

Authority & leadership

You do not lead by hitting people over the head. That's assault, not leadership.

— Gen. Dwight Eisenhower (1890-1969)

When we think about leadership, particularly in the context of organisations, we often muddle three different concepts: leadership, authority and, to a lesser extent, power. It is important to untangle these in your thinking.

The *Oxford Dictionary* explains that the English word ‘authority’ comes from the Latin word *auctor*, which describes the ‘originator’ of something: invention, advice/opinion, influence, or command/instruction. The person with *authority* is, thus, someone with the right to judge or decide, to control or command, or to advise. Such a person’s words should be *respected* or *obeyed*, which means another’s actions or beliefs should be influenced by them, i.e. a duty exists towards the authority. Otherwise, the authority is not truly respected and doesn’t have real authority. Of course, any authority can be ignored, i.e. not respected. This is a choice to make. If respected, though, the authority exercises influence, or leadership.

An authority is respected because it is either trusted as truthful/wise/knowledgeable, or backed by some sort of ‘power to command.’ The words of an authority have force because they are supported by something that is actually separate from the person who says them.

A person with *institutional* authority is respected because of the role of that person within an organisation, e.g. the head-of-government or the captain of a team. This authority follows from the respect and status given to the organisation. Such a person may or may not have the backing of coercive powers. In the case of some institutions (e.g. employers) there are powers, but these are voluntarily accepted by those who choose to be part of that organisation. In some cases not.

Consider, now, how people lead our tastes in fashion, music, etc. These people have no official position that compels others to follow, but still people follow their words. This is authority based on the person; this is *referred authority*. In this case, respect is given **voluntarily** to a person because of some feature of that person. You have all been in a group when a voice says, “What a good idea!” Immediately, everyone else thinks so, too, because of the respect you have for that voice’s owner; you have all agreed with the assessment because of something, e.g. wisdom, expertise, charisma, etc, about the person. This is really what advertising is about when it uses ‘celebrity endorsements,’ that are targeted at a particular group which respects the celebrity concerned.

A special case is *expert authority* which is based on the expertise (special knowledge) that the relevant person has, e.g. your dentist. Engineers, when discussing their special technology, speak with expert authority. But you need not respect an expert, as public discussions about climate change have clearly shown. When we act on the advice about a

movie, given by an experienced critic, or the assessment of new phones, by an IT technologist, then we follow leadership (or guidance) of an expert we choose to respect.

(Note that expert authority is closely associated with making technocratic decisions, but that is another topic.)

The leadership of a team may be *assigned* by someone external to the team, typically the authority which established the team. Such a leader would have some form of institutional authority, but may or may not be respected by that team. Alternately, a team's leadership may be *emergent*, which means its members recognise someone as an authority due to 'something' about that person. Such a person gains respect and so influences others. There may be multiple emergent leaders within a team, with different levels of respect accorded depending upon the matter and context under consideration.

Simply put, raw *power* is the ability to cause someone to do what that person would not otherwise do, typically by using credible threats. For example, a mugger could get your phone because of the threat of violence. This is an exercise of power, and has nothing to do with leadership. Some forms of power are legitimate, e.g. the power of the police directing traffic away from an accident. The mugger's power is not. Illegitimate power is always founded on some form of force, be it physical or psychological. Legitimate institutional power is based on assigned roles or achieved status, and may or may not have physical force associated with it. Personal power is based on expertise or deference to someone because of 'something' about that person.

Power will get compliance, but will **not** produce excellence. Effective leaders are those who influence others to do things well, and not just to a minimum standard. Leaders may have coercive power, but choose not to use it. Leadership is about the power to influence and about using influence without coercive power.

Note also that a person engaged in leadership may or may not have institutional authority, and/or legitimate power.

Those who treat their workers harshly, instilling fear into them with angry words and threats, may succeed in compelling their workers to work hard; but workers feel no attachment to such bosses and, at the first opportunity, run away.

— John Chrysostom (c. 347-407)