

3. The 10 Hidden Social Power Moves (& How to Handle Them)

<https://youtu.be/isO9KGkru48>

Social power moves have one of the following objectives:

1. Increase social status
2. Become the authority / leader
3. Become the judge / moral authority
4. Increase one's own perceived contribution to the social exchange

The problem is that if you are on the receiving end, then you *lose* status / authority / social contribution (ie.: you become “socially indebted”).

Some social power moves are easy to spot, but some of them are not. Some of them actually seem friendly, and they are the persuasion equivalent of subliminal messages.

Many people who haven't yet developed a strong emotional intelligence don't even see them.

This lesson will show you the “subliminal” social power moves.

When Power Moves Hide Behind Social Conventions

The social power moves listed below are extremely common.

But don't get swayed by their commonalities: they still have a huge impact on power dynamics. As a matter of fact, *because* they are so common they have a disproportionate impact on social dynamics.

1. “*I Was Busy*”

This is one of the most common and pervasive power moves out there.

But don't let the pervasiveness fool you, because this is the rule of thumb: **the more people are too busy for you, the more subservient to them you are.**

This is what "too busy" says:

I was busy (with more important things) to take care of your (less important) thing

You, or your task, were not high priority enough for them to take care of.

"Sorry I was busy" says that they have more important things to do and, ultimately, that they are more important than you (higher social status).

But could it be that they were really just too busy?

Of course!

And even then, it's *still* a power move.

Just think about it: would anyone who cares about their job be too busy for their boss? Or for the man/woman of their dreams?

Exactly.

It's never a matter of business, it's always a matter of priority.

Telling someone you were too busy is akin to saying "you aren't high enough a priority".

Similar expressions are:

I didn't have time

I had to take care of a few things

I meant to get back to you, but then a few things came up..

Beating “I Was Too Busy”

Imagine this dating scenario:

***You:** Hi Gina, I wrote you the other day to schedule a coffe*

***Her:** Yes, sorry I was crazy busy these days*

Let's analyze a few ways most people reply to that:

***You:** what were you busy with?*

This is not ideal because she is now expanding and focusing on everything which is a higher priority than you are.

Also, it's possible that she wasn't busy with anything, which is forcing her to make up stories now. That reinforces in her mind you are a bothersome man she is bending over backward... *In order to avoid.*

Not what you want.

Here is another typical reply:

***You:** No worries, life happens*

This is the neutral reply.

It's good because making an excuse for her yourself, it gets her off the hook and does not make you a burden.

But it's still not ideal. You are downplaying her non-reply, but you are also still the one down.

The best ways to reply are:

***You:** Yeah, that's too bad. Sorry that I didn't remind you either, sometimes life just gets too hectic*

Begins honest and sincere: you confirm a certain interest in her.
And then level the playing field by implying she wasn't high priority enough to pursue harder.

Here is a stronger power move reply:

***You:** All cool. I just got back in town from a video shoot and wanted to catch up to see what's happening in town.*

You seemed like a gal who's into the good life here.

But how have you been.

First raises his own value and downplays his interest by implying he only wanted to be social.

Then raises her value again saying she seems one of the cool people.
This part is important otherwise you sound like you're bragging and trying too hard to devalue her.

"but how have you been" ends with a slight deprecatory note. It implies she hasn't been doing anything nearly as exciting as you have.

And if you two aren't very close, here is the power move reply:

***You:** That's how life goes most of the times. (looking at her with a fake embarrassed expression) Sorry... I'm really bad with names...*

Oh yeah right, of course Gina!

And here are the answers to a similar "sorry I didn't reply" plotted on a chart:

Clueless	Smarter	Power Mover
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"I have noticed"

No worries

Oh right, now I remember you! Sorry, I just got back from a crazy world tour. How have you been!

"I was waiting for it"

We all get busy

Thanks God, I wasn't able to meet anyone during our launch phase. Now thankfully we're through.

Why didn't you

You didn't.. ? I don't even remember...

Reply.. (pretend don't understand)? Oh right (you just remembered her). Sorry I'm really bad with names.. (fake embarrassed)?

2. "I'm Sorry"

Would you ever think that "I'm sorry" could be a power move?

On many, many occasions, that's just what it is.

Think of the power relationship it entails: it means that someone has hurt you or caused you harm.

And, from a social power point of view, it's the one who has the most power to hurt the other who usually has also most overall power.

Imagine all these situations:

***Her:** I'm sorry you felt hurt that me and Max spoke for so long*

True Meaning: I'm sorry (that I am so attractive and above your league that you get hurt because of it)

Or imagine this one:

Coach: *I'm sorry that I yelled at you in front of the team*

True Meaning: *"I'm sorry that I (can) yell at you (while you have to take it) in front of the team (and destroyed your reputation so easily... Because I can destroy your reputation).*

Or:

Boss: *I'm sorry that I said you're useless in front of the customer*

True Meaning: *"I'm sorry I'm the boss and you are the underling, and even if you bring the customers in, I can still pull rank on you any time I want".*

Look at this example from Spread:

<https://youtu.be/RonrK-166F0>

He is basically reminding her that he kicked her out (very dominant) and that he made her feel bad (very powerful).

She is a very socially skilled woman and doesn't commit the obvious mistake of saying "it's OK" or "no problem", which would confirm his power over her.

Instead, she cuts right past the "I'm sorry" power move. Not bad.

This is not to say that all "I'm sorry" are power moves, of course. Some are genuine and give you power. But some of them have are 100% power moves: [check out this example](#).

What I am saying is that, often, the power flows away from the receiver and on to the apologizer.

The receiver must be aware of it and maneuver to neutralize or minimize that power differential.

Beating "I'm Sorry"

How do you react to “I’m sorry” power moves?

Don’t say “thank you for saying that”, don’t look like you were indeed hurt by their behavior and don’t let the exchange linger on the apology phase for too long.

The longer you linger on the “sorry” phase, the more you highlight you’re the one down.

Instead, minimize it, rebuild your own status with a quick comment and then move on very as quickly.

Something like this:

***You:** nono, it’s all good, I’m (doing) great. Anyway, I’ve heard that... “*

If you want to answer with another power move back, you can use this one:

***You:** I forgive you*

By saying “I forgive you”(or: “I accept your apology”) you shift the power from them to you. *You* could decide whether or not to forgive, and *you* decided to grant absolution.

If you want to go down harder, you should make the apology a *real* apology.

Like this:

***Boss:** I’m sorry that I said you’re useless in front of the customer*

***You:** Do you understand why that was wrong and how it makes us lose credibility?*

***Boss:** I do, and that’s why I’m telling you I’m sorry*

***You:** If you understanding why it wasn’t cool, then we can move on. But make sure it won’t happen again please*

***Boss:** You have my word*

***You:** I am really glad to hear that, thank you boss. Back to doing some great stuff together now. Let’s do lunch as soon as we’re free, cheers!*

Exception: there are situations just “I’m sorry” is enough to rebalance the power.

For example, if the coach screamed at you in front of the team and *you* requested him to apologize to you in front of the whole team, then it’s *your* power move. In that case, you can take charge of it and build upon it.

Say “it’s OK coach, I’m glad you are making up for it. We can move on”.

3. Forgetting You (Or Pretending To)

The dynamic is the same as with being busy: **the less someone remembers you, the more important they make themselves to be.**

When someone doesn’t remember or, sometimes, pretends they don’t remember you, they are saying that you are a low priority in their life - or that their life is so full of important things that they must be higher quality than you are-.

The mistake that many do here is trying to feed the power mover with information to help them remember you.

When you help people remember you, you are playing into their hands and further highlighting the power differential.

Dealing With Forgetful Power Movers

Look at this scene from “Play the Game” and think of what he is doing wrong:

<https://youtu.be/YVSJNiniBy8>

Notice that as he feeds her information about him one issue becomes more and more obvious: she didn’t care enough to remember.

On the other hand, he remembered everything about her, thus communicating it was a big thing for him.

He is heavily invested, she is not.

If he had pretended not to remember either, it would have been a neutral interaction instead.

Alternatively, after he had already admitted he knew her, he could have pretended it was a vague memory.

Indeed, **you deal with forgetful power moves by pretending you also don't remember.**

Or if you already told them where do you remember from, then say it's just a vague memory and move on right away.

Or, finally, you can say you are confusing them with someone because "there are lots of blondes in this city", or whatever peculiar characteristic they have, which is also slightly demeaning.

4. Loaded Questions

Loaded and leading questions are not exactly the same, but they're similar enough that we can consider them together.

Both of them are designed to wrestle control of the interaction and push you either into a defensive position or into the position the asker has chosen for you -which rarely if ever is a position you want to be in-
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Sometimes loaded questions are obvious, but many more times they are not as easy to spot. An example of a loaded question could be your partner being super emotional and asking you:

Her: how could you do such a terrible thing to me

If she says it very emotionally her words sound congruent and many people miss the preconceived frame those words entail.

The preconceived frame within that expression is that you did do something *terrible*.

Of course, you *might* have done something bad.

But who says it was “terrible”?

Maybe it was just “bad” or it was a “terrible mistake”, which is much different than just “terrible”.

By accepting the adjective “terrible” though, you are immediately cast as the evil one, and at that point, you can only explain, defend and hope to make it up to your partner.

Beating Loaded Question

Do you remember framing from the first module?

Leading questions are attempts to lead you, or trick you, into accepting one’s frame of reference.

And when you do accept it, it doesn’t even matter how you reply to a leading question. Whether you agree, defend or push back, you are still buying into their frames.

The only way to answer leading questions is by rejecting them. And two particularly effective ways of rejecting the frame are to:

1. Explain you don’t agree with their choice of words and change it to what’s most suitable
2. Explain them -and to everyone around- what their game is with the leading question

You want to use the first one when you want to be kind and understanding.

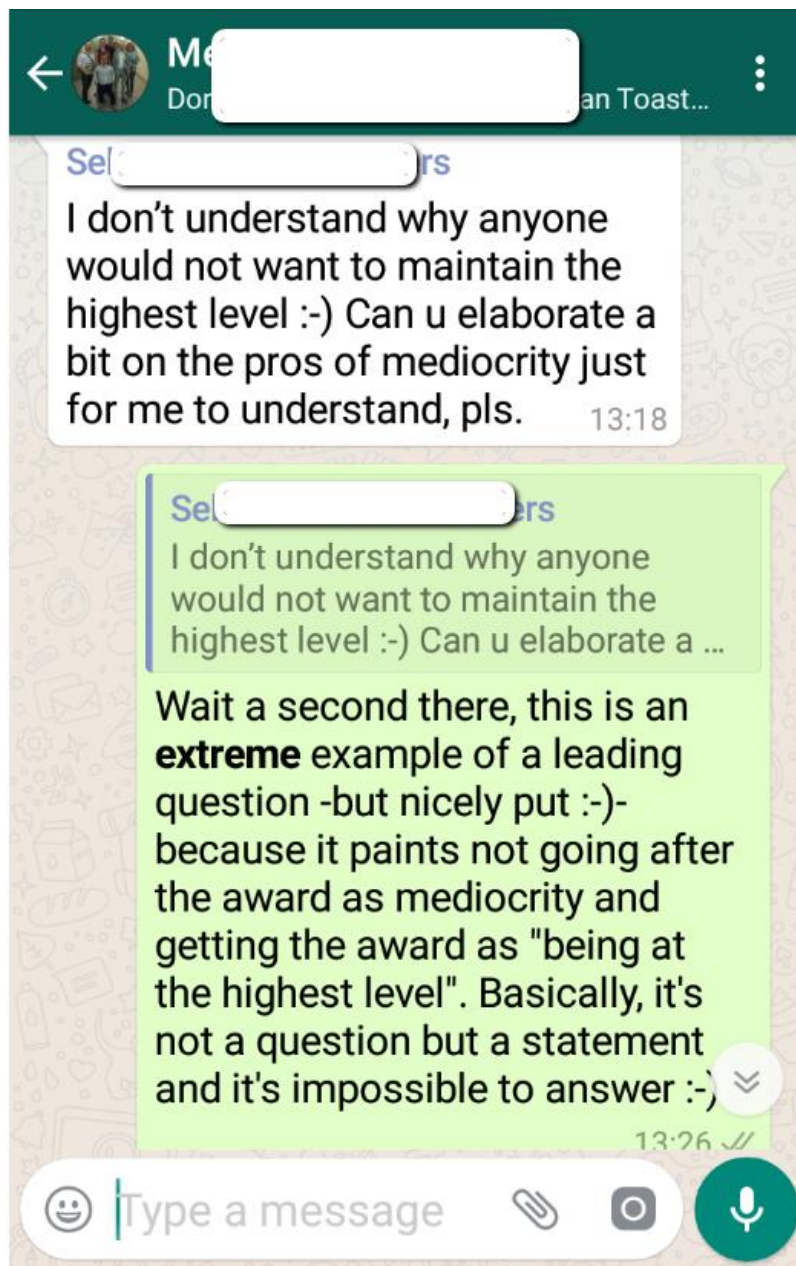
The above example with your partner would look something like this:

Him: *How could you do such a terrible, terrible mean thing to me*

Her: *Honey, I have no words to say how sorry I am. Let me just say it wasn't mean, or out of meanness. I have an issue with controlling my spending. And taking your credit card was the biggest mistake of my life. I have an issue I need to cope with, I do realize that.*

In this case he didn't even go after the word "terrible", which would have probably led to an argument over the gravity of his actions. But embedded in his own reply there is a reframing of the situation from "terrible and mean" to "issue and mistake".

And here is an example with the second one:



My reply to that message deals with the *frame* of the question before dealing even dealing with the content.

5. “How Can I Help You With“

We have already seen this one in the power introduction lessons.

You deal with it by removing yourself from the “helped” position and removing them from the “helper” position.

6. “*That’s Why I Like You*”

This sounds like a compliment, but it’s nothing more than judgment (masked as positive).

Remember that judging flows from the most powerful person towards the subordinate?

Then the person who says they like you are passing judgment towards you.

The compliment receiver is basically doing a good job *to be liked* by the more powerful compliment giver.

Not really an enviable power position to be in, is it.

Here is an example from the movie The Wolf of Wall Street:

<https://youtu.be/EQlgrw31St0>

“that’s why I love you”, while he puts his hand around him. Right there you know Di Caprio is the most powerful man in the room.

This is also a move Trump often engages in.

You will notice he praises people publicly for doing “a good job”. He often has no idea whether they are actually doing a good job, because he uses it as a power move only.

[He even said it to Comey before firing him.](#)

When he says “good job” he is simply positioning himself as the judge and as the most powerful man who is checking up on others.

Here is an even more extreme example with Macron:

<https://youtu.be/my-4UIH4uRA>

Trump says Macron *will* do a great job, but “it’s only a prediction”.
It’s as if Trump is implying that he will be watching him.

Similar power moves are:

That’s why I hired you

Max, I love your idea! What do you guys think

That’s what you are here for

This guys is a genius

7. “Should I Really Tell You?”

Here is another innocent-looking one.

The rule of thumb is: **the individual dispensing truths dominates intellectually, while the individual listening attentively is subservient.**

With this gambit, people entrench their authority position -or outright make it up- as the knowledge dispensers, which confers them power of you (the non-knowledgeable party).

Here are different versions of this move:

Do you wanna hear the truth
Should I tell you what it really means
Do you want to know how it really works

It’s a shrewd technique to achieve three things:

1. Draws attention to what they're about to say
2. Highlights they know their stuff -and you don't-
3. Make a you a follower when you reply "yes"

Beating "Knowledge Authorities"

Never replies to those type of questions with a "yes".
When you reply "yes" you are giving them your blessing as the real authority and the leaders of the interactions.

Here is how you handle it instead:

Him: Not really. Should I tell you what that really means for our business

You: Please (say it with an intonation that actually conveys "please go ahead")

Him: Bla bla bla

You: Good observation. Thank you for sharing that!

Simple and effective.

"Please" is a power move on its own, and it's often used to convey orders in a more "socially acceptable way". And with that, you switch the tables and frame the knowledge dispenser like the one following *your* lead.

8. Fixing Mistakes

Public corrections are often a way of decreasing your authority.

Of course, self-help gurus tell you to welcome criticism and learn from it.

And that's true... As a general rule to improve.

But from a power point of view, the person fixing your mistakes is decreasing your authority and increasing theirs.

We will deal with this one in the module on workplace power moves because mistake fixers are the most powerful and most dangerous in business settings.

9. “All Good?” – The Owner Power Move

The individual who checks upon others is the leader. The individual who puts his well being onto someone else’s hands is a follower.

The owner power move can be very simple, and consisting simply in asking you if everything is good.

Since it’s leaders who take care that everything is running smoothly, the moment you reply that everything is good, you are communicating that they are the one taking care of you.

They are the host, owners or leaders. And you are either the guest or the submissive party.

Mo Greene in The Godfather is a perfect example of the owner power move:

<https://youtu.be/9DZNDEqcSi0>

Just look at how he moves in the room, the questions he asks people and how he tells his underlings to “give chips to everyone in the room” (ie.: playing good host with his guests).

Beating The Owner Power Move

Here is how you reply instead:

Him: How’s the night going mate, you enjoying yourself?

You: Hey man, what’s up (then go back to your own thing)

Here, you avoid answering his question, completely neutralizing his game and actively taking social value away from him (when you refuse to comply or answer you decrease their social status).

***Him:** How's the night going mate, you enjoying yourself?*

***You:** Hey man, thanks for asking, I hope you're having a blast (pat him on his shoulder)*

Here you remove his frame of “taking care of you” and playing the same game back on him “I hope you're having a blast”.

10. “You Owe Me” Power Move

I hate this one.

It's so sneaky and slimy.

This is not a dominant power move, and it's another great example that power is not the same as dominance.

“You owe me” leverages the fact that **the one who owes to the other is the one down in the relationship** and, it's implied, he should make up for it if he wants to be an honorable man.

The “you owe me” power player will position himself as the giver.

Some examples:

***Him:** I really wanted to eat it, but I saved it just for you*

***Him:** I've done you an intro with X because I wanted you to be the first one in the door*

See what these testaments do?

They either set up (fake) roadblocks they had to go through to deliver “just for you”, or they oversell their favor. Either way, they imply that you owe them big.

How do most people answer to these statements? They answer with “*ohh thank you*”, which only underline that, indeed, now they owe them.

Beating The “You Owe Me” Power Move

How do you answer this power move instead?

By neutralizing the “giver/taker frame”.

Here are some examples:

Him: *I really wanted to eat it, but I saved it just for you*

You: *Awesome, thank you so much, I would have done the same for you. But I can't touch it unless we are going to share it*

Here you tell them you would have done the same (implying they aren't doing anything special).

And then you further even the relationship by giving back.

Him: *I've done you an intro with X because I wanted you to be the first one in the door*

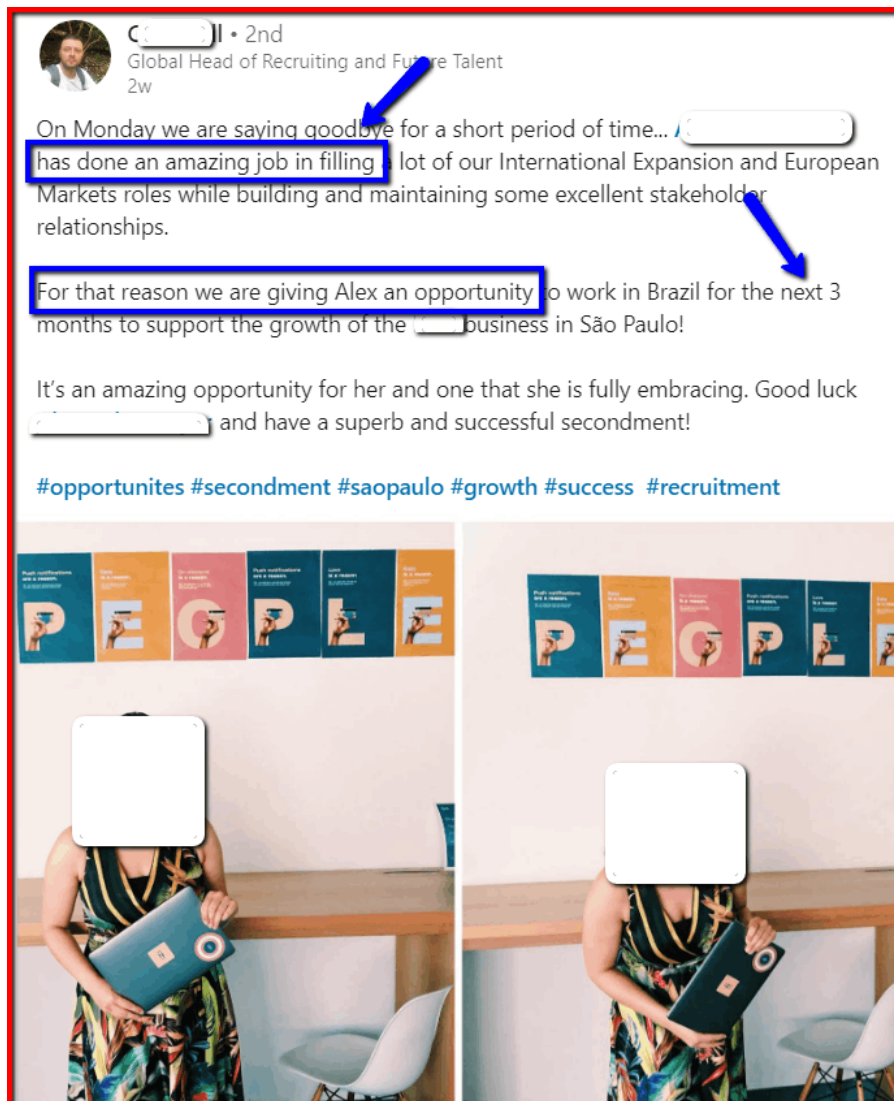
You: *Oh yeah, I know these guys, a friend of mine works there and I applied a week ago. But thanks man, your intro might help speed up!*

Here you tell them that you appreciate their help, for sure.

But that you're not an idiot fully dependent on him and you're taking your own steps in the right direction.

11. “Reward” Power Move

Look at this picture, a post from LinkedIn, and think how it feels to you:



If it felt somewhat off and patronizing, maybe slightly annoying, too, then chances are you start “feeling” power dynamics already.

He is basically saying:

She has been so good at doing her job so far (for which I am the final judge)... That now we are giving her this little reward (keep doing the good job and we'll keep liking you)

It's the equivalent of the dog's treat.

“you be a good boy, and you'll get the treat”.

The gift is conditional on you doing *his* job the way *he* likes.
Stop doing the job the way he likes, and you're out of treats.

Extremely disempowering.

The "gift" comes with strings attached or, shall we say, with a leash attached.

And this is true for many "awards". The power dynamics of awards are that you are being judged and someone else is doing the judging.

And when the awards are given by people who have actual authority over you, then the power dynamics are even more oppressive. Because as they imply they are in a power position over you, they also imply you must keep doing the same job if you want to be liked and rewarded by them.

Some individuals feel emotionally validated by these token awards from the authority position.

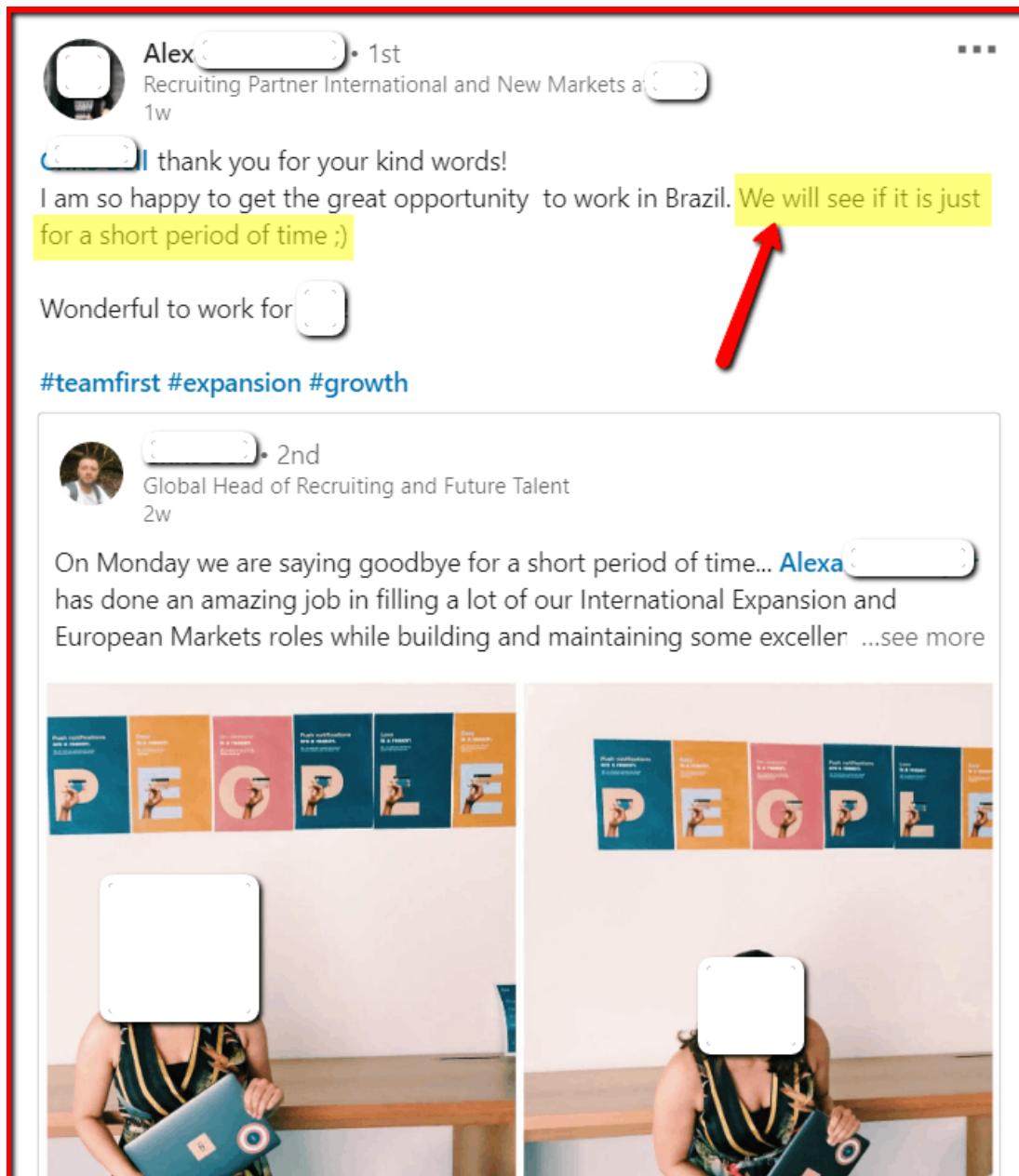
And when they do, they end up in a "child/parent" relationship where they crave the authority's approval and suffer when the approval is withdrawn.

P.S.:

Women being more aware of power dynamics, the lady in the example caught on to the oppressive power move.

And she made sure to put in her last, rebellious word, to negate his power over her.

See her reply here:



She is implying that how long her assignment will go for is *up to her*. It denies the extent of his authority over her. Is she even implying she's got the power to quit the company and find something else in Brazil? Possibly... And then she ends up on a positive and confirming her loyalty.
Very good reply. She did very well here and he had it coming.

12. “The Judge” Compliments And Rewards

Finally, I’d like to remind you again of the judge role, which is sometimes expressed through compliments and rewards.

Sentences like “I’m impressed”, “well done”, “great job”, all convey that judge appreciates. But to keep that appreciation coming, the receiver must continue to “impress” the judge and “do well” in the judge’s eyes.

We will revisit this concept in the last module, the “leveling up” on emotional intelligence.