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PUTTING POWER IN PERSPECTIVE

Are you using all of your power sources?

Author Terry Bacon recently published "The Elements of Power". He outlines 11 sources of power - a timely update to the 1959 ideas of French and Raven.

1. Knowledge power - knowledge and skills.
2. Expressiveness power - ability to communicate the knowledge!
3. Network power - connecting with others, not just in hierarchical manner.
4. Information power - facts and data relevant to a context.
5. Role power - ability to influence based on position.
6. Resources power - controlling accessibility to resources.
7. Character - the values which drive individuals.
8. Reputation – how you're seen / known by others.
9. History power – what's happened before?
10. Attraction power – extent to which people like to associate with you.
11. 'Will' power – the strength of personal determination.

UGM has found it useful to reflect on the underlying themes of information, connection and context, three defining components (and drivers of value) of our Knowledge Economy.

Saved by the link

"Who would have believed", Mike reflected, "that the big deal that came so close to being lost would be saved by such a seemingly small clincher?" Months of work and substantial resources had been invested to marshal the prospect. But a last, unexpected hurdle had arisen and all seemed lost. The deal-breaker was agreement on the monitoring of the proposed JV.

When it seemed as if it was over, a chance coffee meeting changed everything. It saved the day! Who could have believed that a coffee catch-up, followed by an invitation to "LinkIn", would reveal a common contact that would become the mutually trusted and respected independent monitor? A deal saver.

Power in perspective

At the point when the deal looked to be falling through the cracks, neither party had sufficient influence to get it over the line. Up until that time, in contrast, each had exercised the right kind of influence to keep things moving and on track. The problem the JV deal finally faced was that the prospective partners had run out of power.

Power is the capacity to influence. All too often the term conjures up very negative connotations. We recall the phrase 'power corrupts' and immediately steer clear. But, did you know that this often cited phrase is itself corrupt – that's not actually what the originator said! So, pretty strong reactions to power are based on a misconstrued message.

Historian and moralist, Lord Acton, actually wrote, "Power *tends* to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Interestingly, that one small word, 'tends', has such power! Power is nothing more or less than '*the capacity to influence*'. At source, power is neutral. On application, the influence may be exercised in a positive or negative manner. Put to good or bad use.

We can think of power like we do energy. A small battery can power a pacemaker, or a detonator. Our stoves can enable a delicious hot meal, or cause the fire which burns down the house. But we don't avoid batteries because they sometimes power detonators. Neither do we shun stoves because sometimes they cause fires. Instead, we think carefully about how we might use each responsibly, for good.

And so it is with power. Without it, we cannot influence. We need power to be able to exercise influence, to act. Power may tend to corrupt, but a lack of power incapacitates! That's helplessness, which the dictionary defines as "deprived of strength or power; powerless; incapacitated". A much worse condition than being powerful. You have no ability to change your condition when you're powerless.

Sources of power

You may not have heard of social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven. Fair enough, their significant study of power was published back in 1959. However, you've no doubt heard about their research findings - five bases of power.

Legitimate power occurs when parties recognise rights and responsibilities, usually relating to positions or roles. For example, a superior has the right to instruct a subordinate to complete a task that falls within the subordinate's job description. This type of power is a form of positional power. Managers have this power (as do subordinates, for that matter, in terms of the power to do their work).

Referent power is a kind of informal power that people choose to attribute to others. For example, someone likes, trusts or respects you, so they are willingly influenced by you. You'd correctly recognise the outcomes of that power as leading and following. Referent power is also a type of personal power.

Expert power, another personal power, derives from superior skills or knowledge. In the right context, knowledge is indeed power. Then there's reward power and coercive (punishment) power which need no further explanation, given our limited space.

Very often, more than one and even all of these sources of power will be used. Research shows that combining sources of power delivers synergies. The particular combination is much more effective than the sum of the individual sources. How often do you intentionally exercise multiple sources of power? Sometimes, things might go sour when you don't recognise that you're drawing on multiple sources, in a combination that, overall, brings negative rather than positive energy to your context.

Power in the Knowledge Economy

Useful as it is, French and Raven's take on power is dated. If that's all you had, it's better than nothing. However, were moving rapidly into the Knowledge Economy, which is quite different from the Industrial Economy. The change is revolutionary, not incremental. Power, too, has undergone revolutionary changes.

For example, a presidency in the Philippines was brought down by the power of SMS. More recently, the Arab Spring saw unprecedented power flowing to the people, supported by communications technologies that allowed unmatched social networking and connection.

Powerless or powerful? It's a no-brainer really. But how often do you stop and think about your sources of power? Our side-bar highlights sources of power available in the Knowledge Economy.