

Leading with Intention: Understanding and Building Your Power Intelligence

Introduction to Thinking About Power

There's an assumption that power is bad. It's often considered a *dirty* word and taboo to talk about. We often associate it with negative contexts or experiences such as abuse of power, a power struggle, etc. But power in and of itself is neutral energy. It's how it is used that determines whether its impact is positive or negative.

Definition

Power is the capacity to alter another person's condition or state of mind, or to alter our environment to our advantage, whether that advantage is a personal one or an organizational one.

Power is the single issue underlying many organizational problems because it is at the heart of so much of our work as leaders operating within our organizations as well as our networks and communities. We often debate and fight over the best/ or right way to use or allocate finite resources, yet we don't talk about power competencies that drive decisions, outcomes, and long-term effects.

Power follows us through every context of our lives including:

- In our *families* from or as elder, parent, child, or sibling
- In our *education/learning* from or as teacher, mentor, or student
- In our *work/vocation* from or as boss, employee, board member, partner/volunteer, or donor

We need power. We use it:

- to impact their communities, their organizations and their environment
- to gain buy in from employees or other constituents
- to solve conflicts, or even to prolong conflicts
- to persist through or recover from failures or losses
- to resource ourselves in times of despair and restore our hope in others and ourselves
- to build or mobilize forces (people, pressure, money) for desired change

Power and Leadership

When we lead, we are granted positional power as well as the authority to empower others. Power alone (regardless of the person who holds power) exerts an influence that can silence or empower others. Consequently, it is critical to take the time to understand our relationship to power. A few reasons directly related to leading include:

- Impact: Power is defined as making an impact, yet being in a position of power makes it hard to know your REAL impact.
- Feedback: The effectiveness of any leader is predicated on feedback and knowing impact. However, leaders with the most positional power rarely receive candid feedback.
- Engagement: A critical competency of leaders is to create engagement – a mutual commitment between the staff member (board member, stakeholder, funder) and the organization (represented by the leader). The leader's use of power can engage or exclude.
- Culture: Culture is what guides and shapes the quality of experience and effectiveness in organizational life. Culture is shaped by actions and impact far more than espoused values and intent – by what is “done” not what is “said.” How leaders use their power is a critical influence on organizational culture and the expression of power among staff.

Types of Power

- Social status: Power and advantage one is born with based in social identities, education, or physical/mental abilities
- Expertise: Knowledge, information, skills, competencies
- Positional: based on legal right or role
- Experience: Wisdom gained over time and context (seniority or tenure, for example)
- Informal/context: Power of belonging or fitting in, very dependent on context and ability to leverage norms and values of a given context
- Personal: Everything you use that comes from within you that helps persist, thrive, and influence (can be innate or learned)

Three Dimensions of Personal Power



When Power Can Be Problematic

OVER-USE

Self-serving and excessive use of power and control

Examples: Micro-managing, making decisions that aren't truly yours to make, over-application of rank and hierarchy

MIS-USE

Reactive use of power

Examples: Exploitation of others through power, pushing a personal agenda

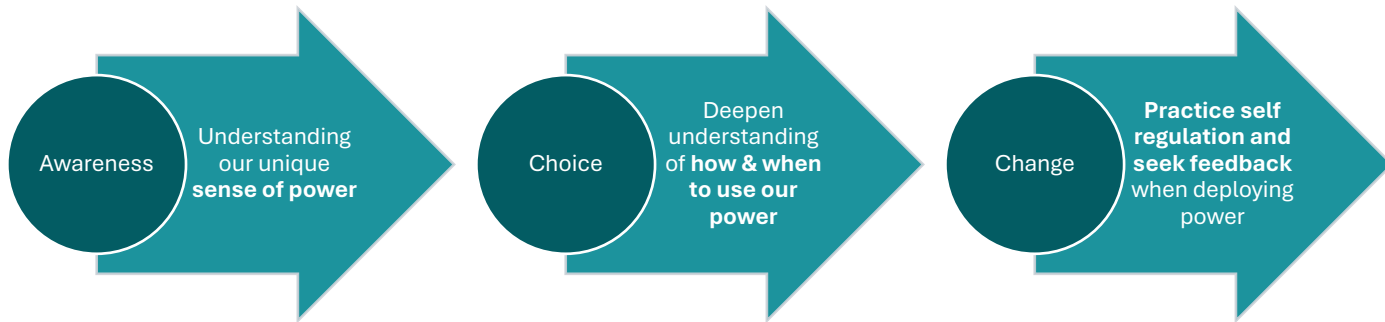
UNDER-USE

Opting out of using power

Examples: Abdication and silence in the face of harm, inappropriate delegation or deference to others

Developing Power Intelligence

How do we begin developing our own power intelligence?



Awareness: We can start with understanding our “sense of power,” which is your belief in your ability to impact or influence. This can stem from our family, learning, personal development, spirituality, etc. We want to start building awareness around your experience of power:

- In relation to others
- In relation to yourself
- In Socio-political – life - context

This awareness enables our success and our impact.

Choice: Recognizing that power is context fluid. We want to be aware of your various types and bases of power and begin deepening your understanding of when and how you use them (or don’t use them). *Example, I have power over my young kids and may be more authoritative with them from time to time. But I wouldn’t use that same type of power with the kids who I do volunteer work with.*

Change: Lastly, practicing and developing “self-regulation” is key. Develop an understanding of your reactive tendencies and self-limiting beliefs so that you can avoid reactivity when deploying your power.

Informed by the work of Julie Diamond Leadership