

# The Nature of Power

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## 1) Preamble:

**"...an essence of power that has yet to be fully articulated." -The 48 Laws of Power**

Contained within this piece is wisdom that most people can feel subconsciously, but few have ever articulated consciously.

## 2) Power Imbalances:

A 'superior' is simply someone who wields more power over you than you do over them, while a 'subordinate' is someone whom you wield more power over than they do over you.

A power imbalance can be defined as the power the other party wields over you, minus the power you wield over them.

This begs the question *what gives one party power over another?*

Most forms of power boil down to either a *carrot* or a *stick*. A carrot is a potential reward; *do as I say or I will deny you X*. A stick is a potential harm; *do as I say or you will suffer Y*.

A steep power imbalance is one where the gap between the power of one party and the other is so big that it's undeniable. A shallow power imbalance is one where there *is* a gap between the power of one party and the other, but the gap isn't obvious; it is quite plausible to maintain the pretense that the power of each party is equal. *Zero* power imbalance is a case where the power each party wields over the other is equal or close to equal.

In modern America, carrot power is far more common than stick power. An ancient king ruled over peasants by saying "Do what I say, or you will be killed" (extreme stick power). A modern capitalist rules over his wage slaves by saying "Do what I say, or you will be denied your wages, and starve to death" (extreme carrot power).

Thinking of carrot power as gentle and stick power as harsh is foolish. Both carrot and stick power can have deadly consequences.

In any relationship where there is a steep power imbalance, one party is a master and the other is a slave.

If you are ever in a situation where another person wields the power to destroy your life, and you wield no significant power over them, you are a slave to them. In modern America nobody is ever called a 'slave', but there are plenty of employees who are slaves in everything but name.

It should be noted that the *\*perceived\** balance of power is what determines how people behave, not the actual balance of power.

### **3) Top Down Exploitation:**

It is inevitable that those towards the top of a dominance hierarchy wield more power over those towards the bottom than vice versa; indeed in some sense this is what it means to be towards the 'top' of a hierarchy.

It is also inevitable that those towards the top will exploit those towards the bottom for their own gain, simply because they can.

Many communists blame this on capitalism, calling it 'Capitalist Exploitation', but this is to drastically underestimate how deeply rooted the problem is.

Top Down Exploitation is a feature of every society (macro dominance hierarchy), whether capitalist, feudalism, socialist, or communist.

The *degree* of exploitation may vary from one society to another, but the fact of its existence does not.

#### **4) Commonality of Conflict:**

If 2 people with power levels far apart encounter each other the probability of conflict or argument is very low. The less powerful person will instinctively submit to the will of the more powerful person, lest they face the wrath of the more powerful person.

Conflict is far more likely when 2 people of roughly equal power encounter one another; each person could conceivably win the conflict, so both are willing to fight.

Middle managers starting arguments with CEOs is rare, but middle managers starting arguments with other middle managers is common.

#### **5) Rules, Dealing With Superiors:**

What follows are guidelines for interacting with your superiors (those who wield more power over you than you do over them).

Most of these are things most people do instinctively, however it is useful to be consciously aware of them.

##### **5A) Hide Your Displeasure, Fake Your Contentment, Follow Orders**

**“It is foolish to get angry with people whose power is so great that you can not hope to win. Even if they offend you, you must grin and bear it.” -Francesco Guicciardini**

When in the presence of your superiors, you must always appear to be happy or at least neutral. You must also follow every order they give you.

*Never* complain or express any displeasure. Never express any anger or disdain towards one of your superiors. Violate this, and it is likely to annoy one of your superiors enough such that they will use whatever power they wield over you to wreck you.

Expressing anger or displeasure towards a superior is tactical suicide; it sounds obvious, yet many have ruined their lives by doing this.

In the venue of Office Politics in particular, you must hide your displeasure and fake your contentment so that your superiors view you as being a worker with a 'good attitude'; someone worthy of promotion.

## **5B) Charm Works, Intimidation is Suicide**

When dealing with superiors, charm and persuasion are the only tools available to you.

Attempting to use intimidation on a superior for the sake of coercing them into cooperation is tactical suicide. Your petty attempt will annoy them, possibly so much that they use the power they wield over you to wreck you.

## **5C) Never Outshine Them (Law 1)**

If it is ever the case that you have a superior who dislikes you and there isn't an apparent reason why, it is most likely because they feel you have not been sufficiently obsequious in your dealings with them.

## **5D) Be Calm and Confident**

There is a paradox. You must not outshine your superiors, but on the other hand if you look like a nervous wreck it makes them perceive you are someone unworthy of their respect.

Within the venue of Office Politics this is fatal since it makes your superiors perceive you are unworthy of promotion.

Your superiors should perceive you are *calm* and confident, but not arrogant.

When meeting an immensely powerful person (billionaire), *don't* give them hero worship. Express modest admiration for their accomplishments, but don't crumble at their feet the way most people do. This causes them to view you as respectable; a worthy courtier, rather than a common peasant.

## **5E) Appear Receptive to Their Advice**

Most advice from most people is garbage. However, when someone gives you advice you must *appear* receptive to it; if you appear unreceptive to their advice they will feel insulted.

This is all the more true when dealing with a superior.

## **5F) Criticize Gently and Indirectly**

Generally speaking when dealing with superiors you shouldn't criticize them at all, even if they are engaging in foolishness.

The upside reward of correcting their behavior is small, whereas the downside risk of them disliking you and punishing you is catastrophic.

There may however be times when some correction is necessary, lest their foolishness lead to you suffering as collateral damage. In such cases, deliver criticism as gently and politely as possible.

## **5G) Regulate Your Speech**

In the presence of superiors, every word that comes out of your mouth must be calculated (use PowerTalk).

The stakes are very high; say one wrong thing, one phrase that offends their sensibilities, and it could lead to them using the power they wield to wreck you.

## **5H) Analyze Their Personality**

Whenever interacting with a superior, you should be analyzing their body language, vocal tonality, and psychological profile as deeply as possible.

You 'should' do this with every person you encounter, but especially so with your superiors; they are worth the effort expended on such analysis, because they wield immense power over your fate in life.

## **5I) Reflections on Superiors**

These guidelines may sound obvious, yet many otherwise intelligent people destroy their lives by violating them. Many will fail to hide their displeasure, since some combination of annoyance and ego compels them to express displeasure and even anger towards a superior.

Others will fail to sufficiently filter their speech, and many put no effort into consciously analyzing the personalities of their superiors.

Of the guidelines listed above by far the most important is this: *hide your displeasure, fake your contentment, and follow orders.*

If a superior rebukes you for a mistake you must appear to be apologetic and receptive to any corrective advice they give, even if the mistake exists only in their imagination and their advice is useless. Honesty is not a good strategy; faking your contentment and agreement is.

## **6) Rules, Dealing With Subordinates:**

**"It is unwise to insult or offend the taste of people...even if they are below or equal to you. It is always beneficial to play the obliging courtier, even when you are not serving a master." –Law 24**

Dealing with subordinates is not nearly as high stakes as dealing with superiors; by definition your subordinates don't wield the power to destroy you.

Nonetheless, some general guidelines are useful.

### **6A) Hide Your Displeasure, Fake Your Contentment**

When interacting with superiors this is mandatory, with subordinates it is optional but highly recommended. Don't express any displeasure towards your subordinates unnecessarily.

Some subordinates will hate you and desire to harm you simply due to the fact that you are their superior. However, if you express any displeasure towards them unnecessarily, you only increase the percentage of subordinates who fall into this category.

### **6B) Necessary Tyranny Only**

Some tyranny may be necessary for the sake of enforcing order and making things run smoothly. However, if you are unnecessarily tyrannical you will cause your subordinates to hate you more than they otherwise would.

Too much tyranny breeds rebellion because your subordinates cannot tolerate living under your rule. Too little tyranny breeds disobedience since you appear weak. A balance must be struck.

### **6C) Charm Often, Intimidate Rarely**

When interacting with superiors charm is your only weapon; intimidation is out of the question. When dealing with subordinates, charm and intimidation are both tools at your disposal.

Use charm as often as possible and intimidation as rarely as possible; you want to minimize the percentage of subordinates who hate you, and the degree to which they hate you.

### **6D) Regulate Your Speech**

This is critical with subordinates just as with superiors.

Beware that every word you say in front of one of your subordinates may later be repeated in front of others, including one of your superiors. Operate under the assumption that your subordinates have loose lips; most of them will.

## **6E) Don't Punish Truthtellers**

If you punish your subordinates for telling you the truth because the truth offends your sensibilities, you will in a Pavlovian manner train your subordinates to be yes men who only tell you what you want to hear. This will prevent you from getting an accurate view of reality, and have catastrophic consequences.

## **6F) Don't Trust Them**

Your subordinates will be far nicer to you than most people. Why? They are attempting to charm you, to win your favor. Don't fall for this. They are not loyal to you; only your power.

This may sound obvious, yet there are plenty of otherwise intelligent billionaires who have had people kissing their feet for so long they have become convinced that people everywhere love them for their personality.

## **7) Monitoring Behavior:**

People instinctively monitor their behavior (body language and speech) when in the presence of superiors, but less so when in the presence of subordinates, and not at all when alone.

One consequence of this is that a person's subordinates usually have a far more accurate view of their personality than their superiors; their superiors see a mask, whereas their subordinates see their real self, or at least a mask that is less thick.

## **8) High Status Wins Favors, Low Status Gives Invisibility**

Generally speaking it is wise to make people perceive you are as high status as possible since it makes them more eager to do you favors and more hesitant to harm you (since they assume you wield the power to repay a favor in a meaningful way, and also the power to retaliate in a meaningful way).

That said, keep in mind that there are situations where it is advantageous to make people perceive you are low status; it gives you a cloak of invisibility.

When people perceive you are low status (low in the hierarchy), they pay very little attention to you and they monitor their behavior very little when in your presence. This

can be advantageous for intelligence gathering; you are invisible, and your targets put no great effort into concealing their real selves.

## **9) Power and Cortisol:**

Interacting with a superior is an intrinsically stress inducing experience (cortisol increasing). Why? Because even if the superior is kindhearted and means you no harm, your hindbrain gets the message “This person is dangerous; they have the power to destroy me!”

Interacting with a superior is stressful for the same reason that having a venomous snake sleeping on your chest is stressful; regardless of whether or not they intend to harm you, they have the potential to destroy you if they become so inclined.

The higher you are in the dominance hierarchy, the less often you will be interacting with superiors. The lower you are in the dominance hierarchy, the more often you will be interacting with superiors. This may explain why people located toward the top of hierarchies are far less stressed than those towards the bottom; it is less often that they are subjected to the cortisol inducing experience of interacting with superiors.

## **10) Epilogue:**

Power is fickle; a person who is powerless today may be in a position of power tomorrow, and vice versa.

As such be careful with how you treat those below you in the hierarchy; the day may come when the tables are turned, and people remember past harms for a long time.