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# Exercising Power in Organizations

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“Power is like fire. It can do useful things; it can be fun to play with and to watch, but it must be constantly guarded and trimmed back lest it burn and destroy. The proper attitude toward power is respect tinged with some suspicion.” (Winter, 1973, p. XBII)

The word power is a loaded word that often evokes a negative response in people who work in organizations. Power can be seen as a limited resource in organizations. As such, one organizational member either tries to hold on to his or her own power or tries to take it from others. Others see powerful people in organizations as corrupt or as people who play manipulative games. This playing of games in order to advance one’s own power is often termed organizational politics and many want nothing to do with it. To seek power even for sincere and honorable reasons, often puts the seeker in a value contradiction. McClelland pinpoints the dilemma, “It is a fine thing to be concerned about doing things well (achievement) or making friends (affiliation), but it is reprehensible to be concerned about having influence over others (power)” (McClelland, 1975, p. 255).

Historically negative images of power emphasize power over others: absolute control, domination, exploitation, coercion, manipulation, and directive power. The behavioral science vocabulary on power has historically supported this negative image, depicting powerful people as “harsh, sadistic, fascist, Machiavellian, prejudiced

and neurotic” (Adorno, 1950). We have in many ways avoided using power terms and use more acceptable humanistic characterizations such as leadership, maturity and achievement. With the rise of the women’s movement, the emphasis on participative management and employee involvement and the development of leaders, we have seen a more positive view of power terms. Josefowitz (1980) describes women’s use of power as “effectiveness”. Block (1987) discusses how “partnership” equalizes the balance of power and Bradford and Cohen (1998) describe “power-up” where everyone is a leader. The research of Sprier, Fontaine and Malloy (2006) builds on McClelland’s *socialized power motive*, finding that leaders who use styles characteristic of socialized power create strong and energizing work climates.

## Approaching Power

We have witnessed a sharp increase in interest as we are titillated and preoccupied with power. The literature on power has increased. Management seminars explore organizational power and leadership issues. The public expresses and engages in lively debates on local, national and international power and politics through demonstrations, talk radio, blogs and letters to the editor. Power, like fire, mesmerizes; it draws us to watch, to experience the heat, to be intrigued by its illusiveness and enhanced by its strength.

As we have read and discussed this topic, we have found there is profound

confusion about the definition of power and the potential of the use of power for good and positive results. In this article we begin by exploring others' definitions of power, we offer our definition of power, and then we discuss the authenticity of power and provide a model for use of power in organizations. We conclude

**Those who have the most power almost never talk about it and thus induce the rest of us not to recognize it either. We argue that for the use of power to be authentic, the structural or organizational resources of power need to be made explicit and named.**

with a discussion of the implications for organization consultants.

### What is Power?

Many of the definitions of power include the *ability* or *capacity* to achieve desired outcomes. Quinn, Faerman, Thompson and McGrath's (2003, p. 263) definition of power at the group level reads: "The ability to influence your peers through strength of expertise and experience, and the ability to build coalitions of those who share your views and goals" (p. 263). At the personal level their definition is: "Power can be seen as person A's capacity to influence person B's behavior so that B does something he or she would not do otherwise" (p. 263). Other definitions of power describe power as not only the ability to get the other to do something he or she would not otherwise do, but they also include the ability to prevent others from doing something they otherwise would do (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962).

In emphasizing capacity or ability, these definitions confuse power with the resources to exercise power. Resources contain the potential; power contains the actual utilization of a resource in motion to accomplish a given end. Morgan (1998) appears to separate power and resources. He defines power as "the medium through which conflicts of interest are ultimately resolved" (p. 162). And he lists 14 sources of power: formal authority, control of

scarce resources, use of organizational structure, rules and regulations, control of decision making processes, control of knowledge and information, control of boundaries, ability to cope with uncertainty, control of technology, interpersonal alliances, networks, and control of "informal organization", control

of counter organizations, symbolism and the management of meaning, gender and gender relations, structural factors that define the stage of action and the power one already has (p. 163).

Miller (2003) reviews structural power in organizations and society; she describes how one group has more resources and privileges and thus, has more capacity to *control* others. Those with fewer resources include demographic groups divided by race, class, gender, sexual preference and the like. The dominant group often holds more resources and thus greater power in the economic, social, political and cultural realms. She argues that structural power is hidden in our society. Those who have the most power almost never talk about it and thus induce the rest of us not to recognize it either. We argue that for the use of power to be authentic, the structural or organizational resources of power need to be made explicit and named. The approach by both Miller and Morgan suggests a distinction between power and the resources to actually exercise power. This distinction leads us to our definition.

### Definition of Power

We offer a definition of power in which power contains the utilization of a resource to accomplish desired ends. *Power is the self-conscious activity of making and actualizing decisions.* Power is the energy expended to realize intentions, it is the energy in the activities to get things done,

to make and implement decisions; the energy in the actions to accomplish the task. Power is action in motion. However, in our definition, power is not the ability or the potential as in Kanter's (1983, p. 213) definition: "the ability to produce; the capacity to mobilize people and resources to get things done".

We suggest that the ability and capacity of individuals really refers to the resources they possess to make and actualize decisions. In our definition, power is expended in the accomplishment of the desired end. Power is self-conscious decision making and the implementation of those decisions.

With this definition of power comes the realization that everybody has power, not just the lucky (or evil) few. With this definition, we affirm that power is essential to life and therefore essentially good. This contrasts with the definitions we have reviewed, and the traditional image of power as "power over"; definitions that negatively influence how we see hierarchy functioning in an organization. Those at the top of the pyramid are seen as having power over those at lower levels. This lens on power sees organizational life as a struggle for resources, career opportunities, visibility, influence and control. With this lens, one of the goals of lower level employees is to climb the ladder of the organization to obtain more perceived power.

Our definition rejects the notion that power is equated with domination and control or is inherently negative. Power in and of itself is good, however, the use of power can be negative (control, domination, coercion, force).

Now that we have defined power as the self-conscious activity of making and actualizing decisions, by what standards do we judge its use and abuse in organizations? To engage in such a discussion, leads one across the ages with theologians, moralists, philosophers, ethicists, social scientists, and policymakers who have wrestled with the ethical use of power. However, we believe we can use the concept of authenticity to assess the activities of power in a variety of societal and organizational contexts.

Chart 1: Activities of Power

| Authentic  |  | Inauthentic   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| ←  | ←  | →   | →  |
| Initiative   |  | Responsive  |  |
| <p><b>Using Spin</b><br/>Supplementing truth with self-serving distortions.</p>                              | <p><b>Influencing</b><br/>Using reason, arguments, true data and the relationship with others to direct the course of action</p>                 | <p><b>Offering</b><br/>Creating and exploring options, providing resources for others to implement their ideas.</p>                     | <p><b>Manipulation</b><br/>Rigging options by playing to the needs of others dishonestly.</p>                    |
| <p><b>Exploitation</b><br/>Deceiving others and taking more than one gives.</p>                              | <p><b>Negotiating</b><br/>Seeking a deal between relative equals which levels the playing field for each person's perceived benefit.</p>         | <p><b>Negotiating</b><br/>Supporting and being responsive to a proposal between relative equals to each person's perceived benefit.</p> | <p><b>Using Others</b><br/>Taking advantage of the others in a pseudo deal, which may look real but is not.</p>  |
| <p><b>Tyranny</b><br/>Demanding which is arbitrary, capricious, unfair, or without legitimate authority.</p> | <p><b>Insistence/Requiring</b><br/>Utilizing recognized and legitimate authority to persuade others to act in accordance with your position.</p> | <p><b>Resistance</b><br/>Refusing to participate or giving advice against a course of action that would violate authenticity.</p>       | <p><b>Revenge/Betrayal</b><br/>Transforming refusal into sabotage or deviously or unfairly punishing others.</p> |

### Authentic Uses of Power

The common definition of authenticity is being genuine, credible and trustworthy. At the foundation of this common definition lies the concept of being true to one's core values. In using it to define the ethical use of power, we expand authenticity beyond ourselves and include the relationship one has with the other(s) who is a stakeholder in the decision making. We suggest that to be authentic is to be both true to one's core values and to be open and engaged with others, by putting a high value on relationship building when exercising one's power. Authenticity, in this context has to do with how one engages in that relationship when actualizing decisions and making the connections with the other and the organization or society. Power never occurs in a vacuum, but always in a context. It is this contextual use of authenticity that needs further exploring to fill out the picture of the authentic use of power.

Harvey, Martinko & Gardner (2006) state that for a leader to be authentic, the ability to achieve psychologically close relationships with subordinates is important. Luthans and Aviola (2003) posit that future orientation and a focus on associate building in the values and behaviors of leaders are key to being authentic.

When discussing the authentic use

of power, Miller (2003) uses the term mutual empowerment to describe how both people in a relationship move to more effectiveness and the authentic use of power. Here, mutuality means joining together in a kind of relationship in which both (or all) parties are engaged, empathic and growing. Miller does acknowledge that there can be inequalities in the relationship due to age, experience, knowledge, etc. and states that the more *powerful person*, or the person with more resources, has the primary responsibility to develop the relationship.

Kernis (2003) supports our definition of authenticity with four basic dimensions of authenticity: self-awareness, unbiased processing of information, relational transparency, and authentic behavior (behavior that is aligned with one's values, needs and preferences). Expanding the concept of authenticity to include "unbiased processing of information" suggests that incoming information be interpreted in a fashion that considers the perspectives of others and is free from distortions, denials, or ignorance regarding private knowledge and external evaluations of the self (Harvey, Martinko & Gardner, 2006). This takes us back to self-awareness. Relational transparency is also supported by Harvey, Martinko and Gardner (2006) who believe that transparency furthers authenticity.

In conclusion, the definition of authentic use of power as we define it here requires self awareness, a quest for self understanding, behavior that is aligned with one's values, needs and preferences, balanced processing of information, transparency, personally and organizationally, and a focus on relationship building. What this means in practice is that a person who has access to resources such as those described by Morgan, and uses her or his power authentically will share information, access and resources, will act responsibly to process information in a balanced way, and will create mutually empowering relationships.

### How Power Gets Expressed (An Organizational Model)

We have defined power and discussed using the concept of authenticity to judge how it is used. Now, we move to a discussion of how power is expressed. We suggest that power can be expressed in two ways, *initiative power* and *responsive power*. Initiative power is expressed when one takes initiative to meet one's own goals and needs or overcome hurdles. It is a force against inertia; it is the call to action. Responsive power is expressed when one responds or refuses to respond to the needs of others. See *Chart 1*.

One could say that these expressions

are masculine and feminine. In organizations the masculine or initiative expression of power, is historically more valued than the feminine or responsive expression of power. The initiative expression of power involves influence, negotiating deals, utilizing persuasion and authority. The responsive expression of power focuses on offering support, providing resources, building relationships and empowering others. Both of these expressions of power can be done in an authentic and an inauthentic way. The authentic expression of initiative power as influence, negotiation or insistence and requiring can become distorted and inauthentic as using spin, exploitation or tyranny. The authentic expression of responsive power can be distorted and inauthentic as manipulation, using others, or revenge and betrayal. See *Chart 2* for examples of these two expressions of power in both authentic and inauthentic ways

### Implications for OD Consultants

The application of this model of power offers OD consultants an opportunity to assess the working theory of power in the client system: is power used to control and dominate or is it used to empower? Is the expression of power authentic or inauthentic? In many of our client systems, power is controlling, political and inauthentic. We often speak of our role as a consultant, as one who brings a presence that is missing in the organization or one who models the values and behaviors we believe will build more effective and rewarding work environments. Our modeling of authentic expressions of power as either internal or external consultants places us in the role of confronting, by our presence, the traditional hierarchical and controlling exercise of power. It also demonstrates what the alternative looks like and offers an attractive future possibility to the current state.

### Utilizing Initiative and Responsive Power

In the discussion of the consulting role, we have often contrasted the expert and the process consultant (Scott, 2000). The expert role provides opportunities for

the consultant to use initiative power by drawing on one’s own knowledge and skills to influence the client and address the client’s issues. The process role provides opportunities for the consultant to use more of a responsive role as s/he explores possibilities, offers perspectives and supports the client’s learning. Attending to the emotional, nonverbal and covert dynamics in the client system brings a view from the balcony and helps the client understand the often confusing undercurrents and hidden emotions in group dynamics. This responsive process role brings a valuable

presence that is often missing in the organization.

However, OD consultants both external and internal are expected to bring more than their presence, process and observation skills. They also bring technical competence, knowledge of theory, intervention methodology and expertise in individual and organizational change. Their exercise of this expertise is often expressed as initiative power. But the consultant’s use of power is more than using expertise to influence the client or serving as a process facilitator responsive to the affective dynamics in the organization.

Chart 2: Examples of the Activities of Initiative Power

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>INFLUENCING:</b>               | Using reason, arguments, true data and the relationship with others to direct the course of action.   |
| Example:                          | Utilizing factual information and analysis to obtain client’s agreement to proceed on a new project or initiative.<br><br>When influence is distorted and inauthentic, the expression moves toward “spin” . . .                         |
| <b>USING SPIN:</b>                | Supplementing truth with self-serving distortions.  |
| Example:                          | Using incomplete information or data slanted to give a biased or self-serving picture to support your proposed recommendation.  |
| <b>NEGOTIATING:</b>               | Seeking a deal between relative equals which levels the playing field for each person’s perceived benefit.  |
| Example:                          | Proposing processes to involve all relevant stakeholders in the decision process.<br><br>When negotiating is distorted and inauthentic, action becomes “exploitative” . . .   |
| <b>EXPLOITATION:</b>              | Deceiving others and taking more than one gives.  |
| Example:                          | Gaining a client’s agreement for an intervention by promising positive outcomes when your data suggests otherwise.  |
| <b>INSISTENCE/<br/>REQUIRING:</b> | Utilizing recognized and legitimate authority to persuade others to act in accordance with your position.   |
| Example:                          | Insisting that a client address a sensitive moral or legal issue as a basis for continuing your consulting contract.<br><br>When requiring or demanding is exercised with inauthentic or illegitimate means, it becomes “tyranny” . . . |
| <b>TYRANNY:</b>                   | Demanding which is arbitrary, capricious, unfair or without legitimate authority.   |
| Example:                          | Threatening a client with exposing sensitive or personal confidential information unless the client acts on your demands.   |

Again Block (1987) is helpful here. He uses the term entrepreneurial contract or spirit to describe positive political behavior or action taken in the name of service, contribution and creation. The entrepreneurial spirit requires us to be our own authority, to take responsibility for our own actions and to be in equal partnerships with others. It encourages expression of our own positions and to take actions that will have a positive impact on others, and, to take these actions with authenticity (p. 71). This suggests that the consultant's exercise of power moves back and forth between the authentic expression

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of initiative and responsive power whether the consultant's role is focused on the expert or process role.

We believe the role we model as consultants also requires us to continuously seek our own authentic

expression of power. In the authentic initiative power expression, we use *influence, negotiation or insistence* (see Chart 2). Examples include:

- » We utilize the data that we collect from the client system, our knowledge of human and organization behavior and the relationship we build to *influence* our clients' decisions.
- » As we partner with clients to plan an intervention, we *negotiate* ways to involve the relevant stakeholders in the process.
- » When we uncover sensitive moral or legal issues that have not been addressed, we may *insist* that the client addresses the issues as a condition of our involvement.

In the authentic responsive power expression, we use *offering, negotiation or resistance* (see Chart 3). Examples include:

- » We *offer* the client approaches and processes which support involvement and participation of employees.
- » We respond to a co-facilitator's proposal by *negotiating* how we will both manage the responsibility of the intervention.
- » We *resist* the pressure of a senior level client demanding information which was gathered with an agreement of confidentiality.

These authentic expressions of power require us to seek and continuously utilize the components of authenticity we outlined earlier: *self awareness, behavior aligned with our core values, balanced processing of information, transparency and connection and relationship building.*

- » *Self awareness* of our actions, intentions and defenses is critical in maintaining an authentic expression of our power especially when we are under stress, working with challenging people and

Chart 3: Examples of the Activities of Responsive Power

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>OFFERING:</b>            | Creating and exploring options and providing resources for others to implement their ideas.  |
| Example:                    | Offering processes and interventions which allow employees to express and implement their concerns and ideas.<br><br>When offering is distorted and inauthentic, it becomes "manipulative" . . . |
| <b>MANIPULATION:</b>        | Rigging options by playing to the needs of others dishonestly.   |
| Example:                    | Offering processes and interventions which you know will undermine the credibility of certain individuals/managers.  |
| <b>NEGOTIATING:</b>         | Supporting and being responsive to a proposal between relative equals to each person's perceived benefit.  |
| Example:                    | Responding to a co-facilitator's proposal on how you will both manage the responsibility of the intervention.<br><br>When negotiating is distorted and inauthentic, it becomes "using" . . .     |
| <b>USING:</b>               | Taking advantage of others in a pseudo deal which may look real but is not.  |
| Example:                    | Taking advantage of someone's mistaken credit for a successful intervention result that was not your own.  |
| <b>RESISTANCE:</b>          | Refusing to participate or giving advice against a course of action that would violate authenticity.   |
| Example:                    | Refusing to share confidential information about an employee when pressured by a senior manager.<br><br>When resistance becomes distorted or inauthentic, it becomes "revenge" . . .             |
| <b>REVENGE OR BETRAYAL:</b> | Transforming refusal into sabotage or deviously and unfairly punishing others.   |
| Example:                    | Refusing to share your information which contradicts a negative assessment of a difficult client whom you don't like.  |

assignments or building trusting relationships.

- » Both initiative and responsive expressions of power will be most effective with our clients when they see our *behavior aligned with our core values*. This congruent behavior demonstrates the positive alternatives to the controlling, manipulative or exploitive

concept of mutual empowerment describes how both parties in a relationship move to more effectiveness and authenticity. In relationships inequalities exist due to age, experience, knowledge or positional resources. Miller argues that the person who commands more resources in the situation has the responsibility to facilitate and develop the relationship.

**Block's perspective on how easily we succumb to the politics of the organization is also helpful here. We tend to be blind to our own political maneuvering, which he defines as acting in your own interest (since nobody else is going to do it). It entails protecting oneself based on the assumption that there are only limited resources and we each want our part of the pie. As consultants we must continuously seek the self understanding that uncovers our hidden adversarial attitudes or temptations to political manipulation which may trip us up in challenging and tense situations.**

uses of power in organizations.

- » When we seek to *balance the processing of information*, we can more easily influence and achieve agreements. As consultants, we collect data and information from our client systems by seeking to broaden and balance our perspective and expressing openness to differing views and opinions.
- » When we are consistent, clear, say what we mean and use language that describes reality we are being *transparent*. Such transparency contributes to our modeling positive expressions of power when we find hidden agendas and covert issues simmering under the surface.
- » The trust, partnership and confidence we seek from our clients is a result of our ability to focus on *connection and relationship building*. Our authentic focus on our client's needs, concerns and emotional state is the powerful initiative expression of offering our understanding and helping the client explore alternatives.

As we discussed earlier, Miller's (2003)

As consultants, we are bringing a unique positional role with knowledge resources of human and organizational behavior which can place us in a powerful position. Our ability to initiate, to develop the relationship, and to be responsive is the authentic expression of our power as consultants.

We believe that the success of our authentic expression of power requires that we continuously seek self mastery. James Tamm and Ronald Luyet (2004) state that "the ability to make effective choices and live an authentic life depends to a great extent on the capacity to be self-reflective" (p. 107). They place emphasis on especially knowing our attitudes, fears and defensiveness, because they argue that relationships under stress are often manifesting hidden, or unconscious, adversarial attitudes (p. 168).

Block's perspective (1987) on how easily we succumb to the politics of the organization is also helpful here. We tend to be blind to our own political maneuvering, which he defines as acting in your own interest (since nobody else is going to do it). It entails protecting

oneself based on the assumption that there are only limited resources and we each want our part of the pie (p. 10). As consultants we must continuously seek the self understanding that uncovers our hidden adversarial attitudes or temptations to political manipulation which may trip us up in challenging and tense situations. Block (1987) juxtaposes political maneuvering with his concept of "positive political action". This concept and the authentic use of power are related concepts requiring in our view intentional and continuous learning in order to seek self mastery in the authentic expression of power.

In this article we have explored the concept power and its use in organizations. We have provided a new definition of power, in which power is 'the self-conscious activity of making and actualizing decisions'. This definition creates a distinction between power and resources and provides us with a lens in which power is essential to life and essentially good. In this model, power is expressed as either initiative or responsive power utilizing the concept of authenticity to assess these expressions of power in organizations. The implications of this model of power for our work as OD consultants in organizations emphasize the importance of continuing to seek self mastery in it's authentic expression.

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