all leaders and managers. Power is the potential or actual ability to influence others in a desired direction. Power, when viewed as potential or actual influence, is an essential part of effective leadership and management. It can come from the control of information, knowledge or resources that are desired by others. Historically, the idea of power was associated with evil that emanated from coercion. Whereas currently, power is recognised as having both positive facets that can highly influence performances in organisation and negative facets that can create conflict through associated power behaviour. Individuals and groups, formal and informal, in an organisation can exert power. Individuals can exert influence in a variety of ways e.g. managers exerting influence over subordinates, leaders using charisma to motivate team members.

Attempts to exert influence can be constructive or destructive. For example, calling and facilitating a meeting to address dissatisfaction in the team is constructive. Whereas encouraging people to ignore policies and procedures can be destructive and all managers should have guidelines for the ethical use of power in their organisations.

Power and dependence

Diagnosing dependence is a key step to understanding and using power. Dependence arises in part because a person, group, or organisation relies on another person, group or organisation to accomplish his, her, or its tasks. It may also arise for other reasons, such as previous history of assistance by one person or a psychological reliance by one person on another. A subordinate depends on his or her manager for directions and resources. A manager in turn depends on his or her subordinates for assistance in accomplishing a task and identifying obstacles to achieving team goals. The person being relied or depended upon automatically has some power - potential or actual ability to influence the other. Individuals who are dependent attempt to secure power to neutralise their dependence on others. Dependence increases as the organisation becomes larger, causing greater reliance on specialities that result from division of labour – all of which can reduce the power of the manager. Individuals engage in power-oriented behaviour to reduce their dependence on others, they also try to increase the dependence of others on them, thus increasing their own relative power.

Power as a motivator

The need for power is an individual motivator that causes a person to seek and build power. People with a high need for power try to influence and control others, seek leadership positions in groups, enjoy persuading others, and are perceived by others as outspoken, forceful and demanding.

Power relations

Managers can exert power downwards by giving direct orders to subordinates, establish guidelines for their decision making, approve or reject subordinates decisions, or allocate resources to them. Individuals can also exert influence upwards. To promote or protect their self-interests, they can control the type of information passed to superiors or withhold information that they feel is detrimental to themselves. Contributions to an individuals' powerlessness in an organisation can occur through a manager who just focuses on the negative, a manager who over-supervises, significant changes, an impersonal bureaucratic climate, poor communication, unappealing rewards, too many rules, low chance of advancement, and lack of appropriate resources.

Empowering others

Managers can increase their own power by sharing their power with others. They can give them empowering information, such as providing emotional support, offering words of encouragement, serving as role model, and facilitating successful mastery of a task. They can also provide a positive emotional atmosphere, rewarding staff achievements in visible and personal ways, expressing confidence in subordinates abilities, fostering initiative and responsibility, and building on success.

Personal Power

Personal power is based on the knowledge or personality of an individual that allow him or her to influence the behaviour of others. It can be reflected in expertise, whereby an individual has unique or special knowledge, skills, and experience. It can further be reflected where a person may have the charisma that attracts others to follow him or her because they identify with them. Finally, because of fear resulting from a position of power a manager may coerce a person to perform certain tasks.