The Power of Giving Away Power

What’s in it for me? Learn how to multiply power by giving it away.

We tend to think of power as a win-lose kind of thing. Someone at the top has it, and the people below them naturally have less of it. We even encourage our leaders to keep it that way, by forcing decisions, hoarding information, and locking in power at the top. But who said that power has to be power over? Is it really so absurd to think that power can be created and held together – as groups, communities, or organizations? In these blinks, you’ll learn how sharing power creates more of it, for everyone. You’ll see how the anti-hierarchical idea of building constellations helped Wikipedia beat out the wealthiest business in the world, won Obama the 2008 election, and created the Great Seal of the United States. You’ll also learn

what the one-dollar bill has to do with the way we think about power; why cities are like snowflakes; and how we can change commencement speeches for the better.

The US was built as a constellation, but has come to embrace the pyramid structure of power.

When the founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776, they felt like something was missing. They’d just cemented the independence of their new nation. But now they needed a good logo for it. Of course, they didn’t call it a logo. They talked about a “Great Seal.” It would be a visual symbol of everything the US stood for: a constellation of 13 colonies with different perspectives, coming together as one nation. Lesser-known politician Charles Thomson took on the task of overseeing its design. First, he had his colleagues Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams come up with some ideas. But Thomson wasn’t satisfied with the results. He formed several committees and brought in a string of consultants to rework the ideas. Each new team ended up adding something to the design, until finally everyone agreed. Here’s the key message: The US was built as a constellation, but has come to embrace the pyramid structure of power. Six years later, on June 20th, 1782, the US Congress finally approved the design of the Great Seal of the United States. It prominently featured a bald eagle, a collection of 13 stars representing the 13 colonies, and a motto: “E Pluribus Unum” – “Out of many, one.” The design echoed how the US and the Seal itself were created: through a constellation of independent actors who brought in different ideas and united them under one goal. This constellation mindset almost represents the original spirit of the US. When Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to the US in the early nineteenth century, he was fascinated by the fact that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite.” But the Great Seal actually has two sides. The other side depicts a pyramid and a different motto: “Novus Ordo Seclorum” – the “new order of the ages.” This second side was designed alongside the first. But it wasn’t used until president Franklin D. Roosevelt rediscovered it in the 1930s. For FDR, the pyramid stood for a New America. It represented stability, authority, and the consolidation of power – even if it was a hierarchical kind of power. FDR wanted to put the pyramid on the new one-dollar bill, right next to the constellation symbol. And he had a note for the design team: put the pyramid first. This marked a significant change

in the American mindset and in the next blink, we'll see what that's all about.

We need to take the leap from a Pyramid structure back to a Constellation mindset.

What's the difference between a pyramid and a constellation? In a pyramid, power consolidates at the top. People are ranked hierarchically according to their function, and they're expected to fulfill just that function. The leaders at the top make all the important decisions, working backward from a fixed destination. This eliminates some of the uncomfortable uncertainty that comes with running a business or an organization. Everyone knows what they should do at all times. But it also leaves no room for flexibility, new ideas, or spontaneous synergy. Society today has fully embraced the pyramid mindset. It's how we try to shield ourselves from uncertainty: by sticking to deadlocked hierarchies. We've convinced ourselves that leading means one powerful individual enforcing decisions. And companies almost exclusively reward individual achievement, not collective power. The key message here is: We need to take the leap from a Pyramid structure back to a Constellation mindset. While the pyramid mindset pervades our lives, many of us yearn for a different way of doing things – one that allows for more community and creativity. But we did once do things differently! In a constellation, power is distributed through a constantly evolving network. People work independently, but towards a common goal – a goal that they help shape. There's still room for leaders. But they don't hoard power at the top. Instead, they share it. This allows constellations to achieve big things through many small actions. Let's consider one example: Wikipedia. Encyclopedias used to be 24-book volumes like the Encyclopedia Britannica, gathering dust on shelves across the world. But then the internet came along, and Microsoft replaced them all with a new digital encyclopedia called Encarta. But even Encarta is now long forgotten. That's because Encarta worked along the same principle as the Encyclopedia Britannica. Power was locked in at the top with the experts who wrote the articles. Articles were slow to edit, and slow to reflect changes. In the beginning, Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales wanted to do things quite similarly. But then his colleague Larry Sanger had another idea. There was a new technology called Wiki that allowed people to write and edit text collaboratively. Why not let anyone share their knowledge, and build a community where people could proof each other's writings? And that's how Wikipedia was born. Now, it has over 6 million entries in the English language alone. It was a constellation mindset that built the biggest knowledge platform known to man.

Mary Parker Follett pioneered the idea of collaborative leadership and integrative organizing.

Peter Drucker, who pioneered many of our current ideas about leadership and management and who died in 2005, was considered one of the great business gurus of all time. But most people don't know that he had a guru himself; Mary Parker Follett. Mary was born near Boston in 1868. Even in high school, she was fascinated by the way

that knowledge and power were distributed in society. As a woman, she often found herself at the bottom of these power structures. But she managed to secure a special scholarship to Harvard. There, she learned from “the father of psychology” himself, William James. For her senior thesis, she studied the way that leadership worked in the House of Representatives. Later, she helped pioneer the concept of community centers, which spread to over 240 cities in her lifetime. The key message? Mary Parker Follett pioneered the idea of collaborative leadership and integrative organizing. Over the course of a lifetime studying organizational structures, setting up community centers, and giving speeches to business leaders, Mary developed her own theories on these matters. And they still inspire today. Firstly, she believed in the power of small groups. She believed that when people come together with open minds – in community centers, for example – they can create power-with instead of power-over. Secondly, she found that the best leaders didn’t rely on hierarchical power. They made people feel like they were generating this power-with, together – by listening to, consolidating, and integrating other people’s ideas. In fact, she thought that integration was the only desirable outcome of any meeting. When people integrate their ideas, they make a new thing together – as Charles Thomson’s many committees did when they designed the Great Seal. Too often though, meetings end in one party’s submission, a hard-fought victory, or a mutually unsatisfying compromise. It’s this win-or-lose strategy that keeps us from true co-creation. Mary’s advice was that we shouldn't go into a meeting ready to force our ideas on people. Instead, we should go in expecting to need others, to be needed, and to be changed. After Mary died of cancer in 1933, her revolutionary ideas were all but forgotten. The crises of the Great Depression and two World Wars demanded the rigid, hierarchical organizational style that she’d questioned. But as we’ll see in the next blink, people are now starting to rediscover her wisdom.

We need to build special relationships that foster interdependence.

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey is one of the most popular business books of our time. And half of the habits described in it are dedicated to a concept pioneered by Mary: interdependence. Interdependence means letting go of that win-lose mindset and striving for mutual connection and co-creation. It means working independently, together. Indeed, most of our important relationships are interdependent. Unless you think about who’s winning your relationship with your mom? Exactly. There’s no reason we need to treat our professional relationships any differently. Data supports how important interconnectedness really is. When Google analyzed data from 180 businesses to find out what makes an effective team, they found that the most distinguishing factor was interdependence. The key message? We need to build special relationships that foster interdependence. But how can we foster interdependence? When Churchill gave his famous Iron Curtain speech after World War II, he advocated for a new, reinforced bond of mutual assistance and collaboration between the US and the UK. He believed that this was the only way to respond to the perceived threat of Stalin’s communist revolution. He called this bond a special relationship. The term is still used between the US and the UK today – sometimes mockingly. But there’s an important idea at its core. What makes a relationship special? In routine relationships, we treat each other according to our function. Consider the professional relationship between an employee and his boss. There are many routine transactions in routine relationships. And when a boss asks something of her employee, for example, he’ll usually conform. But there are also special transactions. Trying to fit

these special transactions into routine relationships creates frustrating friction. That's why we need special relationships. Special relationships foster interdependence. They create a kind of connection that allows for fruitful friction. Between routine transactions and special relationships, we can create a cycle of friction and mitigation that allows us to get big things done. The author calls it a bloom loop. Think of the frictionless, choreographed routine of a family breakfast, versus the friendly chaos of a family dinner. As a diplomat, the author learned how important these special connections really are. And he learned that the best way to build them is to listen attentively to other people's ideas and stories.

Sharing power harnesses the energy of uncertainty.

Barack Obama's 2008 campaign for president was the perfect example of the constellation mindset in action. And as a fundraising strategist, the author was directly involved in its success. In fact, it was he who came up with the low-dollar fundraising events that made all the difference. By the time the election rolled around, Obama's campaign had raised $19 million, as opposed to Hillary Clinton's $16 million. What made the difference? The Clinton campaign was hunting for donors – and so they got hunting results. They captured a few big ones, but most got away. But the Obama campaign was farming. Instead of focusing their energy on roping in a few big campaign donors, they planted seeds. They mobilized thousands of small-dollar donors, and these small-dollar donors, in turn, mobilized more. Here's the key message: Sharing power harnesses the energy of working together towards a common goal. After the success of the fundraising strategy, the Obama campaign blossomed into a full-blown constellation. Under its unofficial campaign of "respect, empower, include", it mobilized thousands of people from all walks of life to share their time, energy, and money to work towards a common goal. When the election neared, campaign leaders made another monumental decision. They gave their most active volunteers decentralized access to the voter file. This way, volunteers could self-organize to make sure that people actually went to the polls. This had never been done before – previous leaders had feared for the precious voter data. But the Obama campaign decided the energy of sharing power with their volunteers would outweigh the risk of data theft. It paid off: on election day, Obama's campaign achieved an unheard-of negative flake rate. In one state, this meant that for every ten people who committed to vote, 15 showed up. In her book The Death and Life of Great American Cities, urban observer Jane Jacobs describes a similar type of organic growth. She observed that great cities are like snowflakes: branching out into ever smaller units. A great city consists of great neighborhoods, great neighborhoods consist of great blocks, and so on. In mathematics, patterns like this are called self-similar, or fractal. Constellations grow fractally, too. The great thing about fractal patterns is that because the base pattern always repeats itself, they can grow without a master plan. So unlike pyramids, constellations thrive on uncertainty. In fact, it helps them grow in power.

It will be hard work to let go of our pyramid mindset – but the future demands it of us.

Once you've discovered how rigid, inflexible, and inhumane the pyramid structure of power really is, it's hard to unsee it. But it's also hard to unlearn it. Even those of us who know better keep backsliding. The author experienced this himself with Obama's 2012 reelection campaign. The feeling of building something big together, which had energized the 2008 election, had largely subsided. The re-election campaign focused more on Obama as a person than the movement surrounding him. And the unofficial slogan "respect, empower, include" was amended by one telling word. It now went: "respect, empower, include, win." The key message here is: It will be hard work to let go of our pyramid mindset – but the future demands it of us. Commencement speeches at university graduations are a good barometer for the things our society values. American radio station NPR recently compared 350 of them to determine the most common themes. Among the top five: "Don't give up," "Embrace failure," and "Work hard." Notice anything? All of this advice addresses one person, and one person only. But out in the real world, we rarely work alone. We sit at big tables with people from all kinds of backgrounds, and we have to find a way to work together. This is increasingly important in a world of growing complexity and mounting uncertainty. This world requires flexibility in our thinking and in our organizations. For that, we'll have to redefine what good leadership means. Recent studies suggest that the leaders of the world's best companies are actually very humble, even shy. But they have something else in common: they're extremely motivated by group achievements. They create space for everyone to succeed, together. We can start by reworking the themes of our graduation speeches – away from the pyramid mindset, and towards a constellation mindset. "Don't give up" would become "Give up power – to make more for everyone." "Embrace failure" would become "Embrace uncertainty." And "Work hard" would become "Work through hard things together." Or, we could simply follow the advice that then-president Obama gave to a young woman at a Q&A in England. The woman asked what she could do to make a positive change in the world. Obama answered: "Be predisposed to see the power in other people."

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Power doesn't have to be organized hierarchically. We need to abandon this pyramid mindset and adopt a constellation mindset that allows us to share power through a network of interdependent connections. Special relationships can help build these connections, and create the fruitful friction that allows us to achieve big things together. And here's some more actionable advice: Foster special relationships with the a.l.s.o. formula As a diplomat, it was the author's job to create and maintain special relationships. He found that the best tools at his disposal were listening skills and patience. We can also sum up the special relationships in the acronym "a.l.s.o.". It stands for asking others what they think, linking their experiences to our own, serving the relationship, and opening up. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with The Power of Giving Away Power as the subject line and share your thoughts!