

# Understanding the Power Dynamic at Work

by Stephanie Reyes

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Power is an interesting thing. If you believe Margaret Thatcher, “Power is like being a lady...if you have to tell people you are, you aren’t.” People who have power (the ability to exercise authority or influence) may wield it unconsciously (whether poorly or well) or they may deliberately use their power in questionable ways. There are a number of ways to consider power in the workplace and elsewhere. Here is one way of looking at power as presented by the Coady International Institute.

## Types of Power

1. **Power over**, Power is seen as a win-lose kind of relationship. Having power involves taking it from someone else, and then, using it to dominate and prevent others from gaining it. (e.g. formal position power, membership in organizations, resource or financial power, power to withhold something others want).
2. **Power with**, has to do with finding common ground among different interests and building collective strength. Based on mutual support, solidarity and collaboration, it multiplies individual talents and knowledge.
3. **Power to**, refers to the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world. When based on mutual support, it opens up the possibilities of joint action (e.g. knowledge, expertise, experience, skills as well as willingness to take a risk).
4. **Power within**, has to do with a person’s sense of self-worth and self knowledge; includes an ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others. Power within is the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the common human search for dignity and fulfillment (e.g. charm, courage, vision, energy, commitment).

Another way of looking at power was described by Sarlyn Lauby in her blog article, “7 Types of Power in the Workplace.”

- **Coercive power** is associated with people who are in a position to punish others. People fear the consequences of not doing what has been asked of them.
- **Connection power** is based upon who you know. This person knows, and has the ear of, other powerful people within the organization.
- **Expert power** comes from a person’s expertise. This is commonly a person with an acclaimed skill or accomplishment.
- A person who has access to valuable or important information possesses **informational power**.
- **Legitimate or positional power** comes from the position a person holds. This is related to a person’s title and job responsibilities.
- People who are well-liked and respected can have **referent power** (the ability to influence through loyalty, respect, friendship, admiration, affection, or a desire to gain approval).

- **Reward power** is based upon a person's ability to bestow rewards. Those rewards might come in the form of job assignments, schedules, pay or benefits.

## Abuse of Power in the Workplace

The workplace is a great breeding ground for the development of and sometimes abuse of power. The pursuit or abuse of power is the root cause of many workplace problems. When taken to the extreme, misuse of power results in overt conflict, harassment and bullying. Researcher, Nathanael Fast found that business leaders who can't handle the implications of power can create a toxic culture of fear and blame through aggressive application of their positional power. Interestingly, in one study published in Psychological Science, Fast found a direct link between a manager's own perception of incompetence and incidents of aggression. According to Fast, "When people in high-power positions feel incompetent they tend to respond with aggression toward others because it makes them feel superior."

Although Fast's research clearly demonstrated the negative implications of power, he also observed that there are leaders who can handle power. "A lot of people think power corrupts everyone—it doesn't corrupt everyone. People who feel secure about their leadership abilities can use power well." We all recognize misuse of power in its most overt forms: aggression, bullying, and excessive control and there are rules and tools for dealing with these dysfunctional behaviours in the workplace.

## Workplace Bullying: Break the Silence

Unfortunately, a lot of harassment and bullying goes unreported. There are a lot of reasons why someone would choose not to report this type of behaviour, most of them rooted in fear of reprisal or job loss. The following six reasons were suggested and discussed in greater detail by Benoit Consulting in a recent article:

1. **Keep this a secret:** Fear of straight-forward confrontation with a manipulative individual keeps employees silent.
2. **Threats and fear:** Employees learn very quickly who's in charge, who calls the shots, and who suffers retaliation.
3. **Love:** In a work situation, employees who love the company and basically love the content of their jobs don't want anything really bad to happen to the company.
4. **No one will believe you:** Employees know that this bully has been behaving this way for many years and no one has been able to get him/her fired.
5. **Self-blame:** If only I could say the right thing in the right way, the bully would see the light.
6. **Grooming:** Bullies select their victims carefully. They cultivate power-over relationships with those whom they can successfully manipulate.

## What's Worse Than Workplace Bullying?

Perhaps more insidious and damaging than overt bullying are the many hidden uses and abuses of power that are so hard to pin down: these behaviours leave you feeling manipulated and uncomfortable, sometimes without even knowing why. In an exceptional blog post, Shanley delves into these micro-aggressions: the “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities” that help maintain power dynamics, inequities and stereotypes. From body language to unequal visibility, Shanley shines the light on behaviours that many managers employ unconsciously, which maintain an uneven power distribution. She concludes by stating: “In order to break the self-perpetuating cycle of micro- aggression in the workplace, we need to re-imagine and re-implement the concept of management. Management should be a job description that pertains to a particular type of work done on a team related to facilitating the team and enabling it to be as successful as possible. Management should NOT be an honorific, based in an unequal power dynamic, and associated with superiority, entitlement and hyper masculinity. When managers locate their value and contribution to the company in the latter system, micro-aggression against the very team they are supposed to be part of becomes the default mode.”

## Changing the Workplace Power Dynamic

There is a lot of work to be done to move from the typical workplace dynamic of “Power Over” to a more inclusive environment that capitalizes on the collaborative capacity of the “Power With” dynamic. In order to get there, employees and the people and structures that support them will have to draw on their “Power To” create change. It begins at the center, as we strengthen the “Power Within” each of us and recognize our ability to transform our world of work and shift the balance of power.

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