

CONCERNS OF PROJECT MANAGERS

UP & DOWN The Organization

Power and Politics first appeared in this column as an overview article I did for the April 1989 issue. That article was partially based on an ad hoc discussion also involving Russell Archibald, Roland Gareis, Guntar Rattay and Robert Youker at the Glasgow, Scotland INTERNET Conference on Project Management. The article prompted a letter from Peter Morris of the Major Projects Association, one of the

keynote speakers at the Glasgow event, in which the relevance of the topic was emphasized. Robert Youker went on to conduct a workshop on the subject at the 1990 INTERNET Conference held in Vienna. In this guest-written column, Youker shares his views on Power and Politics in Project Management.

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POWER AND POLITICS IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Power (and politics) is probably the most important topic in project management but at the same time one of the least discussed subjects. Power, in the engineering sense, is defined as the ability to do work. In the social sense, power is the ability to get others to do the work (or actions) you want regardless of their desires. When we think of all the project managers who have responsibility without authority, who must elicit support by influence and not by com-

mand authority, then we can see why power is the most important topic in project management.

Yet power is a neglected topic in the literature of project management. The words **Power**, **Influence** and **Politics** do not appear in the Project Management Institute PMBOK [1]. Dave Wilemon has discussed power in several of his articles, but there is general agreement in the social sciences that until recently power has not received sufficient attention. Even though Bertrand Russell in 1938 commented that,

"...the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept of Physics [2]."

Despite the importance of power in relationships among people in project management we seldom deal with the issue directly.

Without power, project managers can accomplish very little. As organizations and projects have become more complex and as project managers become more dependent on more and more persons over whom they do have formal authority, they increasingly need power to influence the behavior of others. There can be no argument that effective performance by project managers requires them to be skilled at the acquisition and use of social power.

The purposes of this article, and an associated one by Bill Smith, is:

The original paper on which this article is based was presented at a workshop at the INTERNET Conference in Vienna, Austria, in July 1990. It is presented here with the permission of INTERNET.

1. To propose common definitions of power and related terms such as leadership,
2. To look at a new model of power field relationships, and
3. To develop practical guidelines for project managers on how to acquire and use power.

DEFINITIONS

A review of the literature in the social sciences on power quickly reveals a good bit of confusion over definitions and terms.

"... Since Bertrand Russell predicted that the concept of 'power' would emerge as a fundamental issue in the social sciences, forty years of research and theorizing have not yet produced a single, uniform conceptualization of power. Statements such as 'power permeates all human action...', or 'power, in short, is a universal phenomenon in human activities and in all social relationships' are commonly found throughout the power literature. Bierstedt used an appropriate analogy when he asserted, 'We may say about it (power) in general only what St. Augustine said about time, that we all know perfectly well what it is—until someone asks us.' Like time, power is an overlearned concept deeply embedded in our culture. Individuals tend to define power in highly idiosyncratic terms. Many social science researchers operationalize the variable 'power' based on preconceived notions, individual intuition, or personal dogma.

If it is acknowledged that social power is a concept embedded in our culture, its potency as an underlying force within many interpersonal and organizational relationships must also be acknowledged. However, the role of power within these interactions will be difficult to pinpoint without a more systematic means of operationalizing the concept. Unfortunately, scholars have been unable to bring clarity to the study of the phenomenon of power. The research remains 'scattered, heterogeneous, and even chaotic.' A recent examination of the power

literature produced a typological framework which may be useful for facilitating clarification and delineation of the amorphous nature of the concept of power. It does not provide a single definition, but it collapses dozens of definitions into a workable system (Cavanaugh in [2])."

Nobody seems to agree about what power and control actually are. Every author has a different definition of these concepts. So, one of our goals will be to simply clear up this confusion by showing what these definitions have in common and where the major areas of disagreement lie. Hopefully this exercise will provide answers to such questions as: How is power different from influence or leadership? Let's start with several definitions.

Power

"The ability to bring about our desires. (S. Arieti, 1972)"

"Power-oriented behavior ... is behavior directed primarily at developing or using relationships in which other people are to some degree willing to defer to one's wishes [3]."

"Power is the ability for A to exercise influence over B even when B would not do so otherwise [5]."

"This typology addresses power in light of the following five categories: (1) power as a characteristic of the individual; (2) power as an interpersonal construct; (3) power as a commodity; (4) power as a casual construct; and (5) power as a philosophical construct. The purpose of this presentation is to bring refinement and clarity to the application of the variable of power within social science research (Cavanaugh in [2])."

Table 1. Sources of Power

<u>French and Raven</u>	<u>Mitchell</u>	<u>Kotter</u>
Reward	Rewards	Sense of Obligation
Coercive	Punishment	Perceived Dependency
Referent	Charisma	Identification
Expert	Expertise	Expertise
Legitimate	Formal Authority	Formal Authority
—	Information	—
—	—	Persuasion
	Connections	

To more fully understand power we need to compare and contrast power with similar terms such as influence, authority, control and leadership.

"... power is defined as the potential or ability to exercise influence over the decisions of others, to determine their behavior to some degree, to establish the direction of future action. Leadership is the use of power for these purposes. That is, leaders employ various forms of influence to mobilize followers effectively. Control is the end result or objective of influence. The central concept that is fundamentally involved in these related concepts of power, leadership, and control, then, is influence. Influence is regarded in this framework as the underlying process through which leaders obtain their power to control events. Leaders may derive their power

from a variety of different types of influence, such as the use of physical coercion or force, money and economic resources, formal and legal authority, social pressure or status, special skills and knowledge, personal vision and charisma, and possibly other such sources (Halal in [2])."

Influence

"Influence is usually conceived as being narrower than power. It involves the ability on the part of a person to alter another person or group in specific ways, such as in their satisfaction and performance. Influence is more closely associated with leadership process. Therefore, authority is different from power because of its legitimacy and influence is narrower than power but is so conceptually close that the two terms can be used interchangeably[5]."

Authority

Authority is the formal power given to a person by their position in the hierarchy of an organization.

Leadership

"An interpersonal relation in which others comply because they want to, not because they have to."

"Leadership is always associated with the attainment of group objectives and involves the common agreement and commitment to objectives and structuring of roles so people know what is expected of them.

Leadership is the use of power to accomplish the purposes of a group or organization [6].

Control

"Control 'is the process in an organization of setting standards, monitoring results with feedback and taking action to correct deviations' [5]."

Politics

"Politics is an influence process in organizations to achieve power to change the balance of power to accomplish your goals or purposes [2]."

From these various definitions we can easily see that we have six closely inter-related terms where there is still a good bit of controversy over precise meanings and where operational definitions for rigorous social science research are not yet available. But for our purposes of

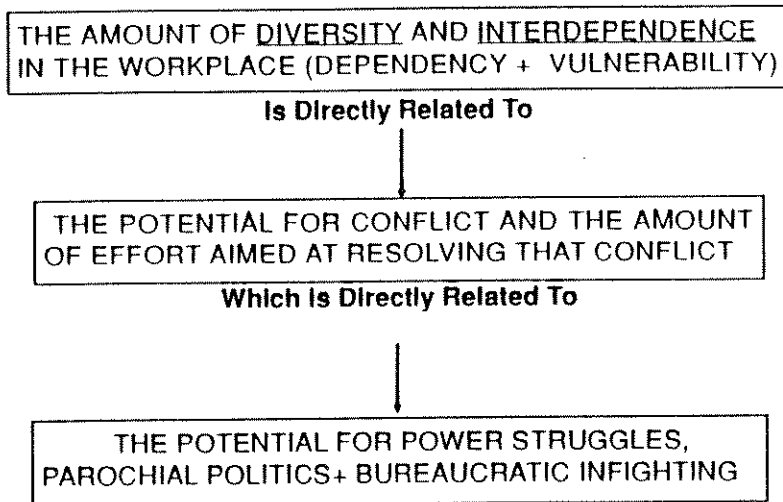


Figure 1. Diversity, Interdependence, and Power Dynamics in Organizations [3]

discussion and action I think we can know what we are talking about.

SOURCES OF POWER

What are the sources of power and influence in addition to formal authority that are available to project managers? The classic scheme of categories was developed by French and Raven more than thirty years ago. There have been minor modifications and additions but their categorization remains the basic model used today, as shown in Table 1.

Some of the forms of power are self-explanatory and some need further definition. The various forms are interrelated and overlap.

Rewards. Reward power is seen as the number of positive incentives which B thinks A has to offer. Can A promote B? To what extent can A determine how much B earns or when B takes a vacation? To some extent A's reward power is a function of the formal responsibilities inherent in his or her position.

Punishment. Coercive power or punishment has to do with the negative things that B believes A can do. Can A fire me, dock my pay, give me miserable assignments, or reprimand me? These factors are again often organizationally and formally determined as part of A's position.

Referent power. In some cases B looks up to and admires A as a per-

son. B may want to be similar to A and be liked by A. In this situation, B may comply with A's demands because of what we call referent power. Note again that this resource is mostly a function of A's personal qualities.

Expertise. A is often an expert on some topic or issue. B will often comply with A's wishes because B believes that A "knows best" what should be done in this situation. Expertise and ability are almost entirely a function of A's personal characteristics rather than A's formal sanctions.

Legitimacy. Legitimate power as a resource stems from B's feeling that A has a right to make a given request. Legitimate power is sometimes described as authority. The norms and expectations prevalent in the social situation help to determine A's legitimate power: Has A done this before? Have others complied? What are the social consequences of non-compliance?

Information. Information is often controlled by individuals within organizations. They

can decide who should know what. To the extent that B thinks A controls information B wants and perhaps needs, then A has power. This information can be both formally and informally gathered and distributed.

Persuasion. This is when A tries to talk B into a course of action. It takes time, skill and information and B must be willing to listen.

Connections. Building alliances with influential people within the organization is an important power base for project managers who must work with and through functional personnel to achieve project objectives. Developing a variety of informal contacts can help project managers to be in a better position to recognize project problems early.

The nature of power is more complicated than a simple list. Some of the eight forms of power come from the organization (formal authority) and some from the individual (charisma). Power can be direct or indirect through someone else. Power can be possessed or just perceived where B thinks A can reward him. Power can also be exercised or latent where A has power but does not use it.

The relative use of the different forms of power also has an effect on project success and personal relationships. Wilemon's research indicated that the more effective project managers relied more on personal types of power, while the less effective managers were concerned with not having enough formal authority to command and punish [7].

Table 2. Forms of Power and Project Management Tools and Techniques

Forms of Power	Project Management Tools and Techniques
Reward	Budget/Favors
Coercive	Personnel Appraisal
Referent	Team Building/Personality
Expert	Technical Knowledge
Legitimate	Top Management Support/ P.M. Charter
Information	Plans/Meetings
Persuasion	Meetings
Connections	Startup Meetings

Kotter makes a strong case that exceptional managers understand that true organizational power is based much more on inspirational leadership than on executive rank and status. These managers have achieved their stature by establishing the power bases that are essential to the exercise of leadership. Kotter believes that the need for managers who are adept at dealing with organizational complexity will continue to grow. "A century ago," he writes, "only a few thousand people held jobs that demanded that they manage a large number of interdependent relationships. Today, millions do [3]." This fact mirrors a changing business and social environment that has grown in diversity as well as in interdependence.

The resulting complexity—involving numerous goals, priorities, and constituencies—inevitably leads to conflict which, in turn, can easily degenerate into bureaucratic infighting, parochial politics, and destructive power struggles. "Dealing with this pathology," Kotter writes, "is truly one of the great challenges of our time."

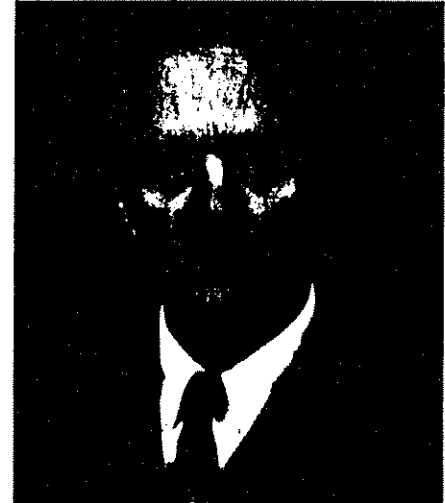
As shown in Figure 1, Kotter believes that the need for power is directly related to a manager's dependency on and vulnerability to others, especially where he does not have formal authority.

How do we translate these definitions and forms of power into concrete actions by project managers? Table 2 relates the eight forms of power to illustrative project management tools and techniques. The key to gaining power is to motivate the key stakeholders into commitment for the project objectives by relating to their organizational and individual purposes.

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From 1975 to 1987, he worked at the World Bank, first as a lecturer at the Economic Development Institute and later as a Management Specialist in the Institutional Development Division for Africa. Previous experience includes President of Planalog Management Systems and an analyst with the Xerox Corporation and with Checchi and Company. He is a graduate of Colgate University and the Harvard Business School and has taken graduate work at George Washington University.

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