

Dependent, independent and interdependent relationships of power

The three broad phases of individual development described in Chapter Two were characterised as *dependent*, *independent* and *interdependent*. These also describe different relationships of power of people to each other in different phases of life.

When I am *dependent* on you (e.g. for your leadership) then you have power over me (which could be a helpful thing or not). At some point I may start to want to move beyond this dependence, perhaps to develop and express my own leadership, to become more *independent*. When I become more independent it signifies that I have found more power within myself to stand alone. Over time, standing on my own two feet, I may gain the confidence and the ability to relate to you in a more *interdependent* way where power becomes more mutual or shared.

Keeping this in mind can be very helpful for a leader or facilitator. Often in the early phase of a relationship the people or organisations we are working with can feel dependent on us, for guidance, support, access to resources, etc. If our purpose is to be empowering we will want to help people, over time, to become more independent of us, more self-supporting and self-reliant. Quite often we will know this is happening when they start to challenge or criticise us!

“Quite often we know that people are becoming empowered when they start to challenge or criticise us!”

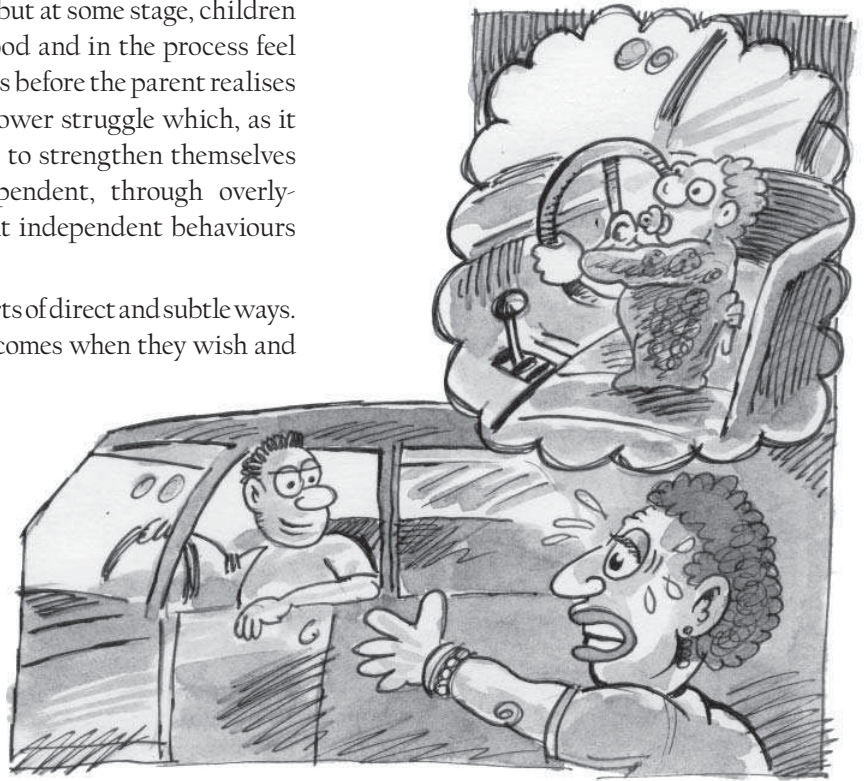
This may mean that we have to pull back, giving people space to work with their newly emerging power, to make their own mistakes and learn from them. Should we challenge them to test and strengthen their power? Should we help them to learn when they make mistakes or should we let them find their own way? There are no easy answers to these questions, because it depends on the situation, each requiring a different judgement. But asking these questions is good.



IS DEPENDENCE A BAD THING?

Is dependence a bad thing? Well, yes and no. Young children are very dependent on their parents. This phase of dependence can be a wonderful process of learning and teaching, but at some stage, children start to grow up and move towards adulthood and in the process feel the need to move beyond dependence, perhaps before the parent realises it. This movement is often something of a power struggle which, as it becomes resolved, helps children to mature, to strengthen themselves towards adulthood. Keeping children dependent, through overly-mothering and not allowing them to exhibit independent behaviours as they grow up, is not healthy.

Followers are dependent on leaders in all sorts of direct and subtle ways. This may be perfectly healthy until the time comes when they wish and are ready to take more leadership responsibility and power, to shift their relationships to others. Again this often happens with a power struggle, even a crisis, which, if handled well, can also be a healthy process, a testing time to see if people really are ready to take on new roles. Organisations moving from one phase of development to another usually go through these relationship struggles e.g. from dependence on the founder/pioneer to more independent and distributed leadership. This is covered in more depth in Chapter 4.



A word on Victim Power

People who perceive themselves to be unfairly disempowered or marginalised often resort to “victim power”. Common examples are: the sulky teenager who mopes around trying to get his parents to feel guilty about some limits they have imposed; or poor communities who overstate their poverty and helplessness in order to extract more resources from outsiders; or employees who continually complain about how stressed and tired they are to get attention and sympathy or to deflect criticism of their work. In each case the “victim” uses indirect or hidden power to stimulate guilt or fear in order to influence the situation in their favour. Their cause may or may not be justified but because it is covert, and easy to deny if confronted, it requires skilful responses by those on the receiving end. People who use victim power are themselves often unaware of other available ways to deal with their situation, in other words, of other powers they may possess.

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QUESTIONS TO WORK WITH

- Where in our lives have we experienced healthy and unhealthy dependent relationships?
- How have we responded to them?
- Do we struggle to talk about power? Why? What can we do to open conversations about power?
- What personal or organisational challenges do we have in seeing and working with power in a helpful way?