

leadership instalments

Positional and Relationship Power

By Dan Gaynor

“Effective leadership inspires people to do what should be done because they want to do it.”

POWER HAS A BAD RAP. WE HEAR THE WORD AND almost immediately begin assigning negative qualities to it. Corrosive expressions of power, like bullying, threatening, oppression or even micro-management come to mind. But power is essential to leadership. It takes power to create movement and good leadership is all about movement. If you're not moving your organization toward something better, you're just minding the store, and that's not leadership. The important questions become: What are you moving and how are you doing it?

There are two fundamental ways leaders use power and they are connected. Some use positional power - let's call this the use of formal authority. Others draw more on relational power - let's call this influence. Here is the connection: formal authority makes it easier to establish influence, (when the CEO makes a suggestion he or she is listened to), but conversely, when a leader has influence he or she does not need positional power very often. This explains why in poorly led organizations people often follow colleagues with no positional power at all. Leadership is much more the product of character than a title on an org chart. The degree to which leaders use positional power reveals how influential they are. And here's the catch, influence is the far more powerful tool.

Let's take a closer look starting with the Oxford Dictionary's definitions for influence and authority. Influence is "The effect a person or thing has on another." Authority is "The power or right to enforce obedience." Influence is more subtle. Influence gets more done. Put another way, people respond to authority by doing what they have to do; they respond to influence by doing what they want to do. This choice between authority and influence often means the difference between leading a band of reluctant survivors and leading a band of enthusiastic participants. Enthusiastic

participants have more job satisfaction and they get a lot more done. They stick with you when the going gets tough. This is not to say that good leaders don't use formal authority from time to time. When instilling accountability or upholding values they must. This is evidence of the strength we look for in leaders. A leader who will not enforce the right things for the right reasons hurts the whole team. But the best leaders limit the use of formal authority to that which is necessary and they use influence as liberally as possible. I like to think of formal authority like a surgeon's scalpel. Surgeons use a scalpel very selectively, always with great purpose and only when necessary.



So how does one develop influence? It starts with a simple powerful principle: always do what is best for the team. Poor leaders put self at the centre, the team exists to serve them. Great leaders care about and for the people they lead. They put the team first. People see this in every word and every act.

All people want to be led to someplace better. This is the opportunity before every leader. The great ones spend their lives honing skills like feedback, communication, coaching and performance management just to name a few, but the most important factor remains how these skills are deployed. Use them to take people someplace better, regardless of how good your team is today, and you are well on your way to establishing the influence that helps teams realize their fullest potential.

Discussion questions:

1. Think of the last leader you saw use power poorly. What was he or she doing and how did it effect team members?
2. Are you taking your team some place better, how would team members describe it?
3. What could you change or add to your leadership to build more influence?

Want to go deeper with your leadership thinking? Check out our e-books.

For other Leadership Instalments articles go to:
www.gaynorconsulting.com

Dan Gaynor can be contacted at:
403.880.1780