

A Common Leadership Challenge

Balancing Positional Power and Personal Power

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Let's assume that "Marilyn," a member of your team, is doing something that you disapprove. You've observed this behavior before from Marilyn when others were in charge. Because others had the position of authority, you didn't say or do anything. But now you are the person who has the positional authority. Your perception of Marilyn's motivation and behavior causes you to feel angry with Marilyn. You decide to put a stop to her actions, using your positional authority. You could do this in several ways. You choose to telephone Marilyn's supervisor and tell him to tell Marilyn to cease that behavior forthwith. No explanations, no fact-finding, no listening. You just shut her down. End of story. That is an example of misusing positional power.

The problem is that the result of such actions is not the end of the story but strained or broken human relations, further misunderstanding, and resentment on the part of Marilyn and possibly her supervisor; resentment that can grow or fester like an infected wound.

How could this situation have been better handled with personal power? Imagine this scenario. You are concerned with Marilyn's behavior. You think you know what is motivating her actions. However, you don't want to shut her down in case you have misread the situation. So you call her supervisor, explain your concern, and ask him for an explanation. If the situation demands it, you meet with both the supervisor and Marilyn. Each person has an opportunity to communicate. Now you make a decision that takes the facts and feelings of the players into account but does not bend your principles or the policies of your organization. That is an example of using personal power.

Positional power is the authority you receive from the office or position to which you are appointed or elected. Personal power is the authority you command as a result of who you are as a person.

The interesting thing here is that when personal power is used wisely, it increases your positional power. When positional power is used wisely, it increases your personal power. However, when either one of them is used improperly, it reduces both your personal authority and positional authority.

Is positional power never to be used? Of course not. There are occasions when positional power should be used. Ceremonial occasions almost always call on the use of positional power. Examples are the opening of the parliament, the seating protocol at a conference or convention, and the chairing of certain committees by people who are appointed or elected to office. There are other occasions when positional power should be utilized. Examples are: when you are chairing a meeting, ruling someone out of order at a meeting when that person is out of order; making decisions that you need to make because of your position, and not passing the buck; taking the initiative to consult with other leaders to fashion a compelling vision for your organization and its members and selling that vision with all your heart and soul. These are all wise uses of positional power. But positional power has its limits. This is especially true when you lead volunteers.

Leadership is defined by followership. If no one wants to follow you, you don't have anyone to lead. If you don't have anyone to lead, you are only a potential leader, not a practicing leader.

Volunteers, unlike paid employees, have the luxury of deciding whether to follow you or not. They are far more influenced by your personal power than by your positional power. However, even in paid situations, if you abuse the positional power you have been given, those who are supposed to follow you will vote with their feet and leave your organization.

A question that we all have to grapple with is, "How do I know when to use positional power and when to use personal power?" There are some black and white areas and there are some gray areas. Black and white or clear-cut areas are occasions where it is obvious that due to your position, you need to assert the power of your position. I have cited some occasions above. Gray areas are those murky situations where you could go either way. In such situations, there is no sure-fire formula to follow. Great leaders seem to listen to their inner voice or "better judgment" before they call the shots.

Here is a generalization of an observation I have made about leaders. The balance of positional power and personal power a leader exerts depends on a complex mix of his or her self-esteem, confidence, values, assessment of the respect received by others, the particular situation and people involved, and preferred behavioral style.

One of my favorite stories about Abraham Lincoln centers around his humility and his ability to make these "better judgment" calls. During the Civil War, President Lincoln and his Secretary of State needed to consult with a general. They walked to his house at night only to find that the general was not expected for a little while longer. They decided to wait. An hour or so later, a servant came to them with a message from the general. The message was that the general was too weary for a meeting, that he had retired for the night, and that he would meet with President Lincoln another time. Lincoln's Secretary of State was livid upon hearing this lack of respect for the President. President Lincoln thought for a moment, decided that they should leave the general alone, and left the premises without once raising his voice. Keep in mind that this is the same President who did not refrain from using his positional authority to remove ineffective generals from leadership of the Union Army.

Leadership is a learned art. One of the best ways to learn this art is to study the lives of great leaders. Observe them. Talk with them. Read about them. Then inculcate the skills of decision making that your role models exemplify. With experience and reflection, we can all improve our judicious use of positional and personal power. Not only will we gain greater satisfaction, but those we lead will also benefit from the results of better leadership and job satisfaction.

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