

Differences between Power and Authority

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What is Power?

Power is a personal trait that affects people at every social level of their lives. Power can be gained through experience and lost through mistakes and bad behaviour, but people tend to continue becoming more powerful and influential the longer they work and live. Power is not hierarchical, and can flow in any direction of a relationship.

AUTHORITY	POWER
Control delegated to an individual or group	Control that allows influence on others
Is a right or privilege granted to you - resides in the post or position	Comes from who you are - resides in the person/people who use it
Technical and static	Flexible and dynamic
Illustrated in organizational charts - flows downwards	Cannot be accurately illustrated - flows in many directions
Positional	Diffuse

What is Authority?

Authority is a formal title or position that gives someone the tools to influence other people within their organization. A person in authority is often powerful, but power is not necessary for authority. Authority is important for many hierarchical systems and organizations to operate smoothly and quickly.

1. *Source of Power and Authority*

Power is generally the product of personal traits like charisma and expertise. Power can be learned and gained, and generally the more knowledgeable a person is in their field, the more power they have. Similarly to charisma, power depends on the way others view a person; if they do not consider you powerful, then you will lack power.

Authority is a title given from an outside source, such as an organization, a government, or another person. While a person in authority may have personal traits that also make them powerful, their authority is derived from their position, not from within themselves. A person can be given authority while having very little personal power, although this is not considered strategic for an organization.

2. *Formality in Power and Authority*

Power, compared to authority, is an informal method of influence. A person or organization does not need to have any formal status within a hierarchy to become powerful. For example, an employee with a high level of experience and technical

expertise will often become powerful and influential to their peers, managers, and clients, even if they do not hold a managerial title.

Authority is a formal method of influence. Authority must be given within a hierarchical structure, and cannot be assumed just because someone is powerful. A common example in politics of the difference between authority and power comes from lobbying groups: while lobbyists can gain a great deal of influence toward an agency, they do not have true authority within that agency. Authority is vital within organizations to ensure that work is assigned appropriately, that employees know who they can turn to for help, and that responsibility is taken for mistakes.

3. Legitimacy of Power and Authority

Because power is not formalized, it is also not legitimate. An individual's power within an organization or system does not give them any special legal or political rights, like those of civil servants who perform duties civilians cannot.

Authority is both formal and legitimate. The difference between formality and legitimacy lies within legal rights and duties. A soldier or a member of the National Guard performs duties as part of their service that civilians do not typically have the legal right to perform; this comes from the legitimacy of the authority given to the military. Importantly, an organization or government must be interpreted by its clients as legitimate in order for it to truly have authority. Illegitimate organizations could be warring factions or a government who came to power in a coup d'état. In these cases, the legitimacy of the organization depends solely on the trust and perception of the public.

4. Ability to be Lost

Power can be lost, but it generally takes repeated mistakes or poor behaviour for someone to lose their power. Because power is built off of expertise and experience, making critical errors, especially in politics or business, can make a powerful person lose their credibility. And while power doesn't require a good personality, it generally requires a level of charisma, so bad personal behaviour or treatment of coworkers can also strip someone of their influence.

Authority is easily lost. An organization can usually take away authority from someone by removing them from the position, or by taking away anything in the position that gave them formal power over others. For example, some government departments have moved managers into positions with the same pay level but have taken away their leadership functions during department restructuring. There are a few instances when someone's position of authority is institutionalized and very difficult to change – the British monarchy still have positions of authority that are extremely difficult to alter, and removing a U.S. Supreme Court Justice is a highly complicated and unpopular process.

5. Use of Violence in Power and Authority

People exercising their power often resort to violence or coercion to influence others. This is especially true in politics, where rebel groups or existing governments attempt to violently promote their cause or defeat opposition. While power is not inherently violent, because powerful people often lack authority, violence becomes their preferred method of influence. For many governments or political groups, methods of violence also appear cheaper and faster than diplomacy or other forms of influence.

Legitimate authority by most political science standards is not violent, with the possible exception of declared and symmetrical war. Authority is institutionalized and authoritative positions should have duties or tools that allow people to influence others or complete their work without having to resort to violence. When an authority figure uses violence against civilians or other non-authority figures, the situation becomes “asymmetrical” or unfair, and the authority figure loses legitimacy.

6. *Within System or Without*

Power is perhaps easiest to gain within a specific field or organization, but it doesn’t need to be confined to one system. A powerful person will often be recognized as powerful by new people and across disciplines, such as a famous doctor or politician.

Authority doesn’t typically apply outside an organization or system, but the system can be very large. A manager at a bank only has authority at their bank, for instance, but the authority of a state trooper extends much further. However, outside the state or the U.S., the state trooper no longer has any legal authority. Any recognition they receive is instead an extension of their personal power.

Table of Differences between Power and Authority

Feature	Power	Authority
Personal Trait	Yes	No
Formal	No	Yes
Legitimate	No	Yes
Can Be Lost	Yes	Yes
Can Use Violence	Yes	Usually no

Summary of Power and Authority

- Power and authority are both methods of influencing other people.
- Power is a personal trait derived from knowledge and expertise, while authority is a formal title or position given by an organization or another personal.
- Authority is legitimate and formal, while power is neither.
- Both power and authority can be lost, and authority is especially easy to be taken away.

- Violence can be a tactic of powerful people, but using violence typically causes an authority figure to lose legitimacy.

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