

THE SEVEN SOURCES OF POWER FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERS

By Richard Searle, www.searleburke.com, r.searle@mbs.edu

Leaders need to power up! Leadership involves moving others, and moving others involves power. If leaders in business and society are to move groups of people towards the achievement of valuable common purposes, or move them to adapt in order to survive and thrive, where do they find the engine power to do that? Let me suggest seven sources of power for effective leaders.

Power has a controversial reputation though so a short detour may be helpful. It is quite possible that some folks are excited by this topic – finally, it seems to them, I am going to talk about something meaty rather than all that fluffy stuff. But it is certain that there will be others who will be feeling decidedly squeamish about the title – surely, they are thinking, he is not taking us back to the bad old days of domineering bosses or command and control management?

I think that management writer Adam Kahane in his book *Power and Love* has a useful distinction to make here. In his words I am not talking about **power over** others, but rather **power to** lead others to achieve beneficial outcomes. Grand aspirations and good intentions are not enough if our leadership is ineffective! Skills are important but they are not enough if we are powerless. Where can we source the power to lead others in valuable ways towards beneficial ends?

The most obvious source of power for leaders is their formal authority and the second slightly less obvious source of power is their informal authority. Ron Heifetz in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* has written well about these two types of authority. It is important to realize that neither form of authority is the same as leadership, although lots of people confuse them. In fact having authority and relying on authority, can be a substitute for leadership and render it less likely at times. But formal authority can also be a major asset for leadership and it confers all sorts of powers on “the leader”. One advantage from formal authority is it gets you lots of attention and attention is the currency of leadership so it allows you to keep directing attention to the critical issues and to frame the adaptive challenges. It allows you to orchestrate internal conflicts in constructive ways. It gives you access to information and allows you to time the release of information. It allows you to pace the work of change and to modulate the levels of anxiety that arise from that. It allows you to shape the decision making processes from highly directive to highly consensual.

Informal authority may be an even more valuable source of what is sometimes called “soft power” for leadership. Here people authorise you to lead them because of what you represent for them and the value that you provide for them. Credibility is important to gaining access to this source of power and that is done through demonstrating expertise and capability, as well as demonstrating values and integrity which matter to others. This source of power can be accessed also by being of value to others by protecting them or maintaining harmony in the group or sorting out roles for people or by respecting the prevailing norms and culture of the group. Again, some of the ways that you can gain informal authorisation from others may themselves get in the way of exercising true leadership when it is required.

A third source of power for leaders is self- authorisation. On my senior leadership programs this aspect of leadership is often the most revealing. Although it is pretty much impossible to exercise any effective leadership without informal authorisation from others, leaders can't just sit around waiting for a pat on the shoulder. Sometimes they may need to exceed their authority temporarily if they are to get any traction. In some circumstances, only those leaders will succeed who can go out on a limb and authorise themselves in the face of resistance or apathy or the lack of an immediate mandate from others, and trust themselves to win the backing of others not by bullying them but rather convincing them.

Other times the external circumstances are demanding leadership action, and our people may or may not be looking for leadership too, but the resistance or apathy or lack of a mandate is being generated internally by the leader herself. The leader is telling herself all the reasons why she is not the one to act, and why this is not her time to act and why it is far too risky. It is those leaders who can authorise themselves to lead in the face of their own disempowering identity and judgements, who are most powerful. Where does one go to find that strength? Each of us needs to find that quiet place inside ourselves where we can go when this sort of personal courage is called for. We will say more about this source a little later.

A fourth source of power for our leadership is collective effort. Powerful leaders devote the time and energy to build connection, collaboration and teamwork in their organisations. They know that the whole can achieve much more than the sum of the parts – a team of champions will be outplayed by a champion team. There are lots of clichés and high sounding aphorisms that get passed around about teamwork but it is a much lower priority in many workplaces than the rhetoric would suggest. And the failure to give attention to the socialisation processes in organisations allows a lot of disempowering norms and practices to prevail. Senior managers on our leadership courses regularly confess astonishment when they discover the level of relationship and communication and common purpose which they have developed in a short period of time with a complete group of strangers. And they are amazed at how empowering such an environment is and how much creativity it unleashes. Collaborative environments can even help us appreciate the extent of our own leadership capability. The other bonus for a leader in a collaborative environment is that the work and pressures of leadership itself can be distributed around more evenly. There is nothing more powerful than a less burdened leader!

The fifth source of power for a leader is allies. The leadership myth of the heroic individual often just results in more martyrs. Solo leaders are too easily marginalized – especially when they are not yet the CEO (and even then)! Effective leaders are strategic and diligent about building a network of allies. Politics is not always a dirty word in organisations. It can be a lot more honourable than gossip or backstabbing. Political power in institutions is real and it can be developed and used by leaders for good just as it can be used for egotistical reasons. Leaders who want to change things will constantly come up against powerful and systemic blockages. The individual leader is often powerless in the face of the resistance. This is where leaders need to be strategic and have their allies organised.

Talk of ego is a perfect introduction to mindfulness the sixth source of power. It is often argued that strong egos provide the drive and thick skin to enable leaders to prevail in business and elsewhere. A healthy ego is not a bad thing, but being able to let go of the ego's excessive neediness, reactivity,

and urge to control everything, frees up a lot of power and energy for a leader. It allows them to focus all their energy on the real leadership work required at the time. Mindfulness is the practice which will enable leaders to “catch” the thousands of guises and ruses that their ego indulges in, and it will provide the moments of pause where responsibility can be taken and free choices made. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes in *The Art of Power*, many of us chase external sources of power when the greatest source of power may be internal. Mindfulness, including meditation, is the practice that can make this source of power available to us and it has so many applications. One example is that it can help leaders to access that calm and still place inside themselves from which may arise powers such as clarity of insight and courage and intuition. Most of us have experienced influential leaders in our lives, whether it was a teacher or a boss or a parent, who didn’t need to say or do much to move us because their very “presence” was powerful and empowering.

And the final source of power for leaders is so simple and effective it is almost embarrassing to mention. Leaders need to build muscle at leadership in the same way that anyone builds muscle. They need to practice, practice and practice!