

# Power Paradox

*You gain by giving it away.*



by Andrea Chilcote and Susan Reece

**P**OWER IS A FASCINATING CONCEPT. Babies experience power related to obtaining nourishment and comfort; adults recognize how power affects their jobs, lifestyle and relationships. Many of us strive to attain and maintain power in balance. If we feel powerless, we feel victimized. If we believe our power is too strong, we feel enormous stress to perform flawlessly. Sometimes, giving away power means you get more. Sometimes delineating your power boundaries is necessary for survival. That's why power is paradoxical—its outcomes are counterintuitive to the inputs.

*We often wonder why we get so much of what we don't want and not enough of what we wish for in personal and professional relationships.* The law of attraction suggests a principle of cause and effect—that we influence our own reality and the responses we receive from those around us.

This principle is also analogous to a law of human behavior—in healthy relationships, *we gain power when we give it away.*

*Giving power away* means knowing your worth and boundaries while understanding and valuing the same in others. Such power-sharing enables all involved to give the best they have to offer to the endeavor or relationship. Acknowledging the opinions, stance or position of others does not disempower you. Surprisingly, it gives you more power because it opens others to you. So, being open to the point of view of another or empowering them builds your power base. *By advocating for another, you gain power.*

Power's paradoxical pattern holds the secret to one of the most potent skills for creating influence through communication. Power may be attained by exhibiting superior expertise, coercion through real or implied threats, legitimately awarded power to make decisions, epitomizing the

values of a group, or social power gained by influence.

*Influence, in turn, hinges on trust.* We often think that influential leaders are born with a certain charisma. This influence that we call *charisma* reflects a set of behaviors. Charismatic leaders articulate their views honestly while acknowledging the apparent and underlying concerns of others. They maintain their values and boundaries, even as they validate others'. Masterful communication skills underlie influential power.

One potent skill-set for creating influence involves aligning with the perspectives, needs, and styles of others. This helps you get what you want and need in life. It's a bit counterintuitive, since we think influence means



pitching, touting or forcing our position when that usually alienates and produces defensiveness. Even Machiavelli warns of the dangers of such actions, admonishing princes not to be "hated." True power is ours when we clearly acknowledge the reality of a situation, remain grounded in our values, and align with the reality of a situation. This paradox can be the mantra for success.

*So, power begins with and is retained by knowing yourself and understanding the position of relevant others.* Reflect upon your ability to listen objectively to points of view different from your own. If you struggle with this, you likely skip an essential step in creating openness in others to hear your point of view or see the world as you do. A key step in mastering your personal power is demonstrating understanding. As you show a willingness to listen, others are more likely to listen to you. It's really that simple.

Do you struggle to connect with or

engage certain people or personalities? People feel more comfortable with and are more trusting of those who act, speak, and view the world as they do. Referent power is possible when you are with others like you, and it alienates others who think differently—unless they believe that you connect at some level with their points of view in a genuine way. So how can you create rapport—that "connection" that means two-way dialogue is free-flowing and candid—when you disagree with the perspective being expressed?

First determine whether influencing the other person matters to you. Sometimes managers think they can impose a way of doing things. Then, they find that source of power is short-lived. If you believe that your ability to influence arises from your position of authority, you might not deem rapport to be essential. Parents who wield coercive power are often startled at the behavior of their teenagers when they are away from parental oversight.

*Influence with or without formal authority is essential today.* If cross-functional collaboration or internal consulting is valued in your work, you appreciate the power resulting from building strong rapport. If engagement is valued, you recognize that engagement results from a strong connection with the immediate manager. Since engagement predicts productivity and retention of high performers, it is seen as a product of powerful leadership.

Some leaders are unaware of the vital role influencing through rapport and communication plays in increasing their power. Consider these questions: Do you sometimes later learn that what was said to you was not the whole story? Do you ever think you gained buy-in to an idea or plan, then find others pursuing their own direction? If these ring true, you need to find ways to build such rapport that the whole story, including obstacles and objections, are out on the table.

Consider the manager who's told that she is too directive and listens poorly—and these issues could derail her career. Colleagues don't cooperate, employees on her team complain they do not trust her. Seldom is she given specific examples, and rarely is given concrete tools for improvement. As a result, she is reticent to lead, another derailer.

*Aligning with and engaging others must co-exist with decisive leadership.* Powerful leaders gain diverse input, then act decisively; exhibit style flexibility, yet are grounded in self-awareness; and advocate their point of view

while making it safe for others to disagree. These leaders are viewed as easy to work with and relate to, and they have the keen ability to influence.

In business conversations, the goal is not to dominate or win, but to be heard and to shape the direction. One effective way to do that is to welcome, rather than oppose, conflicting or differing points of view. This principle is well illustrated in *Aikido*, the Japanese art of self-defense that employs the principles of nonresistance in order to debilitate the strength of the opponent. The strategy is to blend or align with the attacker's energy. Aikido is non-aggressive, but not passive. It requires that the practitioner relax and flow with the opposing energy and thus control the direction of the conflict.

Consultative selling is premised similarly. To be considered credible, the sales rep must align with the needs, issues, and style of the client by seeking first to understand before offering solutions. The process may feel like the client has the power, when in fact the power comes from the alignment. If needs are openly and clearly defined, the solution either matches or it does not.

***Unless power is coercive, power and influence require flexibility and adaptability.*** In systems theory, *The Law of Requisite Variety* states that the most flexible entity is the one that controls the system. One example in nature is the proliferation of coyotes. They can live anywhere and eat just about anything. They live in arid deserts, cold mountain climates, cities and suburbs. They can eat plants, garbage, or other animals. In many ecosystems, they are at the top of the food chain.

Great leaders understand the complexities and inter-relationships among disciplines, personalities, and points of view. The leader's magic is in orchestrating the diversity in an adaptive way as opportunities and threats change.

***Great leaders courageously leverage the dynamics of power to move people in unified ways that perpetuate success.*** We urge you to learn and adopt the most sustainable approaches to power. Sheer force may produce short-term gain, but mastery of genuine listening, appropriate involvement, and skillful alignment will yield a level of influence that produces productive and loyal advocates. LE

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**ACTION: Experience the power paradox.**

**Leadership Excellence**