

Five bases of power

Social psychologists French and Raven, in a now-classic study (1959), developed a schema of five bases of power which reflect the different bases or resources that power holders rely upon in their relationships with others. Often our power is based on different combinations of these.



Positional Power – this is the formal authority people get from their position in an organisation or society, often backed by policy or law. This is one form of *power over*.



Reward Power – this power depends upon the ability of the power wielder to give valued material rewards, such as money, benefits, time off, desired gifts, promotions or increases in pay or responsibility. In the development sector, this power is particularly held by donors and other intermediaries who distribute funding. It is also *power over*. Some donors who dispense funding do so out of a spirit of solidarity and deep humanity and are uneasy with this power, preferring to develop partnerships based on *power with*. There is a tension in here that has not been resolved in the development world, yet is seldom discussed between the givers and receivers of funding.



Personal Power – the power or ability of people to attract others, to build strong interpersonal relationships, to persuade and build loyalty. This is based on the charisma and interpersonal skills of the power holder. This is an example of *power within*, but it can be used as *power over*. Where the world is becoming more democratic, relying less on positional power and more on consensus, this form of power becomes all the more significant, requiring a deeper focus on individual empowerment.



Expert Power – the power people derive from their skills, knowledge and experience and the organisation's need for those skills and expertise. Unlike the others, this type of power is usually highly specific and limited to the particular area in which the expert is trained and qualified. Being well-informed and up-to-date with useful information is part of this power. This is also an example of *power within* but it can be used as *power over* (positively or negatively) especially where expert skills and knowledge are perceived to be desperately needed.



Coercive Power – this is the application of negative, fear-based influence on others. It might be based on any of the above power or even physical strength to ensure the obedience of those under power. Coercive power tends to be the most obvious but least effective form of power as it builds resentment and resistance. A covert form of coercive power is the power of victims to use guilt to influence situations in their favour.

QUESTIONS TO WORK WITH

- What kinds of power do I use and rely on in different relationships in my life?
- What kinds of power do others use over or with me?
- What kinds of power are used in the relationships that govern the organisation?
- What kinds of power do we want to use in different situations in the future?