

7. Workplace Power Moves: What They Are, How to Handle Them

This lesson deals with some of the most common workplace power moves.

Making You Wait

When someone makes you wait he is communicating that he is:

1. More dominant as it's a slight sign of disrespect (you don't let your boss wait usually)
2. Higher value (their time matters more than yours)
3. Less in need (if you're waiting, you probably need them more)

And here is how you can restore power balance:

1. Prevention: Meet at Your Convenience

Prevention always goes a long way.
Here are a few steps I routinely deploy:

Meet Close to Your Place Whenever you can, always try to avoid the "come by at my office"

Confirm The Meeting Confirm in the morning, which will make them look sloppy if they make you wait (ie.: bad time management)

Plan B Something you will do instead of waiting (ie.: carry a Kindle or audiobooks).

2. Start Without Them

If you are sitting at a dinner table, order.

If waiting outside the office for lunch, go by yourself. If you are presiding a meeting, start the meeting without them.

Once people join the meeting late they will feel they have been marginalized and might try to grab attention. They might say “*sorry I was very busy*“, or “*sorry, what have you guys said so far*“.

Don’t dignify their excuse or you are giving them power back.

Instead, say it’s OK, but say so very nonchalantly and then move on. If they ask you a question, don’t reply verbally or reply the bare minimum.

If they ask for a recap, don’t give a recap and say you will take it offline 1:1 after you’re done. If you can’t avoid answering because it’s your boss, add a little zinger in there. Something like:

***You:** Yes, this is important for you to know so I’ll repeat. Since everyone else has already heard it I’ll be brief*

Notice: “*this is important for you to know so I’ll repeat*” is a great way to reduce your compliance to your boss. Instead of just following the order you add that you repeat because it’s important for them to know, not because they just told you.

Example:

McGregor was playing the waiting game on Khabib, who righteously pushed the organizer to start:

<https://youtu.be/U409sgC1EAc>

Khabib largely denied McGregor’s power move by starting the conference. When McGregor arrived, it looked like a poorly executed power move.

3. Busy Yourself

Instead of sitting and doing nothing in a lobby, start reading from an ebook reader, make a call, pull out the laptop to work or listen to an audiobook.

4. Even The Scores: Let Them Wait

When he shows up, let him greet you first and be slightly colder than usual in your greetings.

If you are behind a laptop screen or if you were reading an ebook, don't raise your head just because you heard someone coming: that makes you look like you can't take your mind off of them.

Instead, let them speak first, and then slowly raise your head. Then, pack without hurrying.

If you were on the phone, greet him nonverbally as you wrap up the call and make him wait for the handshake.

Notice Ashton Kutcher doesn't say anything when his date arrives late and is rather cold and standoffish (turns his head the other way, looks ahead in the space).

He puts social pressure on her to speak first, which helps restore some power balance:

<https://youtu.be/BlaSFuiaTf0>

Note: she's very shrewd though and hell-bent in keeping the power on her side. She leads towards the table first, thus forcing him to follow. She's a game player.

5. Address it Directly

If you are on the same level or if you are above in the company or social hierarchy, be direct.

Tell them their behavior is improper and please not to do so anymore without any warning. If you are below in the organization but their belatedness is constant, you can also address it directly -but politely-.

6. Address It Indirectly At Job Interview

With a job interviewer or someone with higher authority, you can address it indirectly.

For example, you could look at your watch when they enter the room. Or highlight their move like this:

You: Hi, pleasure meeting you, I was thinking something happened

You: Hi, good to see you, I was getting worried everything was OK

Notice especially the second one: it feigns interest in them while it actually pushes them to explain. When they explain themselves, they are giving you power.
Awesome power move.

Inappropriate Comments

Inappropriate comments are power moves because they communicate that “yes, I can break the rules and disrespect you”.

They are low-quality power moves though, more typical of the assholes or of the “funny” guys trying to look stronger.
Here are some good steps to dealing with inappropriate comments:

Keep your cool

They are trying to get a reaction out of you.
The signs that they got under your skin show that they have the power to rattle you. Don't give them that victory.

Stern gaze

Turn towards them full-frontal, which shows you're serious about it.
Give a strong and stern eye contact but without opening your eyes too wide (looks crazy) or furrowing your eyebrows (too aggressive).

Shame them

Inappropriate comments are easy to shame by virtue of their inappropriateness.
I like this example from [Daden Helgin](#) in case of a “woman joke”, which we saw earlier:

You: The idea that women are somewhat inferior has been put to rest since a long time, but I'm really astonished of hearing it from you

As soon as they backtrack, which they most likely will, you won -and earned the power upper hand in the relationship-.

Pause

After your delivery, pause for a few seconds.
They are the ones in the wrong and you want to put social pressure on them to backtrack, defend or excuse themselves.

Get stern if it continues

If it was a heavy comment or if it happens a second time, I like what [Renee Evenson](#) recommends you tell them:

***You:** Going forward I expect you to treat me respectfully. If you can't, then please don't say anything to me.*

Fixing Mistakes

Most self-help gurus tell you to invite criticism.

And that's true: you should seek criticism.
But public criticism at work is different than private feedback and mentoring.

From a power perspective **when people fix your mistakes they are decreasing your social status and increasing theirs.**

This is what it communicates:

1. I have more status to be able to correct you (or I'm not intimidated)
2. I am more knowledgeable than you are (or you are sloppy)
3. You are not an authority if you make mistakes on your own turf

It's not easy defending from mistake fixers in business because, officially, truth and results matter (on paper) and people are *supposed* to care about common good instead of personal power.

When you react hurt or annoyed to mistake fixers, you communicate you are making it personal instead of making it about the team, the results and the company.

As an example, look at this video from “Up In The Air”:

<https://youtu.be/UCmBK9cGYO4>

Imagine this scene if she had reacted in the boss’ office by telling him he was only playing a game because he was jealous and was trying to make her look bad.

Maybe that was true, but she would have looked petty and lost even more power.

Dealing With Mistake Fixers

When someone publicly fixes your mistake, you have three options:

1. Insist on your point of view
2. Guide them to correct you while you maintain leadership
3. Pretend you’re eager to know the truth

1. Insist On Your Point of View

If you are discussing opinions and not numbers, you can view it as a battle of frames and insist on your point of view.

Here is an example:

<https://youtu.be/sob390UY9Go>

This is an opinion when there is no straight answer and when you have more power -in the case above, simply for holding the stage-. How can you glean from the video above that the speaker has more power? It’s because the audience laughs. When you have more power one of your levers of leverage is that more people are willing to take your side.

2. Guide them to Correct You

If you are not sure whether you're right or wrong or don't want to take risks, you can invite the person to weigh in while you keep control of the overall interaction.

For example:

***You:** (...) and this is why we increased revenues by 2% this month*

***Him:** Actually, if I may interject, I think the reason is different*

***You:** That's what my analysis yielded, but I am very curious to hear your opinion, would you please share it with us (holding the reins of the interaction here)*

***Him:** The real reason is because of our sales discount, which increased sales by 4%, but given the 50% discount only accounted for 2%*

***You:** That's a very good point, we did take the discount into account, but based on our observations we believe that the new product simply had more pull*

This option is very leader-like.

It looks like all you care is the truth and you let them shine a bit while you still come out of like the most powerful individual in the room.

Never make it a battle of will if you go for this option and you will look magnanimous and leader-like.

Even if their correction shows a mistake you can't address, you still end up losing less power if you guide the correction.

3. Be Eager for Truth

Finally, if you were sorely wrong, your best option is to pretend that you are very happy they corrected you.

This technique is exactly the same one we saw with a boss giving you orders and you pretending you take ownership of that order.

The role you take here is that of the man who's in search of the truth, no matter where it comes from.

People respect this approach naturally because it shows strong control over oneself. And the best leaders are searchers of truth.

Dealing With Taskers

We already met the taskers, or the people giving you a task to force a leader/subordinate relationship on you.

Here are a few ways you deal with it:

Avoid escalation unless their tasking was obviously rude

Approaching it directly is dangerous.

You can only do if they were obviously rude or if the task they demand makes no sense.

Because otherwise, they will spin it to make you look selfish, like this:

***Tasker:** can you please take care of filling the data in the McKenzie brief by today*

***You:** can you please stop assigning me tasks, you're not my boss and I'm doing something here*

***Tasker:** it's not about who gives tasks Lucio, it's about getting it done*

See what they did there?

They positioned themselves as real leaders interested in the results. And they make you look petty in the process.

You must avoid them framing you as petty at all costs because that's difficult to reframe without further escalating.

And 99% of people, when framed as petty like in the above example, end up getting overly emotional and overreacting.

Frame them as pawning off work

Make it look like they are trying to avoid work, or that you are doing important stuff and they are slowing you down:

***Tasker:** can you please take care of filling the data in the McKenzie brief by today*

***You:** wait, I don't understand, why are you asking me to do that*

***Tasker:** because we need it done by tomorrow*

***You:** that's true, but it's your task, you need to get it done by tomorrow*

***Tasker:** no, boss said the team needs it by tomorrow*

***You:** the team needs by tomorrow and boss told you to take care of it because I am taking care of customers outreach. Pardon me to say it, we need to make money here and now let me get back to it if you don't mind*

Here you win because you show present yourself as busy with company-crucial tasks and you frame them like getting in the way of company-crucial tasks.

If they keep going frame them as time-wasters:

***You:** Look this conversation is going nowhere and I need to stay very focused on the customers right now, please take care of your own tasks and lemme focus*

If they are below you in the pecking order (albeit not your direct reports) it's also OK to say:

***You:** Look I am wasting my time and I don't like wasting my time. Please take care of your own tasks and I am done with this discussion*

Keep delivering great results

It's easier for the tasker to task you if they are doing more important work.

That's why working on important projects and delivering great results gives you huge leverage with taskers.

Be busy

It's more difficult saying no to taskers if you're watching YouTube.

If you need to slack off, go for a walk, book a meeting room or sit on a beanbag where nobody can see your screen.

Look for opportunities to task them

Get involved in a high priority project, find a huge potential customer or take the lead on crisis response.

Then ask your boss if you can get Tasker as a support, so you get some more official authority on your side.

Commanding You To Do Your Tasks

This is really one of the most annoying workplace power moves.

I call them "hollow commands".

Here what it consists of: they tell you to do something that you were going to do anyway or which was so obviously part of your tasks that it didn't need to be said.

For example:

You: *Awesome! Our prospect has just sent me all the docs!*

Compliance Guy: *Cool*

You: *I will send it to you for review*

Compliance Guy: *Please send them to me and please make sure to upload them on the drive*

You had just told him you were going to send him the documents, there was no reason to say “please send them to me”. And uploading them on the drive is a standard procedure, but they make a standard procedure you were going to do anyway sound like a command, so it looks like they have authority over you.

Beating Hollow Commands

Here is how you can deal with hollow commands:

You: *Matt, wait!*

Compliance Guy: *What*

You: *Why do you that?*

Compliance Guy: *Do what*

You: *Making commands out of things I will do anyway. It's like you're playing power games here man, jostling for status over me or something. It creates a bad vibe*

Compliance Guy: *Uh? no, I was just reminding you*

You: *Reminding is good, but it's annoying reminding people of things they will do anyway. Imagine if I started reminding you to run the financials everyday you will probably find it annoying, right? You'd probably say “why the hell is he reminding me to do what I do anyway every single day”*

Compliance Guy: *I don't know man, I was just saying, don't make it so difficult*

You: *I agree. Let's also agree to stop playing “command and remind games” then. Cheers.*

You'll notice that in this exchange it doesn't sound like you scored a clear win because they didn't backtrack. But that's OK.

You were still successful: your minimum goal is to make their game so painful and embarrassing to deploy that they will soon drop it.

Hollow taskers feel strong because few people have the guts to address their behavior and risk an escalation like the one above. But if you're reading here you're not aiming for average and you must force yourself.

Next time they do the same you can just add "oh-oh there he goes again" and they will know you caught them. Keep doing it a few times and chances are you won't have to do it ever again.

Leading Braggarts to Social Suicide

This is a trap I fell into on my very first job.

I was part of a batch of graduates on one of those "talent rotational programme". The last rotation was abroad and there was only one place for the best performer of the batch.

At the end of each assignment, we had to present our results to all our mentors combined (all drawn from senior managers).

I was not as good at social dynamics back then and sometimes ended up blowing my own horn a bit too much. Talking about myself, I said that "presentation and communication was one of my skills".

One of the senior managers, whom I later got to know was trying to help his mentee to win, asked me:

"OK, so you're good at presenting?".

And there and then the mothaf*cker had just passed me the rope to hang myself and make me sound conceited.

Eager to answer with a positive attitude I said “yes”.

Do you recognize this technique now?
We’ve already seen it with verbal attacks and racist jokes.

And it’s the same technique you want to use with [frenemies](#), underhanded compliments or with anyone who’s being nasty in public: you give them even *more* space to be nasty so that they can be even nastier in front of everyone.

You want to draw them out.

Whenever you have a colleague who is bragging, or who seems too intent in looking brilliant for the boss, don’t try to go against them. Set them up for their own bragging to become even more obvious instead: people don’t like braggarts anyway.

Ask them if their former boss was an idiot, ask them if they were the top performer.
Or, even better, pay them a compliment which they will have to correct you for and for which they will sound even more conceited.

If they were in the top 10% of their university, ask them “oh yeah, you were in the top 20% right?”.
When they will correct you, they will sound even vainer.

Name The Game – Win The Freedom

Remember “going meta?”.

Going meta consists in explaining the game people are playing. It's super effective, and while you dismantle their power move, you also look incredible socially intelligent and leader-like.

Even if you keep it for yourself, it still allows you to more clearly see the game, reduces the feelings of guilt and detaches yourself from the situation.

And it will make it easier for you to act assertively.

Here are a few common games:

Power Mover: *Come on man, you are the coding genius here, we are lost without you. Only you in the world can help us.*

Game: flattery.

Power Mover: *It's just a small feature change, it will take you 5 minutes*

Game: minimization + slippery slope technique

The slippery slope technique is to make something sound easier, and then once you started, you're trapped with the tasks even if it takes a whole day.

Power Mover: *You know man, I have done a lot of stuff for you and I am always willing to help. Can you just do this one little thing*

Game: guilt-tripping

Power Mover: *But you said you would help. That's how you keep your word?*

Game: misrepresentation of your words + emotional manipulation

Power Mover: *What do you think will happen when the guys complain and the boss finds out?*

Game: threat

Power Mover: *I'm just raising a red flag man. It can help you -and all of us- avoid future troubles. If we fix it now, it means no problems down the road*

Game: good cop

Power Mover: *We're friends man, can't you do it for our friendship*

Game: guilt-tripping.

And a very nasty one at that, drop these types of "friends" from your friends' list.

Power Mover: *When you will need something I will remember this and will do it for you*

Game: carrot game + threat

The unstated threat is that if you *don't* do it, he will also remember it

Power Mover: *Alright, let's do it like this then, just help me out with the beginning and then I'll take it over. Or if it's getting too difficult, then we'll give it to someone else*

Game: minimization + potential false promise + slipper slope technique

I recommend you answer each of these assault by telling the power mover exactly what they're doing and what techniques they are using. If you can't remember the exact type, just say "emotional manipulation": it always applies well anyway.

Then shame them while you compliment them at the same time to avoid making enemies.

How?

You tell them that these manipulative techniques don't belong to the high quality, respectful person they are.

This also increases the chance they will comply as you uphold them against higher values (Dale Carnegie).

If you want to take an even bigger judge position on them, you can add "I expect better from you man".