



**Claudia Heimer** is a Business Director of Ashridge Consulting. Her focus is on helping international organisations engage people inside and outside more fully as part of their strategic changes. Her experiences as coach and consultant contribute to her research agenda on power and emotions in the context of organisational change.

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Email: [claudia.heimer@ashridge.org.uk](mailto:claudia.heimer@ashridge.org.uk)

# Mastering the power zone

Whether managers choose to recognise and work with power or not, it still determines outcomes in organisations. In this article Claudia Heimer describes the “push and pull” of power games observed in her recent research and offers a mapping device that enables managers to recognise and work with the power dynamics that are at play in change processes.

## Perspectives on power

How does the word “power” make you feel? Does it make you angry? Does it make you happy? Over the years, I have come across managers, particularly in emerging markets, who associate power with repressive government and therefore choose to lead through a highly participative yet disciplined approach. They choose to focus entirely on perfecting their leadership style and are not interested in power at all. Others are filled with enthusiasm and talk about their role models of powerful people who combine strong value sets and missions with extraordinary results.

What is power? We all have our own views

on what it means. With the pace and complexity of change we experience today, more managers want to know how to master the power zone. Do you want true engagement? Do you want people really committed to the strategy of the company? Do you want your agenda to stand a fair chance? It’s increasingly vital that you understand the interplay of political forces to increase your chances for success.

The subject of power has preoccupied many writers and academics over the last 20 years and they have come up with some great questions and approaches that have helped map out the field of power. For example, “*What are the sources of*

*power?”* One of the most influential ways of looking at this question has grouped bases of power along factors coming from one’s position in an organisation and others coming from personal factors<sup>1</sup>. *Position power* sources can allow managers to force others into compliance, or shape decisions because others attribute power to the role the person occupies. The *personal power* sources are either about exchanging knowledge or skills for what others want, or about having attributes such as charisma or fame. The limitation of much management literature and most approaches to power lies in their focus on the individual. They talk about power in terms of helping individuals to “get their way”, reducing it mainly to personal attributes or technique.

From observations in organisations I have worked with, I was becoming increasingly aware that power is something that happens in relationships. If you take something, somebody else is letting you do this. If my observations were to be accurate, we can never really understand and master the subject if we simply study the traits of the powerful and try to replicate their successes. This drove me on to research the subject: research that increasingly led me to see power as something that moves around constellations of people that form and re-form continuously, particularly in change processes. My research findings have enabled me to help leaders think in a systematic way about influencing various types of political situations and adopt some simple approaches to becoming better at the power game.

### Looking beyond the hero

Influenced by ideas from sociology<sup>2</sup>, my research looked beyond the individual into the groups and the dynamics they produce during change. What happens when things start getting in flux? What happens when the “powerful” and the “powerless” interact? How do groups form and re-form in change? How are the outcomes of change processes shaped?

### Scope of the research

My research, throughout 2006, focused on a variety of cases in the private and the public sector. It involved six companies in the IT, financial services, building materials and telecommunications industries; two additional case studies were an NGO and a public sector organisation. Three of the companies were large global players; the others were medium sized organisations in the UK, Germany, Switzerland and South Africa.

Some organisations were rather more hierarchically managed, with control vested very clearly with the leaders, while others were run democratically by involving employees in business decisions. In some of the case studies, change was introduced as a top down, radical approach. In others, it was more evolutionary. In the organisations that took part, I conducted 360° interviews with executives, their bosses or trustees, as well as their direct reports or peers (totalling up to 12 interviews for each case).

Across all continents and across organisations with widely differing value systems, my findings were strikingly similar. I found the same pattern in all the places I looked. There is a surprisingly simple movement in the power dynamics I saw repeated in the case studies, involving competing and collaborating forces.

People invariably formed groups, and invariably there were people who were perceived as “powerful” and people who were perceived as “powerless”. No matter from where change was initiated, others first reacted with scepticism about the other group’s intentions, ways of thinking, and approaches. How much of what is being proposed is going to go against our interests? The dynamics, as various interests interacted, resulted in a movement

of push and pull, with giving and taking on all sides. One group transformed some things in the other peoples' thinking and the other way around, often without each side becoming aware of it!

I found that it was difficult for people to answer the question of what they had to let go of in the process of change. It was the very process of reflection after the event that allowed some of the leaders to realise that others had managed to get their way, at least partially, so focused were they on the desired end state.

The outcome of change was invariably the combination of what the "powerful" and the "powerless" wanted. In the study, even the most "top down" project didn't get implemented exactly the way the leaders wanted. The push backs always led to modifications. They might not have changed the overall course of action but at the very least, other people's reactions delayed the implementation of change.

While some of the change processes involved leaders apparently single-handedly driving change processes top down, the reality was different. Based on the findings, my suggestion is to try and understand how the pattern operates and stop fighting it by trying harder into the direction we want. We need to go with the dynamic power process so that we increase our impact.

### **Creating employee ownership**

**Axiz**, a South African SME in the IT infrastructure distribution business, and the only hardware manufacturer in Africa, was founded in 1989. In 17 years, it grew to reach a turnover of ZAR 2.2billion and 650 employees by the end of 2006. This company is the continent's response to Ricardo Semler's famously self-managed company SEMCO in Brazil<sup>9</sup>.

However, the journey has not been easy and management has observed

much "push and pull" as they learned that power is something that must be accepted and not simply gifted. When management tried to make employee ownership a company-wide approach in 2003, it was surprised to hit a negative reaction. It first had to learn not to assume that everyone would naturally take to the idea of being an owner, or even take the idea seriously. It had to learn to talk as much about the rewards as the risks of ownership and stop trying to convince people. Everyone had to become educated on investments, inflation risks and return including capital gain and dividends in order to understand what truly embracing ownership would mean.

A lot of the push and pull stopped when the first dividends were paid out. Many people completely changed their view. This was real. Management wasn't tricking them into believing something that wasn't really that great for them. This was the point at which many employees started buying more shares in the company and really investing in their future.

When introducing an accelerated share buying scheme to iron out the inequalities that still existed in relation to the black/white and male/female distribution of wealth in 2006, management again found the reactions to be mixed. Why should women and black people be favoured? Imagine how the executives felt who were just trying to give their employees a large gift! Today, everyone joins as an owner. The company employs 60% of the country's black people active in the IT sector, with management holding 74% of the company and the employees 26%. The result is a 25% year on year growth, while the industry average stayed at around 5-10 %, and competitors grew by only 8-9%.

## Stepping into power

If change processes allow everyone to have some degree of impact, how can we shape the outcomes of a political process? If one accepts from the outset that change invariably leads to both push and pull, give and take, the focus can shift away from fighting for separate agendas. Without wasting energy on attempting to drive change agendas through, the focus can be on discovering a new picture of the future that emerges, influenced by both the “powerful” and the “powerless”.

Can you stay out of it? In the research, some managers were very comfortable with letting the political process unfold, and taking every situation as it emerges. Lack of foresight and thinking about political processes were leaving them open to being manipulated, excluded or used by others. Whatever you do, you can't really stay out of the power zone. There is always a political game going on. And you are always part of it. It is your choice if you are active or reactive in it. It's up to you to decide to shape it.

There will always be a degree to which the outcome of any politically charged change will be unknowable. Yet if you look ahead you will have more chances of reaching the outcome you desire than if you leave things to the political process. This is not about planning.

This is not about creating highly manipulative tactics for tricking other people into situations they don't want to be in.

This is not about being clever. This is about being able to read patterns of interaction between people; being clear about what matters to you and what you are unwilling to let go of; realising that you have a lot more influence than you might actually feel you have. This is about stepping up into the field of forces around you and actively shaping the dynamics and the results.

Wendy Luhabe, perhaps South Africa's most prominent female business and social entrepreneur once said: “Power is not something you are given. Power is something you step into.”

Based on the research findings, I have developed a mapping tool to help you think about how to influence things by design (see Figure 1).

As you prepare to use the mapping tool, the challenge is to stop thinking about yourself as a lone hero while you consider the specific change situation you have initiated or you are faced with. You live and work in groups and somebody helped you get to where you are now. Who is helping you stay where you are and support you? The tendency of most stakeholder mapping tools is to treat stakeholders as individual players. Invariably, what you are actually faced with are *groups* of people who are interlocked in a political process of push and pull that might have many more dimensions of push and pull than the one (or the ones) you are looking at.

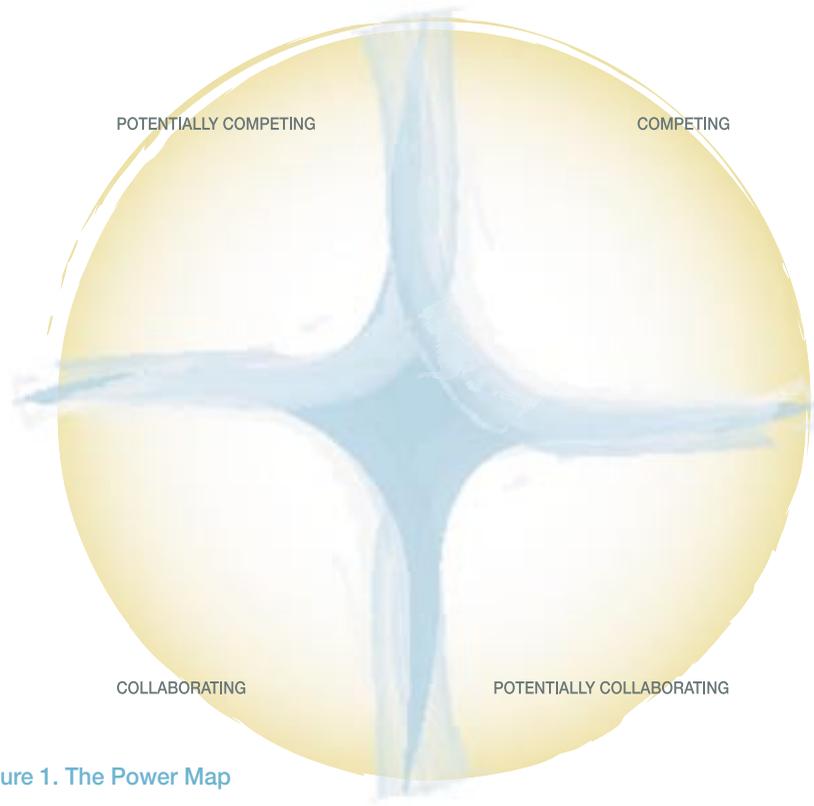


Figure 1. The Power Map

### Step 1: Mapping your power constellations

In the “collaborating” section of the tool, place yourself anywhere you like with a dot and initials and then map your supporters in the same section and in relation to how close they are to you, again using dots and initials. Then draw lines between the individual players to help you reflect on the constellations that are supportive to you and your purposes. Who is connected to whom as they work with you to reach the outcomes you intend in your change process?

You might have considered your leadership skills as the key to your success. The trouble is that some people are most definitely opposed to what you want. They will not be led by you. They will not be motivated by you. They have their own interests. Where are they on the model?

Now move on to place dots with initials for all the people involved or impacted by your change process, using the potentially collaborating, potentially competing and competing sections.

Using the mapping tool, you can therefore first identify the players and map your power constellations (see Figure 2, Step 1 for a completed example, built for the CEO of one of the organisations in the study). Then, start the process of thinking about the pattern of interaction in the current situation. What are the other players going for? What are their interests? In what way can you help them reach their interests? What deals can you make with them? What is sacred to them? (And therefore unlikely to be something they are likely to move away from?) What could they let go of?

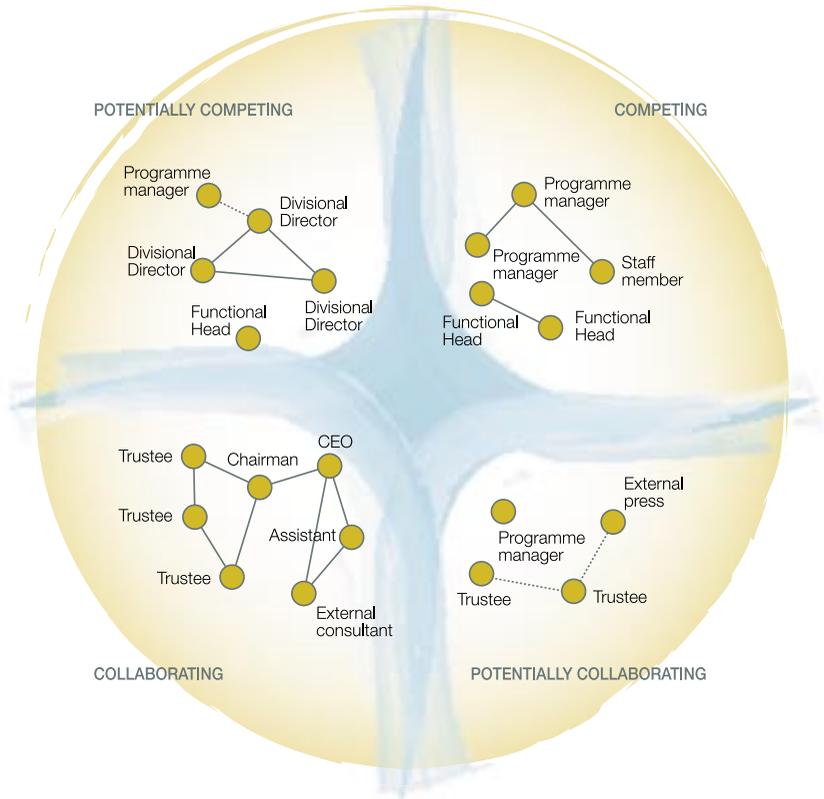


Figure 2. The Power Map  
Step 1. Mapping your Power Constellations

Try working through the Reflection Exercise, *Step 1: Preparing the ground*, to help you deepen your thinking on the current situation and your own starting point. What legitimises your political cause, and what it is that you might let go of – the vital part of influencing the new balance of constellations.

#### Reflection Exercise

##### Step 1: Preparing the ground

###### Your side

- What legitimises your cause?
- Who or what purpose are you serving?
- What are your obligations?
- What are you fighting for?
- What is sacred to you?
- What might you let go of in terms of what you are looking for?

###### Others' side

- What legitimises their cause?
- Who or what purpose are they serving?
- What are their obligations?
- What are they fighting for?
- What is sacred to them?
- What is it they might let go of in terms of what they are looking for?

Identify the power constellations based on the power map and work through the reflection exercise for each important grouping!

## Step 2: Shifting the balance

In a change process, once the initial political stance of the key players is clear, it doesn't matter who lets go first. Whoever does will be rearranging the political field and new possibilities will emerge. Watch out for those new possibilities as they come up – don't wait to be surprised by them. Identify people who are not connected very strongly within a grouping and look for what they are interested in. Sometimes finding a person looking for a connection with a group they can value, or a cause they can identify with, can bring a whole power system to shift the balance.

In the example from my research (see Figure 3, Step 2), a senior executive wished to effect change towards a high performance orientation in a public sector organisation very quickly after his arrival and initial "listening period". **One**, he started intervening by promoting someone who had a very clear overall perspective on the organisation and therefore was neither

tied to a territory or organisational silo, but was interested in linkages and reaching the overall goal. This was also a recently arrived person who was not inducted into the culture of the organisation. **Two**, he then made redundant the group of divisional directors who represented the *status quo*, a forceful intervention going directly against the public sector culture of the organisation where people felt safe and there was no focus on benchmarking or performance. **Three**, he linked the only high performing programme manager to the by now highly motivated cross-functional director he had promoted, providing both with an interesting and fruitful connection to pursue their goals. These three main interventions, quite different in scale and effort required, completely transformed the power balance in the new organisation. The resulting constellation of groups allowed a focus on performance orientation to become the new *status quo* within a few months of the start of the journey.

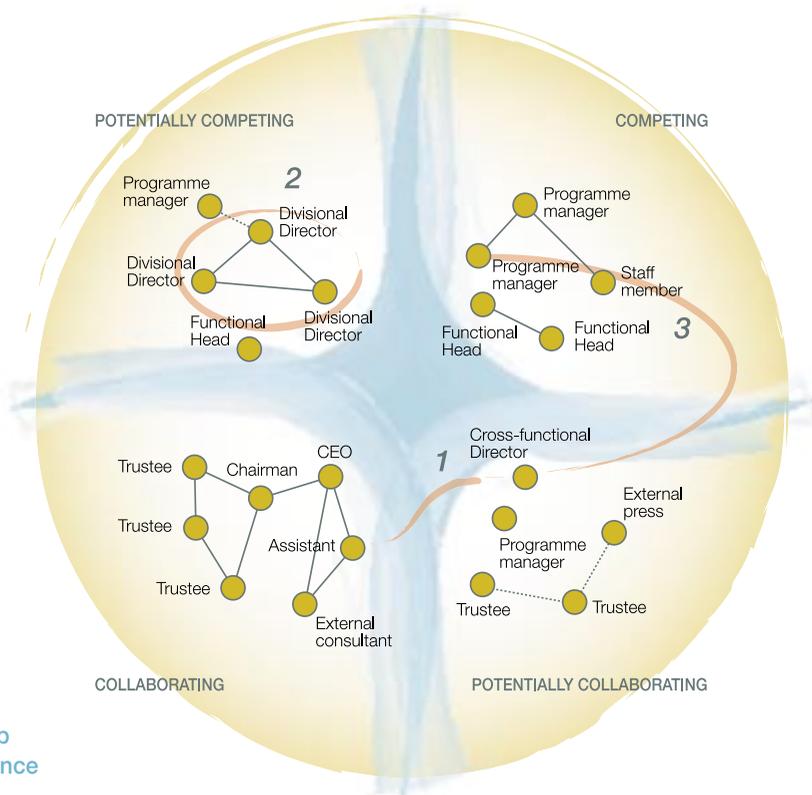


Figure 3. The Power Map  
Step 2. Shifting the Balance

## Reflection Exercise

### Step 2: Getting ready to intervene

#### 1. How can you shape meaning?

How do others describe what they are looking for?

How does your perspective fit with what others want?

How can you describe the perspective you are taking in a way that helps others?

Why are you asking people to change their position?

Why is that a valid reason?  
And why that?

What meaning can you give to the facts supporting the change?

What is your story?

What would you like people to see or feel in their minds?

What are you asking people to do in future?

#### 2. How can you influence the way things are set up?

Looking at your power map:

What are the constellations you can influence?

What can you offer to the people you would like to influence?

What are you willing to trade in or let go of?

What deals or exchanges can you make with other players?

Identify the power constellations based on the power map and work through the reflection exercise for each important grouping!

As you prepare to think through how you would rearrange your own power field, try working through the Reflection Exercise, *Step 2: Getting ready to intervene*. This exercise points you towards exercising power through helping others to make sense of what the change is about and what it might mean to them, as well as thinking through ways of shifting the power balance in your current situation.

Does the power zone still feel daunting? Consider this. The masters of the power zone work with a few simple principles. They know what they want. They know what they are willing to trade in. And they know that they are not on their own.

## References

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2. Norbert Elias provided the greatest impetus for this research, see Mennell, S. (1992). *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*. University College Dublin Press. One of his former students, Anthony Giddens, also played a major part in shaping the ideas and questions for the work. Giddens, A. (1986). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, University of California Press.
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## Further reading

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