

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Social Power and Its Abuse \*

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Social power is the ability to influence other people. What gives people power? Why is it so often abused? Social psychologists have identified at least five basic sources of power:

**1. Coercive power** influences others through threats and punishment. Coercive power is frequently used, because it gets quick results and is relatively easy to use. Unfortunately, it has several important drawbacks. First, the low-power person dislikes the high-power person. If this is the only source of power, the low-power person will get out of the relationship as soon as possible. (Does anyone ever want to associate with a bully?) Second, the low-power person has to be constantly watched so they cannot avoid performing the demanded behavior or get away from the high-power person. Third, if the power scales tip the other way, the former low-power people are likely to retaliate for the punishments they have received. In addition, if you rely almost exclusively on this power as a parent, children obey a coercive parent only because of fear — not because they think they are doing the right thing.

**2. Reward power** influences through positive reinforcement — giving rewards. Since the low-power persons are motivated to stay in the relationship, it is generally not necessary to watch them. However, if the rewards are money or goods, it costs the high-power person more. People are influenced only as long as the high-powered people are capable of providing the rewards. In contrast, if the rewards are honest praise and affection, there is a potentially unlimited supply.

**3. Legitimate power** comes from a specific positions that a person holds — president, captain, boss, teacher, or parent. Legitimate power cannot be used up, but it is limited to *specific domains*. A teacher's legitimate power effects students mainly in class and only during the semester that they are students. Similarly, the legitimate power of parents wanes outside the home and as the child grows up.

**4. Expert power** is based on having skills and/or information in a certain area. If this power is based solely on information, it evaporates as soon as all the information is revealed. Like legitimate power, expert power is usually limited to specific domains. Unlike coercive power, the low-power person does not need to be watched.

**5. Referent power** is when leaders are liked and admired for their personal qualities. Because we admire them, we want to be like them, and we imitate their behavior. This power doesn't weaken when used, and it doesn't require watching the low-power person.

Essentially the above are pure sources of power. Although you may perceive some leaders as using only one of these sources of power, most successful leaders use several types at the same time.

The main problem with power is summarized the following quote — "*Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*" Many examples support this observation — President Nixon and Watergate, President Reagan's staff and the Iran arms sales, Jim and Tammy Baker and the PTL ministry, just to name a few.

Power seems to "*go to the head*" of those who have it, because they can easily influence others. This leads them to belittle those with less power and minimize their contributions. The power holder believes that s/he

is different from — better than — those who lack power. In turn, this leads them to feel that they should be able to operate under a different set of rules.

In addition, power holders often see others as trying to get their power. This leads them to mistrust others and set themselves apart from others. Power holders are also the center of attention. They are generally the focal point of communication, and praise is directed to them. This leads the powerful to have an inflated sense of self-worth.

Lastly, power is similar to a new toy. When you have it, you want to use it. However, there is some evidence that others may take advantage of powerful people who do not use their power, so this may be a protective response.

As shown, there are many forces that influence people to take advantage of their power. This is probably why George Washington thought that American presidents should only serve a limited time. This is also the reason why the various branches of government — executive, judicial, congressional — were set up so they formed a system of checks and balances with each other. More recently, laws like the open disclosure law have been made to curb the abuse of power.

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**Although most people don't realize it,  
much of the power lies with the followers,  
who give their power to the leader.**

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However, people cannot be powerful without the consent and support of others. Most people have power because others *give* it to them! When you don't question an inaccuracy, hesitate to protest a wrong, or fail to vote because there is some effort or risk involved, you are giving power to others. By the way, did you vote in the primary election last week? If you didn't, that means *my* vote counted more. Before you give away more power, find out about the issues, so you can exercise the power you have in the November elections.

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\* Adapted from Stephen Worchel and Wayne Shebilske's *Psychology: Principles and Applications*, Prentice-Hall, 1989, page 649.