

The Straight Talk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

Empower, Align and Inspire: Using Power Tools Effectively

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What influence tools are in your leadership toolbox? If position, process and personal power are not present and among the tools most often used, you are likely overlooking valuable strategies for empowering, aligning and inspiring others.

In our experience, many leaders often rely disproportionately on only one or two of these “power tools.” This is unfortunate, because position, process and personal power are all vital elements of capable leadership. Leaders who are content to “manage and do” may find a limited range of power tools adequate, but becoming an effective leader and teacher (see “Leading and Teaching vs. Managing and Doing,” Volume 3, Issue 2) means developing facility with all of them.

Yet just as a chainsaw can lop off an arm as easily as a tree limb, leadership power tools offer ample potential for abuse. Understanding position, process and personal power, and how to use each to empower – instead of overpower – offers leaders significant leverage for building sustained value.

Position Power: The Empowerment Tool

Position power is the tool leaders most readily recognize, use and abuse.

That is partly because it is tempting to rely on the authority inherent in one’s title to “make” subordinates follow directions by using carrots and sticks such as promotions, raises, performance ratings or even access to the leader.

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However, exclusive use of position power is rarely successful long-term. People usually comply with position-based directives, but they are unlikely to fully engage in implementing them. A more productive use of position power is ensuring that incentives and consequences are balanced, appropriate and consistently applied for both intrinsic and extrinsic impact.

Extrinsic reward systems such as pay and promotion can indeed encourage certain behaviors and discourage oth-

ers, but a leader is responsible for making sure these systems are designed and managed to reward behavior consistent with the organization’s values. He must also faithfully adhere to the systems. Each time a leader compromises them – for example, rewarding inadequate performance because of a friendship – the leader creates a significant ethical breach that erodes his credibility.

Intrinsic rewards such as a thank you or recognition use position power effectively because they enhance people’s engagement in their individual, team and organizational achievement. Providing intrinsic rewards can be as simple as replacing the common predisposition to admonish someone you catch doing something wrong with praising someone you catch doing something right. For example, try praising an idea that represents an entirely novel approach to a problem. Or ask staff you usually dismiss as uninformed to contribute suggestions for improving services, products or processes.

Process Power: The Alignment Tool

Process power should be used to provide structures that align people around a clearly defined strategy –

bringing them together to work on one agenda, move in one direction and achieve shared goals.

Effective process power works from the outside in, appropriately organizing and adjusting internal structures to leverage external realities. For example, recognize that the process by which you and the leadership team establish the organization's mission, strategy, goals and plans sets the tone for the rest of the organization.

Using process power appropriately allows an organization to understand what needs to be accomplished and how to accomplish it. By establishing procedures to navigate the organization, provide growth opportunities, build on successful platforms and maximize return on resources, process power can foster innovation, as well as individual and team growth. It also offers great potential for teaching, when well-defined planning, decision-making and communication processes foster an organization's ability to scrutinize failures and leverage successes.

Common pitfalls include both over-relying and under-relying on process power. Leaders who over-rely tend to create "over-processed" organizations with restrictive structures that stifle creativity, growth, innovation and learning. Leaders who fail to establish enough structure create "under-processed" cultures that lack distinct steps for communicating information, surfacing issues or even clearly defining individuals' and teams' scope of responsibility.

Leaders are charged with using process power to establish systems that encourage and reward the organization for taking business risks appropriate to its strategy. For example, organizations pursuing Build and Invent strategies require higher levels of innovation – and thus, risk – to achieve their objectives than do organizations focused on doing Business as Usual.

Personal Power: The Inspiration Tool

Personal power is a leader's strongest tool for mobilizing the team and creating a positive legacy. Many leaders shy away from it because they are not naturally inclined to inspire or motivate. However, personal power relies on behavior every leader can learn and enhance – emotion, intelligence, knowledge, consideration and values.

The emotional element of personal power means generating enthusiasm and energizing others by becoming more of a champion than a critic. Most people seem programmed to look for and address what is wrong, but every leader can become a champion by looking for and reinforcing what is right.

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Personal power's intellectual component requires stimulating others to think more broadly and deeply about issues, and approach opportunities more creatively. But be careful, because intellect is the most over-relied-upon element of personal power. Leaders whose only personal power is their intelligence may stifle debate and creativity by trying to provide all the answers themselves.

Knowledge is a key aspect of personal power. An effective leader must demonstrate mastery of product, process, function and/or industry, which allows her to engage others by sharing expertise and applying it to create value through-

out the organization. In fact, lifelong learning is a fundamental requirement for every leader. A leader who stops learning loses the ability to teach and foster a spirit of constant learning in his organization – which impairs his and the organization's ability to move and stay ahead of the competition.

In addition, influencing through personal power also includes considering each individual, recognizing what motivates her and adapting your approach accordingly. Many leaders find this difficult and understandably believe their roles mean that others should adjust to them. Counteract this attitude by accepting that it is an “and” world. Building a culture of mutual respect and trust, and one that encourages people to invest in each other's accomplishments is a significant success strategy. Subordinating your ego and learning how to motivate each individual can pay off exponentially in encouraging individuals and maximizing their contributions.

Above all, the strength of your personal power tool depends on your ability to exhibit integrity, trustworthiness, dedication, discipline, selflessness and commitment to the organization's values. The extent to which you visibly demonstrate these attributes adds immeasurably to your credibility and influence.

Leaders have many tools in their toolboxes, but position, process and personal power are among the most influential and overlooked. Leaders who learn to recognize, integrate and effectively apply these valuable tools will have significantly greater ability to empower, align and inspire their organizations to forge ahead of the competition. Ultimately, leaders who learn to use power tools in a balanced and productive way will be significantly better at guiding their organizations to create value – and sustain it for competitive advantage. **HK**

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