

## Learning on the Run 32: Organizational Power Dynamics (1)

What are some reinforcing power relationships?

**My Interest.** Much of the reconciliation work I do involves a power difference among people from different organizational levels and positions (e.g., managing engineer and engineer). The use of the supervisor's authority can cause ill feelings and escalating conflict.

**In Theory.** Many supervisors act as if power was a scarce resource (the more power I give away, the less power I'll have). This belief can lead to two reinforcing patterns.

1. **Power grab pattern, struggles for control, winning becomes paramount, no one authorizes anyone else.** Sometimes supervisors use position power as a main source of influence when faced with resistance from their team. They tend to experience resistance as a threat to their authority. They may reactively seek additional power as they fail to see that the overt resistance actually affirms their power. Direct reports who experience this position power believe that their authority to act flexibly, to contribute input or take initiative is diminished. They might begin to feel micromanaged and unappreciated. In these competitive power struggles, winning to win takes over as major driver. Cliques, triangulation, doing the minimum, blaming ("a control freak") are examples of reports seeking more power. Simple compliance by reports, seen as acceptance, is another means to increase their power, by withholding any real thinking and creative effort.
2. **Refuse power pattern, everyone feels powerless, no one self-authorizes.** Sometimes supervisors refuse any power to raise issues with their supervisor on behalf of their staff. They might comply without consent or just carry messages from their supervisor to their team. They might also fear being accused of grabbing power. Their team feels powerless wondering who represents their interests. Individuals on the team may wish for more power, but increasingly come to fear taking power that others probably want. Avoidance continues to grow and everyone feels less powerful.

A third pattern can develop when supervisors come to believe that taking power to authorize their team actually creates more power for everyone. They might also believe that their real authority comes from those most influenced by it.

3. **Take power to empower pattern, everyone feels authorized to act.** Here, the supervisor takes the authority they have both from their position and from those most influenced by it. They represent the collective interests of the team and their organization up and out. They create conditions to empower the team, that is, give away their power. The team believes they have influence in the organization and accepts their supervisor's direction and actions on their behalf. The more the supervisor empowers others, the more power they are given to act on the team's behalf. This mutual authorizing process has the greatest potential for a high performing team. The focus is on the authorizing process and not the authority figure.

Possible Applications. I have used this belief system to question my coaching clients who are having difficulty changing an established process or norm especially when faced with staff resistance. This theory is also part of a workshop for managers in the middle who might be challenged by their power relationships up and down the organization. My hope is to provide more choice to managers especially for those who see power as only a zero sum game.

(1) The classic paper on power and influence is: French, J. R. P., Raven, B. The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright and A. Zander. Group dynamics. New York: Harper & Row, 1959. An interesting discussion of authority is in: Heifetz, R.A. Roots of Authority. In R.A. Heifetz. Leadership without easy answers. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1994.