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LEADERSHIP

A New Prescription for Power

Spend less time exerting control and more time mobilizing energy and commitment.

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TARA, THE CHIEF STRATEGY officer of a software firm, was the newest member of the C-suite. Except for the CEO, the other officers had joined the executive team from the technology side in the course of acquisitions. Tara, the only MBA, had come from the business side and been recommended by the board. She was excited about her mandate: to drive a coherent strategy across the firm's fragmented divisions.

Several months in, however, Tara had accomplished little. She'd been blocked by her fellow officers at every turn. In frustration, she asked her supporters on the board to back her up with the CEO. She was stunned when they not only declined but said they might have erred in recommending her for the position. What had gone wrong?

As most leaders discover sooner or later, effectively wielding power is rarely straightforward. Simply exercising control over others—the traditional concept of power—is often not the best strategy; it may not even be an option. When the path ahead or the very need for change is in dispute, when looking to seize an opportunity rather than put out a fire, when working across silos where claims to authority may be ambiguous and contested, leaders should take a different approach. The most potent uses of power often involve no direct influence tactics at all.

On the basis of decades of research and consulting with executives and managers, we have developed an approach to power that goes beyond exerting control and mobilizes others' energy and commitment. Our model of power focuses on its three core dimensions: *situational, relational,* and *dynamic.* The degree to which you draw on all three will determine how effectively you get things done.

Power Is Situational

Leaders often view power as a purely personal quality, derived from their formal roles and titles, accreditations, skills, and experience; from the information they control and the reputation they've built; and from their charisma, resilience, and energy. But power also arises from and depends on situational factors such as your objectives, the environment, and bases of power. Stanford professor Jeffrey Pfeffer has observed that one of the primary ways leaders limit their own power is by failing to search for and cultivate sources of influence beyond formal authority and personal charisma. We suggest several steps to help you identify and deploy situational sources of power.

Think expansively about the change you seek. Begin by considering the nature of your goal. For example, are you advancing structural change or refining an existing process? Are you managing a crisis or championing a new initiative?

IDEA IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

Simply exercising control over others—the traditional concept of power—is often not the best strategy. When the path ahead or the very need for change is in dispute, when looking to seize an opportunity rather than put out a fire, when working across silos where claims to authority may be ambiguous, leaders should take a different approach.

THE WAY FORWARD

A new model of power focuses on its three core dimensions: situational, relational, and dynamic. The degree to which leaders draw on all three determines how effectively they get things done.

Carlton Davis/Trunk Archive

Then think about how you might engage others' energy and commitment to achieve that goal. Ask yourself not just why the goal is important to you but also why it might be important to your colleagues, your company, and society. By drilling down into these questions, you can capture the emotions needed to win the hearts and minds of others while accumulating resilience and energy for the work ahead.

Power is often most potent when it mobilizes passion—your own and others'—and when personal objectives and the demands of the situation align. Consider Chief, the private network for connecting and supporting executive women. At critical junctures in their careers, founders Carolyn Childers and Lindsay Kaplan had each wished for advice from other female executives only to realize that like many women, they lacked the deep networks men had built. Inspired by the YPO model, which connects young business leaders around the world, they saw an opportunity to link women executives. Leaving high-profile roles at other companies, they called on funders and power brokers inside and outside their personal networks to help realize their vision. Chief's first "clubhouse" opened its doors in New York in 2019. It was soon fully subscribed, with members paying hefty fees to belong and committing themselves to growing the organization. In pursuing their personal and professional goals, Childers and Kaplan tapped into a need and desire for community among female leaders and crafted an offering that resonated deeply with them.

Identify hidden roadblocks and turn them to your advantage. Most people believe in a just world—one in which credit and rewards accrue in accordance with performance. But that conviction can become an obstacle to the effective development and use of power. In fact, MIT professor Emilio Castilla's research on the so-called meritocracy paradox finds that bias is higher in contexts that focus exclusively on who is most deserving. Situational power, then, starts with the recognition that working harder and smarter often fails to achieve the "earned" outcome. To get results, leaders should instead work with trusted colleagues and stakeholders to assess the lay of the land and identify blind spots. How does your goal fit within the existing landscape? Why hasn't the problem you're addressing already been remedied, or the innovation you're promoting been realized? What obstacles stand in your way?

Steven, a rising executive at a century-old insurance company, saw an opportunity to apply a user-centered design approach to drive strategic innovation, but he lacked the status to advance such a major initiative himself. Despite his best efforts, he was unable to get his colleagues on board. As he thought about why he was deadlocked, he realized that they saw design thinking as a fad and didn't want to commit employees or other resources to it. Yet as he considered the "why" behind his proposal, he recognized that a user-centered approach not only reflected his values but also resonated with the firm's origin story and mission: taking care of customers in times of need. He realized that reframing his proposal as an articulation of the organization's core values would yield power he could leverage, especially with his skeptical colleagues. Acting on that insight, he successfully pushed his initiative through.

Look beyond titles and credentials. In a study of successful corporate leaders and entrepreneurs, one of us (Kathleen) and colleagues looked at ways in which formal positions and status markers helped leaders advance their goals. One executive described her motivation for going to business school at age 40 this way: "To get in the room with the guys, you need to be able to talk their language and... have the credibility of knowing that you went to one of the best schools and did very well." Titles and credentials can secure a place at the table—but they are not always sufficient for the effective exercise of power.

Another executive in Kathleen's study was a banker we'll call Meghan, who, having led several successful IPOs, was hired for a corporate leadership role at a big-box retailer. "The board wanted someone with my skill set, but many in the company reacted violently, like 'We don't know you, and we don't know why you're here,'" she told us. "I had to work really, really hard to gain authority." To her surprise, her new colleagues didn't seem to care about her IPO credentials. "It wasn't about the deal anymore. I had to put on an apron and work in the store. To gain authority, I had to learn the business from the ground up."

When considering a new position, leaders should think not only about what titles and resources the job confers but also about whether the culture is one in which they can thrive. One newly minted MBA turned down an offer that would have required rotations in multiple cities, choosing instead a small, growing firm based in her hometown, where she understood the values needed for success. That intuitive understanding, she felt, would allow her to cultivate a stronger base of power than would the constant adaptation associated with moving from one unfamiliar city to another. "It was a company with a lot of integrity, and it was headquartered in the city my spouse and I were from," she recalled. "All the stars were aligned."

Exercising Situational Power

Your job title and personal charisma will take you only so far. Your power strategy should be informed by your objectives, the environment, and bases of power. Ask yourself:

1. What do I seek to accomplish?
2. Why is this goal important not just to me but to my company and society?
3. Why hasn't it been done before?
4. What roadblocks might I encounter? Can I go around or overcome them, or should I pursue a different goal or seek a new environment?
5. What sources of personal power do I have? Are there existing power bases—such as shared commitment, existing practices, and core values—that I can direct toward my goal?
6. How do I leverage those sources of power to mobilize others?
7. Are there other ways to get the job done?

Power Is Relational

Beyond your personal attributes and the situational factors in your organization, your power is also enabled and constrained by your interactions with others. The relationships and coalitions you forge can be a major source of support, advice, information, and resources; those you overlook or ignore can loom as potential points of resistance.

The COO of an international manufacturing firm we worked with builds and leverages relationships with plant leaders with an unusual frequency and intensity. "The division heads and sales leaders have my cell phone number, and I have theirs. I can call them anytime," she told us. "They tell me things I need to know, and I tell them things they need to know—things that will help them or are hot buttons for them." And she is keenly aware of the value of nurturing relationships over time. "I'm working on a project that requires a change in manufacturing and distribution," she said. "The marketing element of the initiative is huge. Because I worked closely with the marketing team five years ago, anytime I call them, their response is, 'Yeah, we can do that.'"

To cultivate and exercise relational power, take the following steps.

Scope out the landscape. Consider who could help you advance your ideas and then map the array of allies, resisters, and others who might affect your efforts. This will help you understand people's positions and priorities, actual and possible points of resistance, and potential blocking and supporting coalitions. Then ask yourself, What sources of influence can I deploy to engage others? How will I be able to tell whether those efforts are enough?

Another executive in Kathleen's study recounted a time when, as a newly promoted manager, she was working on a potentially transformative idea. The local vice president expressed interest in the idea but felt it would be impossible to forge a partnership with a key outside company. Undeterred, the manager focused on expanding her knowledge of that firm. "I never stopped talking to people," she recalled. "Before hanging up, I would say, 'Can you give me the name of someone else to talk to?' I learned everything I could about the company—where its business was, where it was trying to make inroads, what its needs were." Within a few months this relationship building yielded a connection to the company's founder, who agreed to give the idea a trial. It proved so successful that the manager ended up leaving the company to found her own firm, built around the new partnership.

Tara, the CSO who was struggling to implement a unified strategy in her software firm, is another case in point. Assessing her company's relational landscape, she recognized that shared values were established in the divisions and then traveled to the center, not the reverse. As she was considering how to get her plans on track, a divisional general manager left the firm. Seeing the potential benefits to working side by side with other GMs, Tara asked to lead the division during the search for a permanent head while retaining her role as chief strategy officer. This brought her into the fold in a way she could never have achieved solely as CSO, and she gained the other GMs' buy-in on a strategy that was ultimately backed by her peers in the C-suite.

Elicit insights from key parties and invite them to co-create solutions. A pediatrician at a large New England hospital learned the value of this approach. "Usually I would develop what I thought was a good idea and then worry about getting others to adopt it," she says. "But nothing would happen: People resisted, either openly or passively. Finally, I began to take time up front—engaging in empathic inquiry and inviting others to co-create a solution with me—and the results have been incredible. By the time we pitched to secure resources for a radically new process for onboarding doctors and nurses, I already had the buy-in of the other key doctors and the heads of nursing. The hospital couldn't say no." One of us (Elizabeth) has found in her work with executives and entrepreneurs that this pitfall—putting ideas first and people second—is common. By taking the opposite

tack, leaders may discover that they no longer have to rely solely on personal influence tactics.

Attend to reciprocity and dependency. When assessing their power, Pfeffer says, leaders need to map their dependencies. Who relies on you? On whom do you rely? Who controls the resources in your firm, and why? Your position in the flow of resources may be as important as your formal title; you can accrue power by controlling and creating resources that others need. The fewer substitutes for the resources you command, the more power you have.

But there will inevitably be times when you are more dependent on others than they are on you. The goal then is to find ways to create value for them and thus increase their reliance on you. Pat Fili-Krushel, who started as a secretary at ABC Sports and rose to become president of the network, realized at the start that her initial role could limit her unless she developed sponsors who recognized what she brought to the organization. In each new position she found ways to help her bosses succeed. "I was a learning machine," she says. "Each boss knew I would always get him the information and results he needed." Fili-Krushel's bosses quickly came to rely on her, and in return they recommended her for successively bigger roles.

Leverage relationships among others. As the sociologist Ron Burt has noted, relational power often comes from brokering connections among others—which may require some finesse. While leaders can often extract information and value by keeping people strategically isolated, that approach may undermine trust and commitment. Instead, as Elizabeth discovered in a multiyear ethnography of leaders in the global music industry, a strategic understanding of when and how to bring people together is also needed to develop and implement good ideas.

Jesse, a highly successful Nashville producer, carefully choreographs how he brings together various parties—artists, studio musicians, label personnel, and others—at the outset of a project. He makes a point of publicly praising specific people's expertise and highlighting what each member contributes to the team; this has real implications for the ultimate performance, he finds. Later in the process, strategic separation might be in order. A producer named Sarah uses the structure and technology of the recording studio to keep lead artists and session players from commenting on one another's performances and possibly inciting counterproductive conflict. "I've got the talk-back button—I'm the only one who can use it," she says. "I let the artist tell me things in between takes, but I never pass along negative comments to the guitarist. And I don't let the artist know if the musicians think something's not great."

Make smart trade-offs. Because relationships require investment and nurturing, you need to make choices about whom you will interact with, how often, and on what terms. London Business School's Herminia Ibarra has found that successful professionals need two types of connections: instrumental relationships, which provide professional information, sponsorship, and resources; and supportive relationships, which are built on personal trust and offer socioemotional buttressing along with dependable, high-quality feedback. Balancing the two types is particularly critical in times of uncertainty or stress, such as when you're in line for a promotion or launching a new venture.

It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain that balance as you progress in your career and add connections to your network; you will need to make trade-offs between breadth and depth. Heidi Roizen, a venture capitalist known for her extensive network, became much more strategic about how she spent her time and energy as she advanced. She grew more selective about whom she interacted with on a personal level and made sure that new professional ties were with people she genuinely enjoyed.

Exercising Relational Power

Your ability to exert influence comes in part from your interactions with others—enlisting and mobilizing supporters and identifying and overcoming potential resisters. As you map your relational landscape in pursuit of a particular goal, ask yourself:

1. Who is necessary to help bring my idea to life? What do those people care about?
2. What does the larger network of stakeholders—customers, government, community, lower-level employees, and so on—care about? How can I make it easy for people to say yes to my idea?
3. Who might be unexpected allies? Unexpected blockers? Why? How might my goals coincide or conflict with theirs?
4. What are possible points of resistance? Who might benefit from helping me overcome them?
5. Who is dependent on me? How might that prove beneficial? On whom do I depend? Is that productive or problematic in this situation?
6. Who would benefit from co-creating solutions with me?
7. How and when might I strategically bring people together or keep them apart?

LEADERSHIP

Power Is Dynamic

Many leaders have a static view of power: Once they've established their influence, they assume it's always there for the using. However, our research suggests that to maintain power, leaders must continually adapt to changes in organizational and social systems. Influence strategies that work today may fail tomorrow. Here's how to keep up.

Pause, reflect, and pivot. As entrepreneurs and innovators well know, bringing a product or service to market is rarely a linear process. Offerings must be revised to reflect new perspectives, feedback, and changes in technology or competition. The same is true of the exercise of power: At points it is best to defer decisions, reflect on new information or how your efforts fit within a changing context, and revise the path ahead. Other times it is wise to step away and recharge. In such instances it's important to think creatively about new ways to engage your target.

Working with Harvard's Lakshmi Ramarajan and Simmons's Deborah Kolb, Kathleen studied how a professional services firm's diversity and inclusion initiative played out over 20 years. Internal documents from the initiative revealed cycles of analysis and action—the organizational equivalent of pausing and pivoting. During periods of analysis, undertaken when results had stalled, leaders of the initiative would gather information about its challenges and ask outside experts for their interpretation of the situation. That would lead to a new phase of action. The process was continual: Because the organization, the marketplace for talent, and the diversity challenges were dynamic, each set of actions, no matter how successful at the outset, would gradually lose traction as the context evolved, necessitating a new phase of analysis.

Pausing and pivoting may also be necessary on an individual level. Although Steven, the rising insurance executive described earlier, succeeded in launching his user-centered design initiative, there was a catch. Instead of appointing him to direct the project, senior leadership hired an outsider. Steven was disappointed, but he remained supportive of the effort as he turned to other tasks. His strategy of pivoting while staying engaged panned out. The new director, who lacked a deep understanding of the firm's culture, soon departed, and Steven was offered the position. In our research we have found many instances of leaders who were passed over for promotion but pivoted while remaining engaged and visible and were eventually tapped for the desired role.

As these examples suggest, there is a meaningful distinction between pausing to pivot and avoidance. The first allows you to reconsider and reconstitute your influence attempt; the second, often arising from discomfort or an inability to effectively exercise power, means giving up your opportunity to gain influence.

Use experiments to your advantage. Each new stage in a career, each new assignment, brings a new power landscape and the opportunity to design a new influence approach. Many of the successful leaders we've studied engage in formal and informal experimentation, trying different approaches in similar settings and observing others' approaches. Although you may ultimately set your sights on driving major change, the best way to begin harnessing your power is by "just doing it." Look for small wins and share your accomplishments.

Experiments are also invaluable for overcoming resistance to new ideas, as a midlevel executive at a consumer electronics company realized. He saw a strategic business opportunity: Could the firm capitalize on promising technologies that for one reason or another had not been given a green light for development? He identified several potential partners who were interested in collaborations to that end, but his firm was not equipped to set the arrangements up, and colleagues and senior executives expressed reluctance. So he decided to pilot the development model with one partner and one audio-engineering technology. This gave him evidence he could share about successes, potential pitfalls, and other lessons. With rich details from this experiment, he was able to engage colleagues, address the obstacles—real and imagined—that they had cited, and springboard a corporatewide effort to systematize strategic partnerships.

Give resisters time to come on board. People grow accustomed to the way power is distributed in their organizations, and they are more comfortable lending energy and commitment to those they know. Those dynamics can fuel resistance to new leaders. When that happens, all the lessons we've discussed come into play. It can help to examine how others before you have fared. Why was the previous person effective or ineffective? Are your power bases similar or different? Who are the critical brokers in your organization, and how can you establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with them? New leaders should understand that it may take time for people to transfer their allegiance.

At a transition point in her career, Fili-Krushel, the ABC Sports executive, was seeking a new challenge. Her boss suggested she throw her hat into the ring for VP of business

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affairs. The executive overseeing that role didn't know Fili-Krushel and was concerned that she wasn't up to the job; he told her she didn't have what it takes to negotiate big deals and proposed a different role. "I told him, 'I don't negotiate like you,'" she recalls. "'There are other ways to negotiate that are more my style. Give me six months, and if you don't think I'm doing a good job, I'll move into the other role.' He agreed, and that was the last I heard of the other role."

Exercising Dynamic Power

As the organizational systems and relationships around you change, you must continually reassess and modify your influence strategies. Ask yourself:

1. What is different in my power landscape? Are there new allies, resisters, or key players? Is there new information?
2. How might I adapt my tactics and strategy to reflect those changes?
3. Have I paused to reflect and pivot as needed?
4. What power bases do I need to develop more fully? How might I do so?
5. What small-scale experiments could I use to help overcome resistance?
6. How can I use time to my advantage?
7. What can I do now to make it easier for others to say yes in the future?

Putting Your Power to Work

The psychologist Herb Kelman identified three kinds of social influence: *compliance, identification,* and *internalization.* Power aimed at compliance affects people's behavior in a given situation at a given time and depends on formal instruments such as policies, practices, and guidelines. Power aimed at identification is more durable and rests not on rules but on belief in the leader, who earns trust by communicating a vision, articulating goals, and tying the vision and goals to followers' desired outcomes. It stems from leaders' stories about themselves.

Power aimed at internalization stems from stories about the organization. It may involve changing long-held language, norms, cultures, and beliefs. This is one of the most subtle and effective forms of power; people may not even realize they are being influenced. When fostering internalization, symbolism and imagery are key. They can shape the way information and events are understood and acted on, as storytellers from Homer to Steve Jobs well knew.

Childers and Kaplan deftly used symbolism and storytelling when creating Chief. They invoked the metaphor of time travel to conjure a world in which C-suites are fully diverse and organizations are truly inclusive. They shared with potential funders and members their vision of an organization that would attract the energy and commitment of powerful women—one far removed from stale networking events replete with "name tags, awkward mingling in a nondescript conference room, and plastic cups of warm wine and picked-over cheese plates," as they put it. They paid particular attention to symbolic elements of the space in which members would gather: Co-opting the idea of an "old boys club," they opened their first clubhouse in the vibrant Manhattan neighborhood of Tribeca in rooms designed to exude camaraderie and power, with hunter-green walls and classic leather armchairs. Executive women readily internalized Childers and Kaplan's vision, not only filling membership to capacity but generating a lengthy waiting list to join.

POWER IS ELUSIVE and coveted, enabling and despised. It speaks to the best and the worst of human nature, evoking strong visceral feelings in those who hold it and in those under its sway.

The appropriate use of power is one of the most fundamental and contentious questions of the human condition. Leaders can mobilize energy for personal gain or for collective interests; to enhance potential or destroy it. A thoughtful approach to power requires a nuanced analysis of the intended and unintended effects of influence and close attention to the means as well as the ends.

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