

Types of power

There are many ways of seeing power. This is a popular model and connects well with the phases of individual development. In each case the type of power is held in relationship, either over or with others, or with oneself.



POWER OVER

POWER OVER (dependent power)

Using or exercising one's influence over something or someone. This is how most people see power, and why they don't want to talk about it. But a sculptor exercises power over her medium. The guitarist demonstrates power over his instrument. A mechanic exhibits power over an engine. These are examples of using power over inanimate objects, all positive. Many people use their influence over others for the greater good: Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Theresa, to name a few.

It is when people abuse power over other people that we see power in a negative light. Power over is not, by definition, bad. Power over only becomes destructive if one is using power irresponsibly, depriving others of meeting their basic needs.

In its destructive form power over is taken as exclusive, conflictual and competitive where the way of getting it is to grab it from someone else or to prevent someone else from exercising their power. Here, power over perpetuates inequality, injustice and poverty. Most often this form of power is exercised when people win exclusive power, when they take power. We even see this happening when people from marginalized communities take power in some way, sometimes adopting the same powerful behaviours as those from whom they have taken power.



POWER WITHIN

POWER WITHIN (independent power)

This kind of power is obtained when developing the inner knowledge, skills and confidence that increase the quality of our lives. Gaining power within includes learning, achieving success, and enjoying the feeling of self-worth that comes with personal growth. Something innate in human beings drives us to set goals, to achieve them, to improve upon what others have done before us, and creatively adapt to new situations – the need for power within. In Chapter One we spoke about development as “as a natural process, an inner power, that we need to read, respect and work with.”



POWER WITH

POWER WITH (interdependent power)

Achieved when working cooperatively with others. This is also the power of human solidarity, of collective struggles for human rights, and creative collaborations. It is the place where the need for power and the need for love and belonging intersect. If you think of the great achievements of the human race, they all resulted from humans working together or building on the achievements of those who came before them. Power with has to do with finding common ground among different interests and building collective strength.

Healthy organisations and collaboration are an expression of this power as are community struggles and social movements, when they use the unity gained from “power with” in order to counter abusive “power over”.