

13.2: Power in Interpersonal Relations

How do power bases work in organizational life?

In this chapter, we will examine various aspects of power and politics in organizations, beginning with the topic of power in interpersonal relations. Here, power is defined and distinguished from the related concepts of authority and leadership, and several bases of power and aspects of power dependency are discussed. Although these aspects of power also relate to group situations, they are more germane to interpersonal relations.

What Is Power?

Numerous definitions of power abound in the literature on organizations. One of the earliest was suggested by Max Weber, the noted German sociologist, who defined **power** as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance.” Similarly, Emerson wrote, “The power of actor A over actor B is the amount of resistance on the part of B which can be potentially overcome by A.” Following these and other definitions, we will define *power* for our purposes as an interpersonal relationship in which one individual (or group) has the ability to cause another individual (or group) to take an action that would not be taken otherwise.

In other words, power involves one person changing the behavior of another. It is important to note that in most organizational situations, we are talking about *implied* force to comply, not necessarily actual force. That is, person A has power over person B if person B believes that person A can, in fact, force person B to comply.

Power, Authority, and Leadership

Clearly, the concept of power is closely related to the concepts of authority and leadership (see Figure 13.2.1). In fact, power has been referred to by some as “informal authority,” whereas authority has been called “legitimate power.” However, these three concepts are not the same, and important differences among the three should be noted.

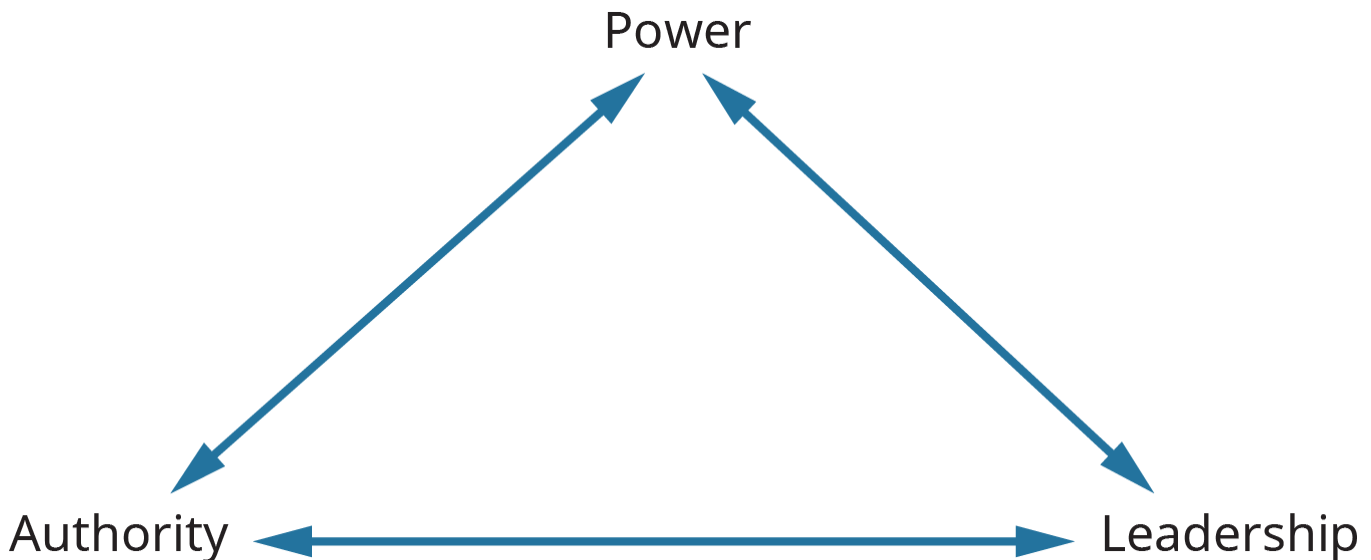


Figure 13.2.1 **Three Major Types of Influence** (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license)

As stated previously, power represents the capacity of one person or group to secure compliance from another person or group. Nothing is said here about the right to secure compliance—only the ability. In contrast, **authority** represents the right to seek compliance by others; the exercise of authority is backed by legitimacy. If a manager instructs a secretary to type certain letters, he presumably has the authority to make such a request. However, if the same manager asked the secretary to run personal errands, this would be outside the bounds of the legitimate exercise of authority. Although the secretary may still act on this request, the secretary’s compliance would be based on power or influence considerations, not authority.

Hence, the exercise of authority is based on group acceptance of someone’s right to exercise legitimate control. As Grimes notes, “What legitimates authority is the promotion or pursuit of collective goals that are associated with group consensus. The polar opposite, power, is the pursuit of individual or particularistic goals associated with group compliance.”

Finally, **leadership** is the ability of one individual to elicit responses from another person that go beyond required or mechanical compliance. It is this voluntary aspect of leadership that sets it apart from power and authority. Hence, we often differentiate between headship and leadership. A department head may have the right to require certain actions, whereas a leader has the ability to inspire certain actions. Although both functions may be served by the same individual, such is clearly not always the case.

Types of Power

If power is the ability to secure compliance by others, how is such power exercised? On what is it based? At least two efforts have been made to identify the bases of power. One model has been proposed by Etzioni, identifying three types of power. In fact, it is argued that organizations can be classified according to which of the three types of power is most prevalent. **Coercive power** involves forcing someone to comply with one's wishes. A prison organization is an example of a coercive organization. **Utilitarian power** is power based on performance-reward contingencies; for example, a person will comply with a supervisor in order to receive a pay raise or promotion. Business organizations are thought to be essentially utilitarian organizations. Finally, **normative power** rests on the beliefs of the members in the right of the organization to govern their behavior. An example here would be a religious organization.

Bases of Power

Although useful for comparative analysis of divergent organizations, this model may have limited applicability, because most business and public organizations rest largely on utilitarian power. Instead, a second model, developed by French and Raven, of the **bases of power** may be more helpful. French and Raven identified five primary ways in which power can be exerted in social situations.

Referent Power. In some cases, person *B* looks up to or admires person *A*, and, as a result, *B* follows *A* largely because of *A*'s personal qualities, characteristics, or reputation. In this case, *A* can use **referent power** to influence *B*. Referent power has also been called *charismatic power*, because allegiance is based on interpersonal attraction of one individual for another. Examples of referent power can be seen in advertising, where companies use celebrities to recommend their products; it is hoped that the star appeal of the person will rub off on the products. In work environments, junior managers often emulate senior managers and assume unnecessarily subservient roles more because of personal admiration than because of respect for authority.

Expert Power. **Expert power** is demonstrated when person *A* gains power because *A* has knowledge or expertise relevant to *B*. For instance, professors presumably have power in the classroom because of their mastery of a particular subject matter. Other examples of expert power can be seen in staff specialists in organizations (e.g., accountants, labor relations managers, management consultants, and corporate attorneys). In each case, the individual has credibility in a particular—and narrow—area as a result of experience and expertise, and this gives the individual power in that domain.

Legitimate Power. **Legitimate power** exists when person *B* submits to person *A* because *B* feels that *A* has a right to exert power in a certain domain. Legitimate power is really another name for authority, as explained earlier. A supervisor has a right, for instance, to assign work. Legitimate power differs from reward and coercive power in that it depends on the official position a person holds, and not on his or her relationship with others.

Legitimate power derives from three sources. First, prevailing cultural values can assign power to some group. In Japan and Korea, for instance, older employees derive power simply because of their age. Second, legitimate power can be attained as a result of the accepted social structure. For example, many Western European countries, as well as Japan, have royal families that serve as a cornerstone to their societies. Third, legitimate power may be designated, as in the case of a board of directors choosing a new company president or a person being promoted into a managerial position. Whatever the reason, people exercise legitimate power because subordinates assume they have a right to exercise it. A principal reason given for the downfall of the shah of Iran is that the people came to first question and then denounce his right to legitimate power.

Reward Power. **Reward power** exists when person *A* has power over person *B* because *A* controls rewards that *B* wants. These rewards can cover a wide array of possibilities, including pay raises, promotions, desirable job assignments, more responsibility, new equipment, and so forth. Research has indicated that reward power often leads to increased job performance as employees see a strong performance-reward contingency. However, in many organizations, supervisors and managers really do not control very many rewards. For example, salary and promotion among most blue-collar workers is based on a labor contract, not a performance appraisal.

Coercive Power. *Coercive power* is based primarily on fear. Here, person *A* has power over person *B* because *A* can administer some form of punishment to *B*. Thus, this kind of power is also referred to as punishment power. As Kipnis points out, coercive

power does not have to rest on the threat of violence. “Individuals exercise coercive power through a reliance upon physical strength, verbal facility, or the ability to grant or withhold emotional support from others. These bases provide the individual with the means to physically harm, bully, humiliate, or deny love to others.” Examples of coercive power in organizations include the ability (actual or implied) to fire or demote people, transfer them to undesirable jobs or locations, or strip them of valued perquisites. Indeed, it has been suggested that a good deal of organizational behavior (such as prompt attendance, looking busy, avoiding whistle-blowing) can be attributed to coercive, not reward, power. As Kipnis explains, “Of all the bases of power available to man, the power to hurt others is possibly the most often used, most often condemned and most difficult to control.”

Behavioral Consequences of Power

We have seen, then, that at least five bases of power can be identified. In each case, the power of the individual rests on a particular attribute of the power holder, the follower, or their relationship. In some cases (e.g., reward power), power rests in the superior; in others (e.g., referent power), power is given to the superior by the subordinate. In all cases, the exercise of power involves subtle and sometimes threatening interpersonal consequences for the parties involved. In fact, when power is exercised, employees have several ways in which to respond. These are shown in Figure 13.2.2

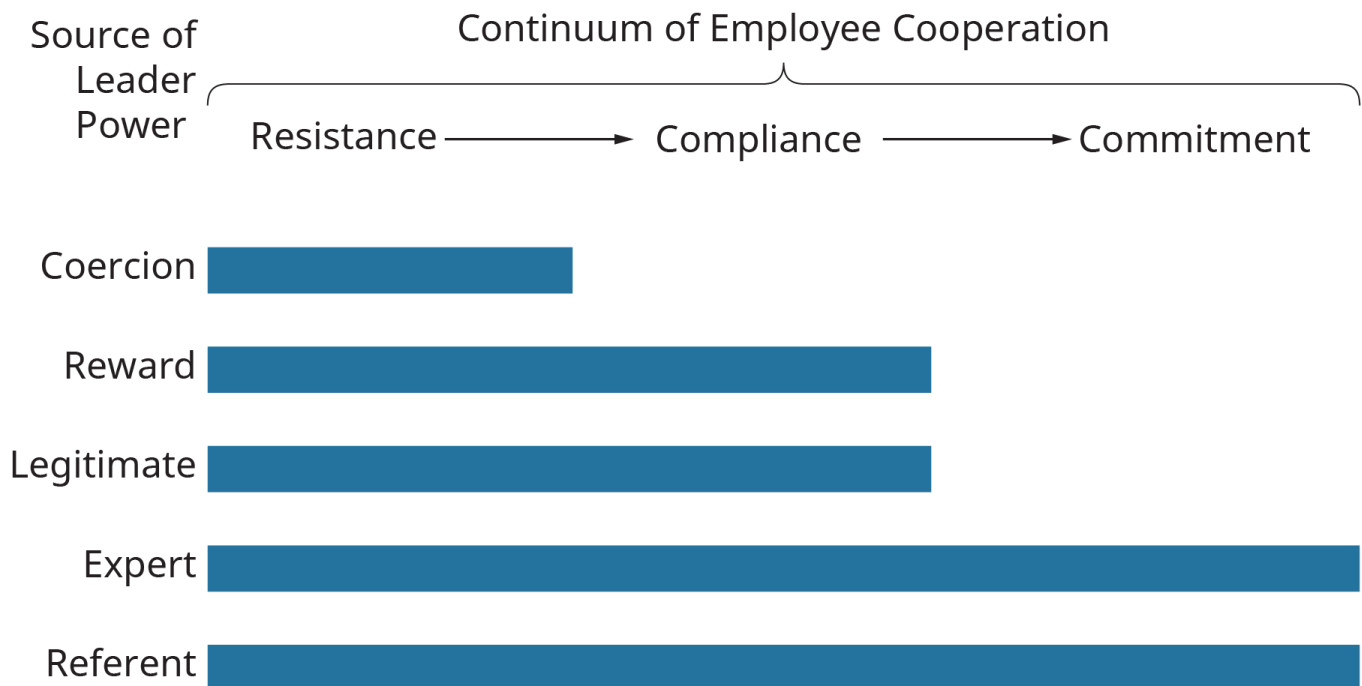


Figure 13.2.2 **Employee Reactions to Bases of Power** (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license)

If the subordinate accepts and identifies with the leader, his behavioral response will probably be one of *commitment*. That is, the subordinate will be motivated to follow the wishes of the leader. This is most likely to happen when the person in charge uses referent or expert power. Under these circumstances, the follower believes in the leader’s cause and will exert considerable energies to help the leader succeed.

A second possible response is *compliance*. This occurs most frequently when the subordinate feels the leader has either legitimate power or reward power. Under such circumstances, the follower will comply, either because it is perceived as a duty or because a reward is expected; but commitment or enthusiasm for the project is lacking. Finally, under conditions of coercive power, subordinates will more than likely use resistance. Here, the subordinate sees little reason—either altruistic or material—for cooperating and will often engage in a series of tactics to defeat the leader’s efforts.

Power Dependencies

In any situation involving power, at least two persons (or groups) can be identified: the person attempting to influence others and the target or targets of that influence. Until recently, attention focused almost exclusively on how people tried to influence others. Only recently has attention been given to how people try to nullify or moderate such influence attempts. In particular, we now

recognize that the extent to which influence attempts are successful is determined in large part by the **power dependencies** of those on the receiving end of the influence attempts. In other words, all people are not subject to (or dependent upon) the same bases of power. What causes some people to be more submissive or vulnerable to power attempts? At least three factors have been identified.

Subordinate's Values. To begin, person *B*'s values can influence his susceptibility to influence. For example, if the outcomes that *A* can influence are important to *B*, then *B* is more likely to be open to influence than if the outcomes were unimportant. Hence, if an employee places a high value on money and believes the supervisor actually controls pay raises, we would expect the employee to be highly susceptible to the supervisor's influence. We hear comments about how young people don't really want to work hard anymore. Perhaps a reason for this phenomenon is that some young people don't place a high value on those things (for example, money) that traditionally have been used to influence behavior. In other words, such complaints may really be saying that young people are more difficult to influence than they used to be.

Nature of Relationship Between *A* and *B*. In addition, the nature of the relationship between *A* and *B* can be a factor in power dependence. Are *A* and *B* peers or superior and subordinate? Is the job permanent or temporary? A person on a temporary job, for example, may feel less need to acquiesce, because he won't be holding the position for long. Moreover, if *A* and *B* are peers or good friends, the influence process is likely to be more delicate than if they are superior and subordinate.

Counterpower. Finally, a third factor to consider in power dependencies is **counterpower**. The concept of counterpower focuses on the extent to which *B* has other sources of power to buffer the effects of *A*'s power. For example, if *B* is unionized, the union's power may serve to negate *A*'s influence attempts. The use of counterpower can be clearly seen in a variety of situations where various coalitions attempt to bargain with one another and check the power of their opponents.

Figure 13.2.3 presents a rudimentary model that combines the concepts of bases of power with the notion of power dependencies. As can be seen, *A*'s bases of power interact with *B*'s extent of power dependency to determine *B*'s response to *A*'s influence attempt. If *A* has significant power and *B* is highly dependent, we would expect *B* to comply with *A*'s wishes.

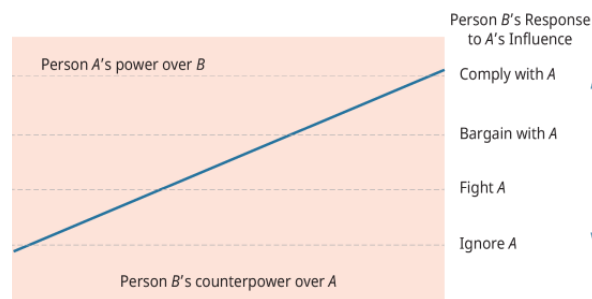


Figure 13.2.3 **Typical Response Patterns in Dyadic Power Relationships** (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license)

If *A* has more modest power over *B*, but *B* is still largely power dependent, *B* may try to bargain with *A*. Despite the fact that *B* would be bargaining from a point of weakness, this strategy may serve to protect *B*'s interests better than outright compliance. For instance, if your boss asked you to work overtime, you might attempt to strike a deal whereby you would get compensatory time off at a later date. If successful, although you would not have decreased your working hours, at least you would not have increased them. Where power distribution is more evenly divided, *B* may attempt to develop a cooperative working relationship with *A* in which both parties gain from the exchange. An example of this position is a labor contract negotiation where labor-management relations are characterized by a balance of power and a good working relationship.

If *B* has more power than *A*, *B* will more than likely reject *A*'s influence attempt. *B* may even become the aggressor and attempt to influence *A*. Finally, when *B* is not certain of the power relationships, he may simply try to ignore *A*'s efforts. In doing so, *B* will discover either that *A* does indeed have more power or that *A* cannot muster the power to be successful. A good illustration of this last strategy can be seen in some companies' responses to early governmental efforts to secure equal opportunities for minorities and women. These companies simply ignored governmental efforts until new regulations forced compliance.

Administrative Assistants: The Power Behind the Throne

It is relatively easy to see the power of managers. They often have the ability to hire and fire, make important decisions, sign contracts, spend money, and so forth. They are, in fact, powerful entities within a corporation. What may be less apparent, however, is the power that managers' executive or administrative assistants (EA) often have. In fact, if you want to discover just how powerful secretaries are, think of what would happen if they were not there. Most paperwork would not get done, many important decisions would not be made, and the organization would eventually grind to a halt.

The EA is intertwined with a very important piece of privileged information and requires the person to be highly detail oriented and have incredible soft skills and to be more than just technologically savvy. Many tech companies are paying top dollar to procure the right person for the job. Base salaries for executive assistants in the Bay area have been reportedly starting at \$80–100K base.

Highly skilled EAs have become increasingly hard to recruit and retain, causing their power to increase. Despite the salary, there is often a negative connotation with the role of “assistant.” “There's definitely a stigma” about the title, says 32-year-old Shana Larson, one of four EAs at Pinterest, the San Francisco visual discovery company. But for Shana, who holds a master's degree from the University of Southern California, after the initial transition period, she felt that it was the best career decision to make—a long-term career with growth opportunities.

EAs represent a true example of counterpower within the organization. Yes, their bosses have power over them; but at the same time, they have considerable power over their bosses. Secretaries—the word is derived from the Latin word meaning “keeper of secrets”—are often privy to considerable confidential information. They routinely handle private calls, correspondence, and reports. They often serve as the manager's sounding board for new ideas, and they more than likely know how the boss feels about coworkers and superiors. This knowledge, along with stereotypes, stigmas, and increased scarcity, gives high-quality EAs considerable leverage in dealing with their bosses and their organizations.

Questions:

1. As a new manager who receives an assistant, what are important considerations to consider when starting in the role?
2. What other stigmas or stereotypes can occur with support roles in the workplace? How does this affect your personal feelings about taking a support role for a company in the future?
3. Why is it important for CEOs and other organizational powers to understand the innate power of an administrative assistant as part of the holistic picture to understand the company environment as a whole?

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concept check

1. Define what Power is.
2. What are the components that constitute power in organizations?

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