

February 25, 2008

Perspectives on Power

by *Tricia Jack, MPA, CPPA Research Associate*

Last month when an almost-stranger I had met at a social event asked me for a ride to a place that was quite out of my way, I was a little irritated. I hardly knew this person and was quite hesitant to meet their request. The irony is that if this had been a friend or family member I would have thought nothing of driving out of my way to help them; in fact I would have been happy to help. On my way back from the unwanted journey (in the snow, I might add), I began to think about how it is that friends and family have this power over us and how this relates to leadership.



I might be biased, but my family and friends are probably the coolest people around and I would do anything for them. Likewise, I have worked for managers that I would have done anything for; not just because they were my managers, but because I liked and respected them. I have seen this happen many times. One notable example: In my work with the Scottish Court Service I once observed court officers who would routinely wash their Judge's cars (a task that is way beyond the call of duty) just because they liked them and wanted to help them.

This "liking" gives people a certain power over others. The leadership literature calls this "referent" power; the kind of power that grows from respect and loyalty. It is not given just by virtue of being a leader, but comes from building effective and appropriate interpersonal relationships with followers.

Of course, leaders *do* have power merely because of their position of authority. The literature describes this as "legitimate power." [1] While this kind of power can be successful because it is easier for people to obey it than to resist it, relying on it can make leaders ineffective in some situations. In fact, some say that legitimate power is the least effective type of power.

Legitimate power can certainly be used as a back-up, and followers will generally respect it – on the surface. However, when legitimate power has to be used, it is often a last resort, such as in an emergency where the leader will be looked upon to make decisions quickly and without discussion. But most situations are not emergencies!

It is widely accepted that power does not have to be used to be effective; in fact, in most situations, power is more effective when it is *not* used. [Thomas Jefferson](#) once said: "I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us, that the less we use our power the greater it will be." I also like Gardner's point: "Power does not need to be exercised in order to have its effect – as any hold-up man can tell you." [2]

When leaders have referent power, the followers grant *them* the power, simply because they like, respect and trust them, and because they have built good relationships with them. In most situations, the most effective way of getting people to do things is to have them *want* to do it!

The principle: If you want to foster long-term and effective working relationships with your team, don't rely on legitimate power, but make the effort to build up referent power. It has its rewards!

[1] French, J.R.P., & Raven, B. 1959. "The bases of social power," in D. Cartwright (ed.) *Studies in Social Power*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

[2] Gardner, J.W. 1986. "The Tasks of Leadership." Leadership Paper No.2. Washington, D.C: Independent Sector.

Published by [Center for Public Policy & Administration](#)

Copyright © 2008 The University of Utah. All rights reserved.

The Center for Public Policy & Administration offers research, education and services to public and nonprofit organizations that will strengthen administration, leadership and public policy making.

Powered by [IMN](#)