



# Book Power

## Why Some People Have It – and Others Don't

Jeffrey Pfeffer  
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### Recommendation

If power corrupts, why does everyone lust after it and worship those who have it? Power – used wisely – can keep you healthy, make you rich and let you achieve great things for humanity. Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor of organizational behavior, explains why seeking power is in your best interest and shows you how to attain power and keep it. He debunks the objections you usually hear from the powerless and the powerful alike. He lays out a step-by-step guide on how to start building your power, what you’ll need and, most important, what it’ll cost you to achieve. *BooksInShort* recommends Pfeffer’s somewhat-less-than-Machiavellian, but still useful, book to anyone who ever has felt powerless in work or in life and wants to power up.

### Take-Aways

- Actively pursuing power is in your best interest.
- Power can make you healthier, richer and more capable of improving the world.
- Doing a good job is, by itself, often insufficient to gain power and wealth; performance correlates with power and career success, but the relationship is small.
- The world will not hand you what you deserve. Life’s not fair, so seek power on your own.
- Avoid “self-handicapping” or not trying because you’re afraid of failure.
- Stand out from the crowd, define your success parameters, know your boss’s priorities and make others feel good about themselves.
- Ask for help from those in power; flatter them, and they’ll remember you.
- Network diligently, support others, and project authority in your speech and behavior.
- Handle power conflicts by allowing adversaries to save face, rising above your emotions and never quitting.
- Once you reach the pinnacle of power, staying on top is even harder than getting there, but when it’s time to go, “leave gracefully.”

### Summary

#### Truth to Power

Power has a bad rap. Scores of overweening politicians, underhanded businesspeople and crafty leaders abuse power while promoting their own interests at the expense of others. Many people shy away from the pursuit of power, seeing it as a distasteful, self-aggrandizing climb to rewards that may not be as alluring as they appear. Yet seeking power is common in all societies and endemic to all cultures; in fact, social scientists call power a “fundamental human drive.”

“Seek power as if your life depends on it. Because it does.”

If you're unsure about why you should aspire to power, consider these three reasons:

1. **“Power is related to living a longer and healthier life”** – Studies show that those with less power and influence over their working lives have higher mortality rates. Less power brings stress and ill health; greater control “prolongs life.”
2. **“Power...can produce wealth”** – High status and visibility lead to higher pay and career advancement opportunities. Although not every powerful individual chooses to cash in, more power can mean more money.
3. **“Power is part of leadership”** – To accomplish almost anything for yourself or for others, you need to wield power.

“Power and resources beget more power and resources.”

You might think that with determination, talent and hard work, you'll get the power, money and recognition you need. That is misguided attitude. Why?

- **“Stop thinking the world is a just place”** – Life isn't fair. It never was and it never will be. Believing that you'll get your just deserts if you do the right thing and perform superbly on the job is not just naive but self-deceiving. Psychologists call this belief the “just-world hypothesis.” It describes how the desire for a predictable, controllable environment leads people to consider life ultimately fair. The world will never come to you.
- **“Beware of the leadership literature”** – Don't believe everything you read in books and studies about storied business leaders. Those sermonizing about their road to authority often overlook the “power plays” they had to make to succeed. They tend to attribute their achievement to qualities such as honesty, transparency and morality – traits that fit “how people wish the world and the powerful behaved.”
- **“Get out of your own way”** – People often sabotage their own efforts. This “self-handicapping” results when individuals fear that they won't measure up and decide that not trying is better than failure. If you shun playing office politics as a way to get ahead, ask yourself if you're just not trying.

## Power Up

Performance doesn't lead to power; if it did, JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon might today be running Citigroup, Arthur Blank and Bernard Marcus might never have started Home Depot, and Steve Jobs might have held on to Apple in the 1980s. Each of these leaders, while talented and capable, fell victim to power plays in corporate politics. Obtaining great results from your work matters less than you think: Job advancement correlates with age, tenure and how much your boss likes you, as well as with your performance. Being too good at your job could even stifle your career advancement because your superiors will want to keep you where you are rather than lose you to a promotion. Demonstrate proficiency, but don't forget these equally significant imperatives:

- **“Get noticed”** – Because we choose and prefer what we remember, stand out and get attention. Don't expect your bosses to intuit when you're working hard. Make yourself known to higher-ups; become memorable.
- **“Define the dimensions of performance”** – No one excels at all aspects of a job, so focus attention on those facets of your performance that make you shine. Influence the criteria others use to judge your work.
- **“Remember what matters to your boss”** – Don't assume you know what your managers prize; talk to your superiors on a regular basis to keep in touch with their priorities, which may change over time and differ from yours.
- **“Make others feel better about themselves”** – Take care of your bosses, provide cover if they make mistakes and point out their accomplishments to others in the organization. Remember that flattery, judiciously applied, creates a sense of “reciprocity” (the need to return the flattery) in the person you're complimenting – and that gives you power.

## Assembling a Power Base

Creating your power takes planning, time and effort. Conduct an honest self-appraisal, judging which qualities are acceptable and which you can improve. Evaluate your “will” and your “skill”: Determine if you have the will to persist. Assess whether you have the ambition and drive to get things done, the energy to sustain yourself and to project your capabilities to others, and the focus and single-mindedness to concentrate on gaining power. Then, refine your self-reflection, confidence, empathy and conflict tolerance.

“You get only one chance to make a first impression.”

You don't need to be smart to gain power and influence. While “intelligence is the single best predictor of job performance,” it's not sufficient for obtaining power. In fact, too much intelligence can work against your power: Really smart people believe they're better than others at tasks, so they keep their activities to themselves, and they can become overconfident, arrogant, intolerant and threatening – all qualities that work against achieving power and influence.

“One of the biggest mistakes people make is thinking that good performance – job accomplishments – is sufficient to acquire power and avoid organizational conflicts.”

Where you work in an organization affects your path to power. To assess the relative power of a function or department, consider the wages that people in that group earn relative to others in the firm; the group's “physical location and facilities,” since you don't want to work away from the action; and the importance of the group's head (whether he or she serves on the corporate board or executive committees, for example). Most people assume that joining the part of a company focused on its major product or capability is the surest road to power, but you'll face more competition there and find it harder to shine and get noticed. And the “current core activity” may fall out of corporate favor in the future. Take the example of Ford Motor Company at the end of World War II: The generation of employees that soared to power there, many of whom moved outside the firm in later years, consisted of the “Whiz Kids,” a group of highly educated, analytical types who joined a company heavy on auto specialists but dangerously light on control and financial skills. The Whiz Kids brought a needed analytical skill set to Ford and rose to power quickly.

“Watch those around you who are succeeding, those who are failing and those who are just treading water.”

In gathering power and influence, don't let shyness or fear of rejection keep you from asking those in more senior positions for help, favors or information. While you might feel uncomfortable requesting anything – you may think it reveals your weaknesses – the reality is that those you ask are more likely to feel flattered and powerful. They will be inclined not only to grant your wish but also to keep you on their radar. At a luncheon with a firm's CEO, a prospective candidate undergoing the final

interview in the recruitment process asked the CEO for an annual lunch appointment if he won the job. Impressed, the CEO agreed and kept his promise, ensuring the new hire privileged access to the top of the company on a regular basis.

## Powerful

Be creative in finding ways to amass power and influence. It may seem counterintuitive, but the road to power begins with doing the smallest activities in the most humble settings. For example, provide others with support and attention by listening to them and being nice. Perform minor but critical assignments that others may avoid, but that the right people will remember. To add to your power base, take an active role in professional groups.

“Getting to higher-level positions is easier and more likely if you build a power base, and it is never impossible or too soon or too late to begin.”

Make “something out of nothing” as Klaus Schwab did. Recently graduated with a PhD in 1971, Schwab took responsibility for setting up a meeting of European business leaders. That meeting evolved into the World Economic Forum, a \$100-million foundation that Schwab oversees and that sponsors the world-famous, prestigious annual Davos conference.

“Get over yourself and get beyond your concerns with self-image or, for that matter, the perception others have of you.”

Approach networking as an integral part of your job: Network with the right people, both within your firm and outside, and develop social capital. Take on the guise of authority by behaving and speaking with power in these ways:

- **“Project confidence”** – Act with assurance, especially when you’re uncertain. Others will perceive you as powerful.
- **“Be aware of your audience”** – The powerful know they are on stage all the time. Make a point of putting away your cellphone and personal devices when you’re engaging with others – they will notice your attention and remember you for it.
- **“Display anger instead of sadness or remorse”** – Research indicates that people consider those who express anger as higher in status and power than those who convey regret or guilt; others will also see you as more able and may hesitate to challenge you.
- **“Watch your posture and gestures”** – Dress professionally, stand up straight and walk toward others with confidence. Use small but strong gestures and look people in the eye.
- **“Use memory to access the desired emotion”** – If you need to project an emotion you’re not experiencing, recall a past incidence of that feeling and use it to act your part.
- **“Set the stage and manage the context”** – Make sure the state of your office or work space conveys your power.
- **“Take your time in responding”** – Breathe deeply and pause before speaking; you’ll appear more thoughtful and in charge than if you rush to answer a question.
- **Employ “interruption”** – Don’t let others cut you off. “Those with power interrupt, those with less power get interrupted.”
- **“Contest the premises of the discussion”** – The powerful challenge widely held truths. And when they do, people recognize their power.
- **Apply “persuasive language”** – Use oratorical tricks such as “us-versus-them” language to create unity. Delay your next sentence to allow others time to signal their approval, use “three-part lists” to appear knowledgeable, make comparisons to convey your point, and speak without notes to demonstrate your command of the material and to maintain eye contact with your listeners.

## Staying Power

How you handle conflicts and impediments says a lot about your power. Treat adversaries gracefully and allow them to save face. If you tear down your opponents, they will retaliate. Choose your battles so you can remain focused on your ultimate goals. Rise above your emotions; powerful people put aside their feelings to maintain beneficial relationships. Don’t quit in the face of opposition: “Not giving up is a precursor to winning.” Seize the first-mover advantage by heading off opponents before they can muster the support to unseat you. If you suffer a setback, don’t retreat to lick your wounds; talk openly about your defeat to remove its sting. Stay focused on your work, and continue to behave with savvy and power.

“Obtaining and holding on to power can be hard work.”

Power has its costs, so be prepared. You’ll sacrifice your anonymity, and every move you make will be the subject of comment and scrutiny. You’ll give up control over your schedule; you’ll do less of what you want when you want to do it. You’ll trade personal and family time for power. Your exalted position will create pretenders to your throne and threats to your livelihood. You’ll also have to distinguish between who around you is sincere and who just wants your job. You’ll fall victim to the addictive nature of power, so be ready for the crash when you must, inevitably, step out of the limelight.

“You can compete and even triumph in organizations of all types, large and small, public or private sector, if you understand the principles of power and are willing to use them.”

Once you reach the pinnacle of power, staying on top is even harder than getting there. Turnover among CEOs rose almost 60% from 1995 to 2006. But relinquishing power – through retirement or voluntary job moves – is always better than losing power. “Overconfidence, disinhibition and ignoring the interests of others” usually results in a leader’s downfall, as does taking risks lightly and treating others as pawns in your power game. So keep your perspective. Remove yourself from your power-centric environment from time to time, and associate with people who knew you before you were a power titan. And when it’s time to go, “leave gracefully.”

## About the Author

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