

Five Forms of Power - French and Raven

What is the difference between leadership and power? The answer to that question might not be quite as easy as it seems at first. In fact, the more you think about it, the more you likely come to the realisation that leadership and power might be the same thing. In any situation where one person is deemed to be the 'leader', they are likely also the person with the most power to make decisions. If you find yourself in a position of leadership within your organisation, it is safe to say that you have a good deal of power as well.

In 1959, the Five Forms of Power research was conducted by John French and Bertram Raven. This research was important because it attempted to determine what it is that makes someone powerful in a given setting. While that might seem like an obvious question, the answer isn't always as straightforward as you might think. Consider your current work situation - are there people in your office who wield more power than others, for no obvious reason? Likely, it is because they fall within one of the five classifications put forward by French and Raven.

This article takes a quick look at each of the five types of power, and what they can mean for you and your leadership capabilities.



1) Reward Power

This is one of the more common types of power. The 'reward' can take many different forms, but it is typically financial when talking about a leader within a company. If you have the ability to reward your team members with things like bonuses or raises, you have the ability to command their attention through those rewards. Assuming the team members you lead are interested in achieving the rewards that you can offer, they will be likely to work well with you in order to improve their chances of receiving the rewards.

One of the problems that can arise from using rewards to command power is when you aren't able to offer rewards that are appealing to those whom you lead. For example, if you don't have the power in your company to offer financial rewards of any significance, you have to try to appeal to your team with other benefits and perks that might not be as desirable to them. In order for reward leadership to be effective, the leader must be able to offer rewards that the team members are striving to receive.

2) Expert Power

Another common type of power, this one is achieved when you find yourself in a position of expertise based on your knowledge or experience. For example, if you are working on a project with a group of co-workers whom are normally your peers - but you happen to be an expert in the specific field that you are dealing with - you may find yourself elevated to a position of authority and power. However, often times this type of power is informal rather than official. You might find that you are commanding more attention in meetings and your opinion is being given more weight, but you might not have received any of the other typical signs of leadership.

Coming into power through being an expert in your field is something that can have long lasting benefits for your career. Because this kind of power is more organic than others - such as reward power - it is more likely to remain long after a specific project or task is completed. When others know that you are an authority on a given subject, that reputation should follow you throughout your career.

3) Legitimate Power

This might be the most recognised form of power and leadership. It could also be referred to a 'title power', because it is the power that comes along with being appointed to a specific position. Why does the President have power? Because he holds the title of President, and all of the authority that comes with it. In this case, the power is granted more because of the title that the person holds as opposed to the person themselves. Within company, the legitimate power tends to fall with the people who hold titles like Owner, CEO, Executive, and other similar positions. This kind of power can be extremely useful while it is held, but it tends to go away as soon as the title is taken back and given to someone else.

4) Coercive Power

This is the opposite of reward power - with coercive power, the leader is able to control their team members by the ability to take things away. If you can fire someone based on their lack of performance on the team, for example, you have coercive power to influence their actions. They are likely to try to impress you and meet your expectations in order to keep their job. In many cases, coercive power is only good enough to get people to do the minimum required to avoid punishment. Unlike reward power, where team members may strive for excellence in order to achieve certain rewards, coercive leaders are more likely to get the bare minimum from their team who is simply hoping to stay out of trouble.



5) Referent Power

Referent power can be thought of as something of an 'x-factor', because it is power that is not come to for any obvious reason. Frequently, those who have referent power are simply well-liked by others based on their attitude, charm, or even good looks. They don't necessarily have any logical reason for having come to power, yet they still hold sway over many people for some reason. If you are naturally a person that others gravitate towards and want to talk to, there is a good chance you already have a measure of referent power.

Understanding what kind of power you have as a leader - and why you have it - is a valuable lesson that can be used to better lead people. Most likely, you will have some combination of the five types of power that are outlined above. For example, a leader who has reward power, probably has coercive power as well. Think about what kind of power you already have in your position, and what kind of power you should be working toward achieving to further your career.