

# Power Types

French and Raven (1991) have identified seven types of power exhibited by people interacting socially. Social power may be described as the capacity to exert influence over others. Power and authority are not synonymous. Power does not necessarily imply a commonly accepted authority ("right") to exert influence over others. Moreover, the legitimacy of power is relative to the time, place, and circumstances in which it is wielded.

As distinguished by French and Raven, the seven types of social power are:

1) reward, 2) coercive, 3) referent, 4) legitimate, 5) expert, 6) informational, and 7) connectional.

**Reward** power results from the ability to provide positive reinforcement for desired behaviour. Conversely, **coercive** power reflects the potential to inflict punishment. In a sense these are not so much two different types of power as they are opposite ends of a continuum. The common and essential element for both reward and punishment is that they are controlled by the "superior" person and are conferred upon subordinates based upon relationships that are less than perfectly aligned with their behaviours. In other words, if the "inferior" individuals are perfectly able to control the results of their actions, the role of the superior is superfluous. The consequences speak for themselves and merely constitute the results - degrees of accomplishment or failure - rather than rewards or punishments.

**Referent** power is a function of the respect and esteem accorded to an individual by virtue of *personal attributes* with which others identify. By contrast, *legitimate* power is based upon authority recognized in accordance with *position* in an organizational structure. Referent power is person-oriented, while legitimate power is depersonalized. Referent power does not require action by the "superior" individual. Instead, the referring individual *voluntarily* moulds him or herself to the referent person.

Paradoxically, unless it is well supported by other forms, **legitimate** power lacks *higher-order* legitimacy. Lack of such legitimacy is why organizational hierarchies are often ignored and bear relatively little relationship to the supply chains by which value is actually delivered. The rumour mongering and griping about the "bosses" that are endemic in bureaucratic organizations are symptomatic of the illegitimacy of so-called legitimate power. Employees simply fail to volunteer referent power to those occupying superior positions in the organizational hierarchies. Lower-order, *bureaucratic* legitimacy is powerless to do anything about it, since referent power cannot be enforced through punishment nor bought with "rewards".

The legitimacy of power structures embedded in old-style bureaucracies is threatened with irrelevancy by virtue of the growing ease with which information can

be shared outside the confines of those artificial and outmoded constructs. However, to the degree that they are insulated from the impact of or are more potent than other forms of power, legitimate powers may prevail for extended periods of time, even though their most efficacious usages may be merely to support themselves. Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that legitimate power is depersonalized, the individual human beings who are able to accrue it are personally motivated to maintain their share of it through application of other forms of power that they possess.

**Expert** power is a form of referent power resulting from recognized expertise while, as defined by French and Raven, *informational* power is a variation of legitimate power stemming from the ability to control the availability and accuracy of information. Expert power is grounded in substantial differences in the knowledge of two individuals on particular subjects. Expert power is limited to the topic of expertise and, thus, is more delimited than referent power. However, it should be noted that expertise may be the most important form of referent power in the information age.

The evolution of information technology (IT), most notably the revolution that is the Internet and particularly the World Wide Web, is rendering moot French and Raven's definition of **informational** power, as more and more knowledge becomes "common". In the reality of the cyber-age, the information power wielded by old-style hierarchies is becoming restricted to information about the organization itself, information that it is either incapable or unwilling to share freely, honestly, and efficiently with others - a circumstance that portends poorly for the longevity of those bureaucracies. At the same time, the explosion of information technology and thus the availability of *common knowledge* threatens to render as commodities much of the *personal* expertise that has been previously highly valued.

For organizations, the clear and widely aired implication is that hierarchies must be "flattened" and made more responsive to internal as well as external stakeholders. In other words, the legitimacy of organizational power structures must be re-evaluated. For individuals, the implications are somewhat more complex. For example, as increasing quanta of knowledge and expertise are commoditized, embedded into technology, and more widely and freely distributed, other, more qualitative forms of referent power may become more highly valued. At the same time, the individual expertise that is highly valued will become more narrowly focused, ever expanding the boundaries of knowledge in highly specialized areas.

Finally, **connectional** power reflects the influence that leaders possess as a result of whom they know and the support they engender from others as a result (i.e., the bandwagon effect). Connectional power is also a variation of referent power. However, like legitimate power, it is depersonalized in the sense that it reflects attributes of others with whom the individual is associated, rather than attributes that are directly inherent to the person him or herself. As the face and force of organizational constructs change, so too must the connectional power vectors.