



RUBES TELLS ANOTHER ONE...

I remember an incident which happened to me as a young student teacher on day one of my first practice teaching assignment at a high school in Cape Town.

After an initial orientation meeting with the principal, I proceeded to the staff room. It was shortly before the bell would ring for the first interval of the day. The room was empty. Without thinking much I sat on a comfortable couch situated on the window side of the room. The staff room was soon abuzz filling up with teachers, but at the same time I also started to feel a growing sense of unease. Someone sat next to me but barely greeted me, another gave me a cold stare. It soon occurred to me that I might be sitting on the favourite spot of one of the more senior teachers at the school. So I promptly got up, apologised and found a hard chair in a more remote part of the room.

I had done some research on the school before my arrival. I had listened very attentively to the principal during the orientation meeting, but this important “rule” had not been communicated. It was not in any rule book, or prospectus and no checklist would have revealed its existence.

“It hadn’t occurred to me that I might be sitting in someone’s favourite chair.”



Power, relationships and change

If development does not lead to a change in the nature and quality of relationships between people, then it is unlikely that any real development has taken place. If as leaders or facilitators we are not interested in working with relationships, with all their difficulties and complexities, then we risk becoming mere technicians.

This is especially true because power lives in relationship. More often than not development is hampered or stuck because of those power relationships which prevent cooperation, which oppress, stress and limit the potential of people. *Therefore if we want to see shifts or transformation of power we have to help to transform relationships.*

There is no one ideal relationship of power. Different situations demand different kinds of power (see below) and as things change so too should relationships and power change, to meet the new situation.

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Dependent, independent and interdependent relationships of power

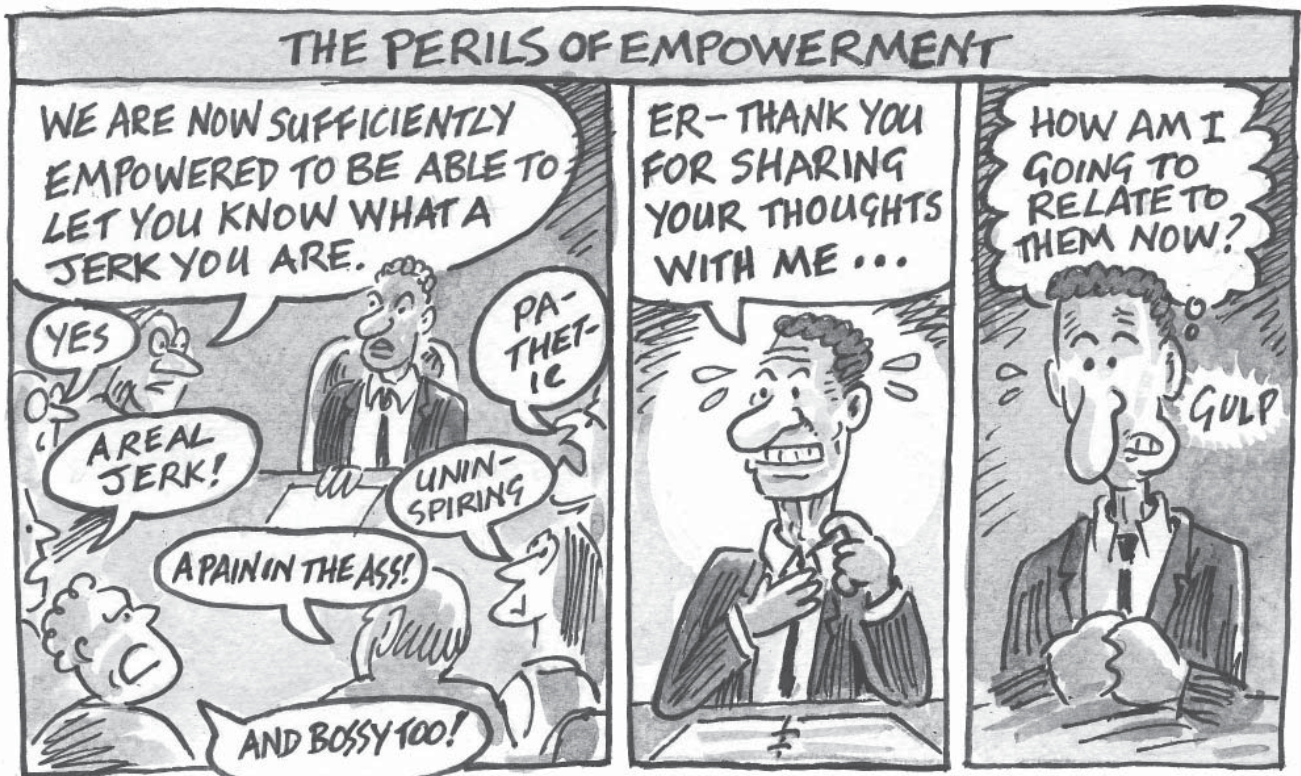
The three broad phases of individual development described in Chapter Two were characterised as *dependent*, *independent* and *interdependent*. These also describe different relationships of power of people to each other in different phases of life.

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!”

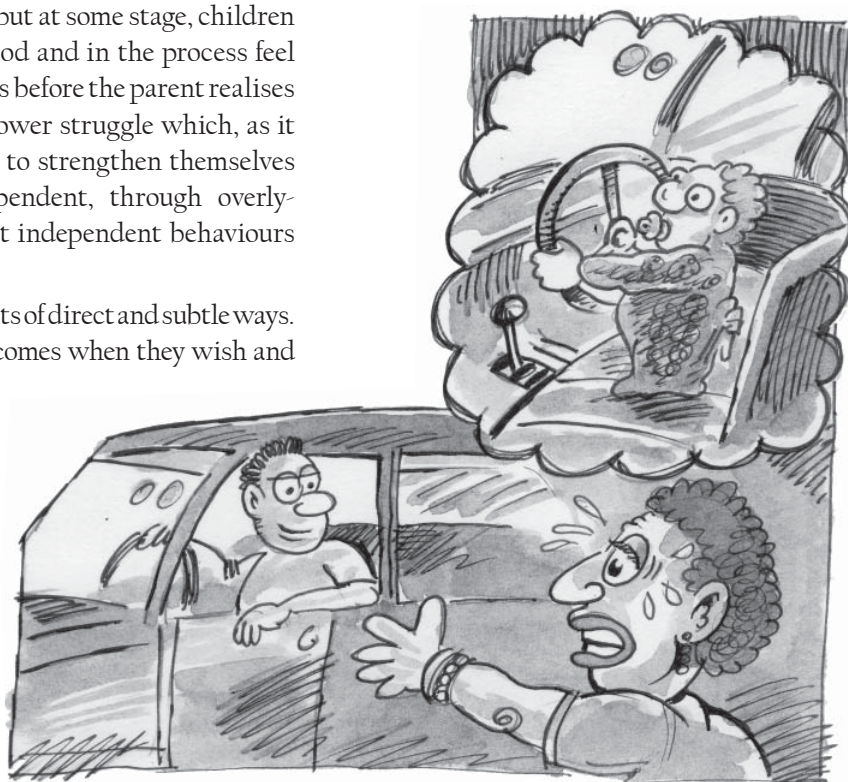
This may mean that we have to pull back, giving people space to work with their newly emerging power, to make their own mistakes and learn from them. Should we challenge them to test and strengthen their power? Should we help them to learn when they make mistakes or should we let them find their own 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 over-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?



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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 WITHIN



POWER WITH

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 (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 (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”.

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 disperse 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?

Why is it important for us to talk about power?

SOME PRACTICAL TIPS

Talking about power is difficult and in some cultures almost impossible. We lack the language and the courage to discuss it because we are afraid it will threaten or disturb our relationships. Power is often associated with *coercive*, *power over*, and so we often prefer to ignore it. There are no easy techniques and tools for this. Hopefully the types and bases of power presented above will provide some language for conversation, prompted by the kinds of questions we have suggested. Like any difficult issue it is good to create a safe and friendly environment and to give time to people to speak. Asking people to express their feelings often guides the conversations to issues that matter. Be careful not to encourage people to accuse each other but rather let them describe what they feel and, if possible, the experiences that gave rise to these feelings.

We often work with people who are or feel disempowered and we accompany and support them in their process of empowerment. We have a role in supporting their efforts to access and exercise their rights and power. Having conversations about power, in a way that makes power transparent and conscious, is a good way of helping people to appreciate the power they have and to use it more positively.

As leaders, facilitators, development professionals and donors we have, and are granted, enormous power by people we try to help, often much more than we realise or even want. Usually it is a combination of *expert* or *reward* power. If we and the people we relate to are not aware of our and their power, its possibilities, limits and potential for misuse, it becomes so easy for us to influence and control them in ways we do not wish to, to have *destructive power over*. For example almost all donor field officers have a story of how a casual thought or suggestion to a community or partner organisation gets taken as an order. Indeed as leaders or facilitators we must be aware that even if we don't intend it, we can change things and even undermine others just by our presence.



TRACEY TELLS THIS STORY...

It was my first week in the office. I was determined to manage in a new way, reduce hierarchy and establish trust. I met every member of staff individually and asked them about their job, their history with the organisation and what they expected of a manager.

Lunch was cooked every day in the office by the guards and the cleaner. It was good local Nepali food but rather bland for my palate after years in Thailand. One day the guard warned me that a particular dish was very 'hot'. No problem, I said, I love spicy food. In fact, the spicier the better. A week later at lunch, I noticed one of the staff members gasping for breath. "I can't understand it", he said, "in the last week the food has got hotter and hotter. I can hardly eat it any more!"

This taught me that when you have "positional power" you have to be very careful what you say!

FINDING OUR POWER WITHIN

As facilitators we relate to community leaders who hold and exercise power (of several kinds) and are mandated by others to exercise their power, whether it is *power over* or *power with*. It is important to help them to exercise their power consciously and responsibly to meet collective goals, one of which may be to encourage and support the empowerment of their members.

Individually, we are all people with power at a personal level, our *power within*. These have been formed and influenced by our experiences and learning processes, both positive and negative. Helping people, whether leaders or members or an organisation, to develop and empower themselves personally is a critical aspect of organisational empowerment and development.



What is needed?

As a leader or facilitator, in order to build authentic developmental relationships, these qualities, attitudes and abilities will really make a difference:

Bring honesty, trustworthiness, integrity... and doubt!

Trust is a defining quality of a good relationship. You can build trust through being worthy of trust in all that you do, and undertake to do – honesty, openness and integrity are key. Many organisations or communities have negative experiences of leaders and outsiders and, despite the warmth they might display towards you, they may find it very difficult to trust and open up to you. But if they do not do so you will be working blindly.

Being completely honest about what you can and can't offer may require courage and frankness. Sometimes as a leader or facilitator you just don't know the answer, and seeking guidance from others can be empowering for them. Being transparent about your own self-doubts can encourage a new degree of honesty in others.

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