# Personal power

DuBrin (2001) identified three sources for personal power: expert, referent, and prestige. Expert and referent powers are components of charismatic leadership. These are the powers associated with specialized knowledge and skills (expert) or those enabling influence over others through desirable traits and characteristics (referent). Expert power is based on trust and acceptance of leadership capability whereas referent power involves having a personality and behavioral profile that includes similar beliefs, a personal relationship, and a desire to be more like the person. Prestige power is more related to past successes and the expectation that past success is an indication of future success. Seniority and breadth of experience may also create a degree of prestige.

In using these personal powers, individuals can influence change with what positional power they may have, no matter how lowly in the organization hierarchy. While not necessarily sponsoring a change initiative, they are able to position the focus of change so that others with sponsorship authority can see the benefits and initiate or validate the change process.

> It would be unrealistic to suggest that change influencers can impact change efforts if those at the top of the organization refuse to accept their ideas. . . . Unfortunately, it is often the perception of those in the middle that 'their hands are tied' – that what they have to say cannot make a difference. This is simply not true. (Fisher, 2000, p. 255).

To an outside observer a change influencer's actions toward leading change may not be readily apparent. Informal network relationships, the chance comments, and initiation of unrelated actions may all be taking advantage of opportunities to lay the foundation for a change vision held by the change influencer. Fisher (2000, p. 256) summarized these actions as "vision, opportunity, and tenacity."

Key to success is not necessarily the weight of personal power versus positional power as it is knowledge of what personal powers exist and not overly relying on positional power as being the sole power source. This is not to say that bright ideas are enough. They are not. It is knowledge about the organizational drivers and internal politics that allow opportunities to be seen and taken advantage. Organizational politics are often treated as being distasteful. In reality, politics are nothing more than the result of the necessary interpersonal relationships that exist in any organization and the actions that are required to effect change and motivate others.

While positional power is driven by the formal organization, personal power resides more in the informal organization, working through the network of relationships that exist within all organizations. These relationships drive the organization toward its goals when reliance on the formal organization would only create bureaucratic barriers. Knox (1998, p. 11) defined informal leaders as those "individuals who find their base of power from individuals and receive no official recognition of position from management." In this role they have control of the informal communication network, which is often more powerful than the formal communications. This then has the capability of shifting some of the power of information from a positional power to a personal power. Further power can be granted by those with positional power in order to learn what is truly happening within the organization.

Consequently, this has the ability to overcome the isolation and information filtering problem that many top managers face daily.

       While development of informal leaders occurs naturally, their capabilities can be strengthened and enlarged through exposure to still more organizational issues.  This can be accomplished through mentoring, assignment on cross-organizational teams, or problem-solving missions.  Effective empowerment for self-initiated change also requires some structure for alignment between individual and organizational goals.  Without this alignment, it is possible for individuals to head in a direction that is counterproductive for the organization.

Bibliography

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