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MANAGING YOURSELF

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How to rise to the top without losing the virtues that got you there

by Dacher Keltner

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Don't Let Power Corrupt You

How to rise to the top without losing the virtues that got you there *by Dacher Keltner*

In the behavioral research I've conducted over the past 20 years, I've uncovered a disturbing pattern: While people usually gain power through traits and actions that advance the interests of others, such as empathy, collaboration, openness, fairness, and sharing; when they start to feel powerful or enjoy a position of privilege, those qualities begin to fade. The powerful are more likely than other people to engage in rude, selfish, and unethical behavior. The 19th-century historian and politician Lord Acton got it right: Power *does* tend to corrupt.

I call this phenomenon "the power paradox," and I've studied it in numerous settings: colleges, the U.S. Senate, pro sports teams, and a variety of other professional workplaces. In each I've observed that people rise on the basis of their

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good qualities, but their behavior grows increasingly worse as they move up the ladder. This shift can happen surprisingly quickly. In one of my experiments, known as "the cookie monster" study, I brought people into a lab in groups of three, randomly assigned one to a position of leadership, and then gave them a group writing task. A half hour into their work, I placed a plate of freshly baked cookies—one for each team member, plus an extra—in front of everyone. In all groups each person took one and, out of politeness, left the extra cookie. The question was: Who would take a second treat, knowing that it would deprive others of the same? It was nearly always the person who'd been named the leader. In addition, the leaders were more likely to eat with their mouths open, lips smacking, and crumbs falling onto their clothes.

Studies show that wealth and credentials can have a similar effect. In another experiment, Paul Piff of UC Irvine and I found that whereas drivers of the least expensive vehicles—Dodge Colts, Plymouth Satellites—*always* ceded the right-of-way to pedestrians in a crosswalk, people driving luxury cars such as BMWs and Mercedes yielded only 54% of the time; nearly half the time they ignored the pedestrian and the law. Surveys of employees in 27 countries have revealed that wealthy individuals are more likely to say it's acceptable to engage in unethical behavior, such as taking bribes or cheating on taxes. And recent research led by Danny Miller at HEC Montréal demonstrated that CEOs with MBAs are more likely than those without MBAs to engage in self-serving behavior that increases their personal compensation but causes their companies' value to decline.

These findings suggest that iconic abuses of power—Jeffrey Skilling's fraudulent accounting at Enron, Tyco CEO Dennis Kozlowski's illegal bonuses, Silvio Berlusconi's bunga bunga parties, Leona Helmsley's tax evasion—are extreme examples of the kinds of misbehavior to which all leaders, at any level, are susceptible. Studies show that people in positions of corporate power are three times as likely as those at the lower rungs of the ladder to interrupt coworkers, multitask during meetings, raise their voices, and say insulting things at the office. And people who've just moved into senior roles are particularly vulnerable to losing their virtues, my research and other studies indicate.

The consequences can be far-reaching. The abuse of power ultimately tarnishes the reputations of executives, undermining their opportunities for influence. It also creates stress and anxiety among their colleagues, diminishing rigor and creativity in the group and dragging down team members' engagement and performance. In a recent poll of 800 managers and employees in 17 industries, about half the respondents who reported being treated rudely at work said they deliberately decreased their effort or lowered the quality of their work in response.

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So how can you avoid succumbing to the power paradox? Through awareness and action.

A Need for Reflection

A first step is developing greater self-awareness. When you take on a senior role, you need to be attentive to the feelings that accompany your newfound power and to any changes in your behavior. My research has shown that power puts us in something like a manic state—making us feel expansive, energized, omnipotent, hungry for rewards, and immune to risk—which opens us up to rash, rude, and unethical actions. But new studies in neuroscience find that by simply reflecting on those thoughts and emotions—"Hey, I'm feeling as if I should rule the world right now"—we can engage regions of our frontal lobes that help us keep our worst impulses in check. When we recognize and label feelings of joy and confidence, we're less likely to make irrational decisions inspired by them. When we acknowledge feelings of frustration (perhaps because subordinates aren't behaving the way we want), we're less likely to respond in adversarial or confrontational ways.

You can build this kind of self-awareness through everyday mindfulness practices. One approach starts with sitting in a comfortable and quiet place, breathing deeply, and concentrating on the feeling of inhaling and exhaling, physical sensations, or sounds or sights in your environment. Studies show that spending just a few minutes a day on such exercises gives people greater focus and calm, and for that reason techniques for them are now taught in training programs at companies like Google, Facebook, Aetna, General Mills, Ford, and Goldman Sachs.

It's also important to reflect on your demeanor and actions. Are you interrupting people? Do you check your phone when others are talking? Have you told a joke or story that embarrassed or humiliated someone else? Do you swear at the office? Have you ever taken sole credit for a group effort? Do you forget colleagues' names? Are you spending a lot more money than in the past or taking unusual physical risks?

If you answered yes to at least a few of these questions, take it as an early warning sign that you're being tempted into problematic, arrogant displays of power. What may seem innocuous to you probably doesn't to your subordinates. Consider a story I recently heard about a needlessly hierarchical lunch-delivery protocol on a cable-television writing team. Each day when the team's sandwiches arrived, they were doled out to the writers in order of seniority. In failing to correct this behavior, the group's leaders were almost certainly diminishing its collaborative and creative potential. For a contrast, consider U.S. military mess halls, where the practice is the reverse, as the ethnographer and author Simon Sinek notes in the title of his most recent book, *Leaders Eat Last.* Officers adhere to the policy not to cede authority but to show respect for their troops.

Practicing Graciousness

Whether you've already begun to succumb to the power paradox or not, you must work to remember and repeat the virtuous behaviors that helped you rise in the first place. When teaching executives and others in positions of power, I focus on three essential practices—empathy, gratitude, and generosity—that have been shown to sustain benevolent leadership, even in the most cutthroat environments.

For example, Leanne ten Brinke, Chris Liu, Sameer Srivastava, and I found that U.S. senators who used empathetic facial expressions and tones of voice when speaking to the floor got more bills passed than those who used domineering, threatening gestures and tones in their speeches. Research by Anita Woolley of Carnegie Mellon and Thomas Malone of MIT has likewise shown that when teammates subtly signal understanding, engagement, interest, and concern for one another, the team is more effective at tackling hard analytical problems.

Small expressions of gratitude also yield positive results. Studies show that romantic partners who acknowledge each other's value in casual conversation are less likely to break up, that students who receive a pat on the back from their teachers are more likely to take on difficult problems, and that people who express appreciation to others in a newly formed group feel stronger ties to the group months later. Adam Grant of Wharton has found that when managers take the time to thank their employees, those workers are more engaged and productive. And my own research on NBA teams with Michael Kraus of Yale University shows that players who physically display their appreciation—through head raps, bear hugs, and hip and chest bumps—inspire their teammates to play better and win nearly two more games per season (which is both statistically significant and often the difference between making the play-offs and not).

Simple acts of generosity can be equally powerful. Studies show that individuals who share with others in a group—for example, by contributing new ideas or directly assisting on projects not their own—are deemed more worthy of respect and influence and more suitable for leadership. Mike Norton at Harvard Business School has found that when organizations provide an opportunity to donate to charities at work, employees feel more satisfied and productive.

It might seem difficult to constantly follow the ethics of "good power" when you're the boss and responsible for making sure things get done. Not so. Your capacity for empathy, gratitude, and generosity can be cultivated by engaging in simple social behaviors whenever the opportunity presents itself: a team

meeting, a client pitch or negotiation, a 360-degree feedback session. Here are a few suggestions.

To practice empathy:

- **Ask a great question or two in every interaction, and paraphrase important points that others make.**
- **Listen with gusto. Orient your body and eyes toward the person speaking and convey interest and engagement vocally.**
- **When someone comes to you with a problem, signal concern with phrases such as "I'm sorry" and "That's really tough." Avoid rushing to judgment and advice.**
- **Before meetings, take a moment to think about the person you'll be with and what is happening in his or her life.**

Arturo Bejar, Facebook's director of engineering, is one executive I've seen make empathy a priority as he guides his teams of designers, coders, data specialists, and writers. Watching him at work, I've noticed that his meetings all tend to be structured around a cascade of open-ended questions and that he never fails to listen thoughtfully. He leans toward whoever is speaking and carefully writes down everyone's ideas on a notepad. These small expressions of empathy signal to his team that he understands their concerns and wants them to succeed together.

To practice gratitude:

- **Make thoughtful thank-yous a part of how you communicate with others.**
- **Send colleagues specific and timely e-mails or notes of appreciation for jobs done well.**
- **Publicly acknowledge the value that each person contributes to your team, including the support staff.**
- **Use the right kind of touch—pats on the back, fist bumps, or high fives—to celebrate successes.**

When Douglas Conant was CEO of the Campbell Soup Company, he emphasized a culture of gratitude across the organization. Each day he and his executive assistants would spend up to an hour scanning his e-mail and the company intranet for news of employees who were "making a difference." Conant would then personally thank them—everyone from senior executives to maintenance people—for their contributions, usually with handwritten notes. He estimates that he wrote at least 10 a day, for a total of about 30,000 during his decade-long tenure, and says he would often find them pinned up in employees' workspaces. Leaders I've taught have shared other tactics: giving small gifts to employees, taking them out to nice lunches or dinners, hosting employee-of-the-month celebrations, and setting up real or virtual "gratitude walls," on which coworkers can thank one another for specific contributions.

> Campbell Soup CEO Douglas Conant handwrote at least 10 thank-you notes to his employees each day.

To practice generosity:

- **Seek opportunities to spend a little one-on-one time with the people you lead.**
- **Delegate some important and high-profile responsibilities.**
- **Give praise generously.**
- **Share the limelight. Give credit to all who contribute to the success of your team and your organization.**

Pixar director Pete Docter is a master of this last practice. When I first started working with him on the movie *Inside Out,* I was curious about a cinematic marvel he'd created five years before: the montage at the start of the film *Up,* which shows the protagonist, Carl, meeting and falling in love with a girl, Ellie; enjoying a long married life with her; and then watching her succumb to illness. When I asked how he'd accomplished it, his answer was an exhaustive list of the 250 writers, animators, actors, story artists, designers, sculptors, editors, programmers, and computer modelers who had worked on it with him. When people ask about the box-office success of *Inside Out,* he gives a similar response. Another Facebook executive I've worked with, product manager Kelly Winters, shares credit in a similar way. When she does PowerPoint presentations or talks to reporters about the success of her Compassion team, she always lists or talks about the data analysts, engineers, and content specialists who made it happen.

YOU CAN OUTSMART the power paradox by practicing the ethics of empathy, gratitude, and generosity. It will bring out the best work and collaborative spirit of those around you. And you, too, will benefit, with a burnished reputation, long-lasting leadership, and the dopamine-rich delights of advancing the interests of others. ▽ **HBR Reprint** R1610K

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