

DYNAMICS OF POWER

THE PRINCIPLES OF POWER



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AN INTRODUCTION

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WHAT IS POWER?

Power is *the ability to make things happen in accordance with one's will*. After all, it is easy to make things happen *against* one's will - such things are known as mistakes. But to bend the world in line with what we intend, that requires power.

However, power is not a simple substance. It is complex and volatile. It requires skilful handling if it is not to backfire. What follows are eight principles of power, with an explanation for each. They describe how power works and how it can be used wisely.

1) Power is never fixed.

There is a reason why, when speaking of power, we use the metaphor of 'dynamics'. The word comes from the Greek for energy. Dynamics are about shifting energies, about fluidity, change, and forces in tension with each other. That is the nature of power. Power slips and shifts and slides from one person to another, one family to another, one organisation to another, one nation to another, even one empire to another, in unrelenting motion.

Sometimes a shift in power can take decades, as in the gradual decline of the West and the corresponding rise of the East, two diverging lines currently defining the graph of this century. But power can also change hands overnight: as when one CEO is sacked to be replaced by another; or when a military coup forces the incumbent out; or even when in a personal relationship one partner confesses to an affair and in that instant senses their power-base in the relationship fracture. Like water poured from one glass into another and then another, power is liquid, fluid, mobile.

No wonder the zealous attempts at holding on to power, to freeze the water and trap it. If it lies in the nature of power to leak away to others, power is going to provoke us into keeping it. That is why our most renowned thinker on power counsels us to do just that. Once in power, says Machiavelli, do all that you can to hold on. The first and ongoing task of the powerful is to secure their power.

The ultimate example is monarchy. By stipulating that power can pass through the bloodline only, a monarchy cancels the availability of power to those outside the royal family. The concept of monarchy

thereby proves that the nature of power hangs on its promiscuity, its readiness to give itself to new partners.

For if it wasn't in the nature of power to go to others, the urge to confine its movement would not arise. The maxim being that while power can be held, it can never be possessed. It reserves the right to escape from its momentary master.

The lesson for those who seek power is that there is a cost to having it. That cost is anxiety – the anxiety that comes from knowing that your grip on power can never be total, and that yours is the burden of keeping it yours. Like holding a tiger, holding power gives you kudos, but also gives you an animal who can leap out of your arms at any time.

2) Power lies in keeping them guessing.

One of the defining features of the powerful is their ability to grant favours. They might dispense titles, money or land. They might bestow honours, prizes and positions of authority. They might endorse, countersign, underwrite and put up collateral. They might pull strings and use their influence to advance the cause of those whom they choose.

There are two reasons why such gestures serve to reinforce the power of the powerful:

First, the granting of favours hints at an abundance of resources on their part. This abundance distinguishes the powerful from the masses, stimulating envy.

Second, the ability to grant favours creates dependency among those who seek

after such favours. Because dependency is a weakness, it reinforces the strength of those with power. What's more, a gift granted by the powerful may actually weaken its recipient. How so? The gift keeps the recipient in a state of indebtedness.

But if power resides in the ability to grant favours, it resides equally in the option of withholding them. By definition, the 'granting' of a favour will be discretionary rather than a matter of obligation. And so it remains at the liberty of the powerful not to grant the favour. Where what can be granted is withheld, the desire for it increases. The greater the desire for the favour, the greater the power of the person who withholds it.

In short, there is as much power in saying no as in saying yes. But to maintain their value, both have to be deployed. For if you always grant favours and never withhold them, their value will decrease. Similarly, if you only withhold, the expectation on the part of others of being granted a favour will eventually fade and so will the dependency that went along with it.

The equal value of the no and the yes leads on to an underlying principle of power. Namely, to keep people guessing. Because sometimes you give and sometimes you don't, people will never know for sure which way you will go. Their state of not knowing is itself a form of powerlessness. Finding themselves subject to what appears like arbitrary whim, they can only bet on the outcome.

3) Power attracts deception.

The key measure of power is not how lofty your position, but how far others will put your self-interest above their own. Power involves leveraging the efforts of multiple others to serve your own aims.

The self-interest of others, however, is not so easily suppressed. In the gardens of the powerful, the self-interest of others will keep springing up like weeds. That is because self-interest is in our nature. We want the best for ourselves, even in the presence of a powerful person who has pressed us into serving the selfinterest of their own.

The reason why self-interest is so resilient, even among the powerless, is that it begins in our instinct for survival, which we have from birth. Over time, as the threat to our survival recedes, that instinct evolves from defending the self into calculating what is best for the self in any situation. Survival becomes self-interest.

So even as you grow in power, with others serving your selfinterest, they will continue serving the self-interest of their own. But they will do so quite precisely, increasing their selfinterest to just short of where yours would be reduced. For to reduce their efforts on behalf your self-interest and in favour of their own, would put them in danger.

There is in other words an ideal ratio of self-interest between you, the one with power, and them, those without power. Let's say that ratio is 4:1. That is, they will serve your interests four times more than they will serve their own. For 80% of the time, they put you first; for 20% of the time, they put themselves first.

One of the main manifestations of this ratio is flattery. Flattery may be defined as the self-interest of the flatterer disguised as the self-interest of the person being flattered. It serves the latter, but also serves the former, in a ratio of about 4:1.

For example, the function of the phrase, 'You are wonderful, my Lord' should be decoded as 'I am wonderful but far less wonderful than you'.

As power grows and with it the likelihood of being flattered, so therefore does the risk of being deceived. Flattery is by definition an editing of the truth, an unduly favourable presentation of the facts, and therefore a distortion. That is, to gain power is to lose the truth. Power attracts deception.

What's more, flattery suggests to the powerful that their power has been entirely earned. It glosses over the role of luck. So not only do the powerful risk losing touch with the truth, they also risk losing the gratitude for their good fortune.

4) Power does not always coincide with authority.

When thinking of powerful people, what usually comes to mind are those who run large countries or global corporations. These are individuals with prodigious power of the political and/or financial variety. But as well as power, what such people have in common is their position at the top. They are the presidents, the prime ministers, the CEOs, the chairmen and chairwomen. They sit at the pinnacle of a pyramid. Beneath them thousands or even millions of people stretch downwards in a hierarchy.

This link between power and position leads us to assume that such people are powerful *because of*

their position. You are powerful because you are the president. You are powerful because you direct a multinational. Up to a point, that causal connection between power and position is valid. Where the causality breaks down is in realising that it is possible to be a weak king, for example, or a puppet dictator, or a CEO who has lost the confidence of the Board, or the captain who can't command her team, or the patriarch in a family that no longer pays him any regard, or even a schoolteacher whose pupils run rings round her. In such cases, a position of power has failed to translate into power at hand.

In short, where a position of authority might often be correlated with power, it provides no guarantee of it. Better therefore to conceive of a position at the top, of a position of authority, as a proxy for power instead of the real thing. Authority is an ersatz.

The incompleteness of the overlap between power and authority contains a lesson for both those with and those without power. The latter are advised to look upon those in authority as other than inherently powerful. That those in authority are in a position of power might be true, but whether they have any intrinsic power is open to question. It follows that being in a position inferior to them does not automatically make one less powerful. The most powerful person is not always the one at the top: sometimes there is a power behind or beneath the throne.

The lesson for those in power is to ask how much of your power derives from your position and how much from your inner power, your strength as a person. If the balance is tipped in favour of the former, clearly you are vulnerable. Your task is tip the balance back.

5) Power does not always equate to strength.

Like power and authority, power and strength are routinely conflated. True, there are similarities, especially when we think of strength and power in the physical domain. One might talk interchangeably, for example, about the 'strength' and the 'power' of a weightlifter.

But even with the weightlifter, a subtle difference obtains. He might have the strength to lift the weight but not the power. That is, he has the technical capacity to hoist the barbell aloft. Indeed he has done so before. But on this occasion he struggles to get it above his thighs. He drops it. Why? Because although he had the strength, he lacked the power. Perhaps he was tired; perhaps he wasn't focussed. Either way, he wasn't able to access the strength he had on paper. To mobilise that strength, what was needed was power.

So much for the physical aspects of power and strength. From a psychological point of view, the relationship between them reverses. For power is generally external in that it is conferred or bestowed. One might be appointed to high office, for example, or granted the deeds to an island. Strength on the other hand is an inner quality. So the Suffragettes fought for power - for equal power with men - and what gave them the ability to do so was their strength. In contrast to the weightlifter, the Suffragettes recruited their strength in order to achieve power. That strength came from an inner set of convictions.

Men sometimes fall into a nearby trap. They look for power when strength is what they lack. To them, the route to power appears like a shortcut to strength.

They pursue power in the belief that it will strengthen them. But because power is typically bestowed from outside, the result is anything but. That is why there are many weak men in power. Vestments of power conceal the inner weakness.

6) Power is enhanced through symbols.

The symbols of power are many and various. There are the sceptre and orb held by Britannia, ruler of the British Empire. There is Merlin's wand. There is the swastika billowing on a flag. The image of a clenched fist. The military parade. The ring on the papal finger. The palace. The limousine. The whip. The private jet. The uniform. The crown, the robes and the coat of arms. The lectern, the pulpit and the presidential balcony. The corner office, the boardroom table and the private parking space. The obelisk, the arch and the statue.

What unites such diverse symbols of power is that they are external, outer, visual. They are located not within the personage of the powerful man or woman, but sit on the outside. Indeed sitting on the outside is crucial for symbols, for their principle purpose is display. They exist to project a message, so it is vital that symbols of power are not covered but seen.

It is owing to their outer quality that symbols of power are ultimately false. Because power is generally superficial, based not on inner strength but on the trappings of the authority with which it is sometimes confused, power looks to clad itself with images and objects that avert to such inner strength without evidencing it. For a symbol is not proof, but only a promise, of power. A symbol of power is the promise of a power that may or may not

exist behind it. The symbol is the visible suggestion of a power that's invisible.

That lack of any visible substance turns a power symbol into little more than a placeholder, an empty screen. But the advantage of a screen is that it allows those looking on to beam their own projections onto it. The symbol fills up with the audience's fantasies of power. By definition such fantasies are at least as satisfying to the audience as any actual power behind the symbol that they might have glimpsed.

Over time, power may be subsumed by its symbols, so that the symbols become power itself. That is, power adopts symbols to give the illusion of strength, but that illusion works no less well than the real thing. The illusion of strength created by symbols can provoke as much awe among those looking on as would a power that is powerful enough to dispense with symbols entirely.

7) Power over the powerless is tyranny.

There are two types of power: Ego Power and Inner Strength. Ego Power is derived from external sources: mainly the position of authority that is occupied, combined with the symbols adopted to project that authority.

However, because it is not self-sufficient but is dependent on external sources, Ego Power remains less powerful than Inner Strength. The latter finds its sources within the person concerned – sources such as courage, conviction, integrity, honesty and will. This resourcefulness on its part means that Inner Strength sees no need to subjugate others or to extend its identity through them. It has no lack to fill. It is already replete. So replete is it that

Inner Strength can give power to others and not be depleted. It has power enough to empower others without fear of loss.

Ego Power on the other hand seeks to subjugate others. The reason is that Ego Power is hollow. It hungers after others to subjugate and thereby feed its lack. This emptiness on the part of Ego Power is the womb of tyranny. It is that space from which the desire to wield power over others is born.

In other words, tyranny is the exercise of power for the purpose of asserting that power. It has no end beyond its own need of affirmation. In tyrannising others, therefore, tyranny is searching for a mirror in which to see its power reflected. But because this reflected power is not real, tyranny can never be satisfied. And because it can never be satisfied, tyranny is in principle infinite. It will go on and on tyrannising others, for it has no means of curbing itself. All that can stop it is an outside force.

8) An increase in power causes a decrease in humility.

Power as Ego Power consolidates itself through dominating others. Elevation is the result: the more people beneath, the more you are raised up. And the more raised up, the closer you get to what lies above. That leads to the status historically claimed by the powerful, of approximating to the divine. We are familiar, for example, with the Medieval 'divine right of kings' and with how the Pharaohs were worshipped as living gods. Power on earth served as a plinth for reaching heaven.

But just as power is a reaching upwards, it can be figured as lifting away from what lies beneath. That carries the risk of losing sight of the earth. To

stand upon the collective subjugation of others is to become removed from the ground of humility. The very word humility stems from the word for earth in Latin.

So power and humility appear to be mutually repelling: the more powerful, the less humble. But the axiom isn't watertight. For when power is acquired for the purposes of doing good, it changes its nature. From the position of height there is a swinging downwards. Power becomes service. Instead of doing things to other people, the powerful entity does things for them.

This is the essence of Inner Strength. The person who is possessed of Inner Strength realises that it is not necessary to shore up their Ego Power, to seek affirmation from outside. Doing so speaks to a position of fear. Instead one looks within. One understands that, unlike Ego Power, Inner Strength does not require being reinforced. It merely requires being discovered.

When there is this grounding in humility, what arises is the possibility of grace.

About Dynamics of Power

Founded in 2018 by Robert Rowland Smith, Dynamics of Power is the world's only organisation to focus exclusively on power dynamics. We help our clients to deepen their understanding of the power dynamics in their particular context and to rebalance them where necessary.



The scope of our work

1. Financial and commercial

For businesses in a market where the power dynamics are shifting, and where the relationships among competitors, suppliers, partners, shareholders, regulators and other stakeholders may be uncertain.

2. Organisational

For companies in which organisational politics are threatening results; or where certain departments or teams are engaged in a power struggle that is taking energy away from core business.

3. Social and political

For charities, NGOs, social enterprises, think tanks and political entities who are seeking to secure their own power base or credibility in relation to funders, audiences and competitors.

4. Sexual and gender identity

For those individuals or organisations seeking to understand the changing nature of sexual and gender identity, and how power dynamics among different groups are being recalibrated in the process.

5. Personal and family relationships

For individuals consciously or unconsciously entangled in the power dynamics of their family system, and who wish to become free of such entanglements in order to realise their potential.



Services

Talks - we give presentations on the history, meaning and relevance of power dynamics today.

Seminars - we run 3-hour dialogues with groups who wish to understand how to work with the power dynamics in their own context.

Workshops - we deliver 1-3 day workshops for clients wishing to develop new strategies for managing power relationships and to turn those strategies into an action plan.

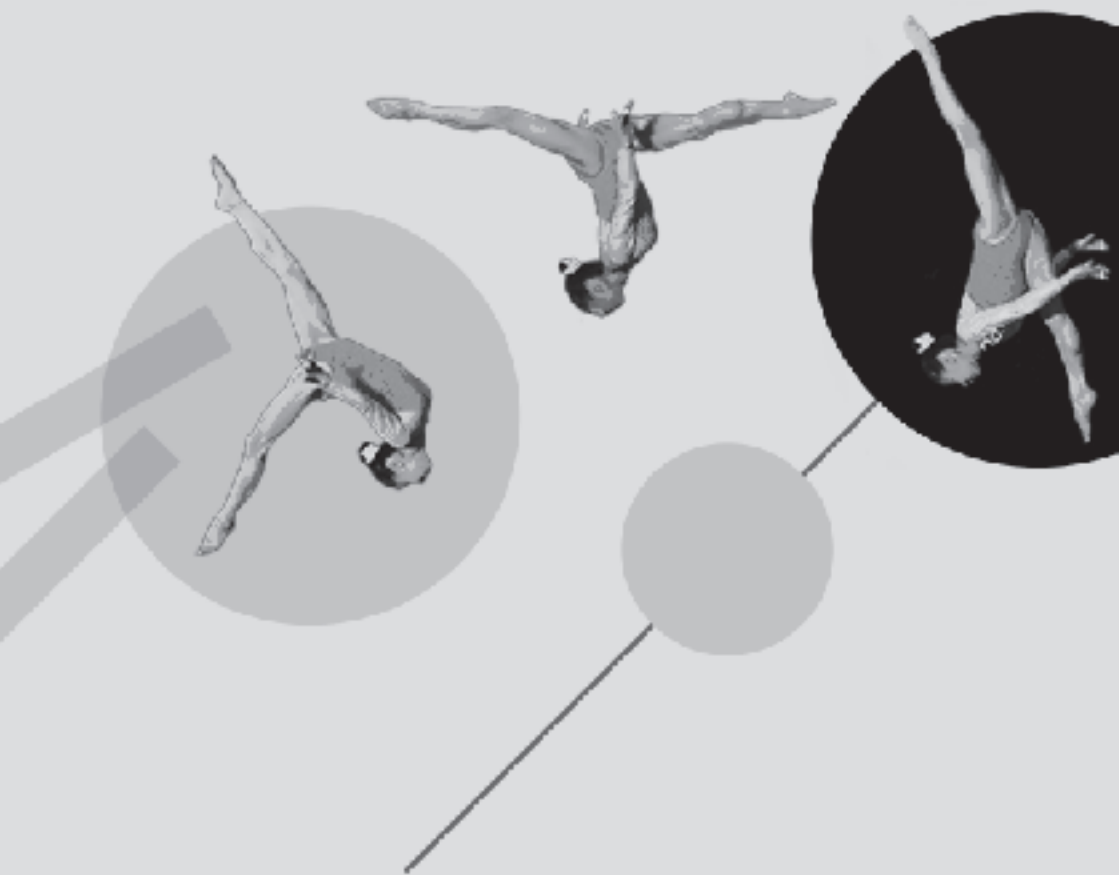
Corporate programmes - we design and facilitate week-long programmes in businesses for senior executives and/or high potentials who want to understand and develop their own power as leaders without damaging the organisation.

Embedding - we work in situ with leaders and teams on live business issues related to power dynamics, to ensure that ideas generated offline have an impact in everyday reality.

Constellations - we offer bespoke half-day and one-day Constellations for individuals and businesses with a specific issue related to power dynamics that they wish to resolve.

Personal development - we support individuals grappling with power issues in their personal and/or professional life. We meet in a confidential setting over the course of 6 sessions x 90 minutes.

Power assessment - we administer a set of proprietary tools for assessing the current and potential power of individuals and organisations. These tools combine self-assessment with objective analysis.



Get in touch



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