



Understanding Power

Acknowledgements

This presentation is heavily indebted to the work of the Craighead Institute and the Grubb Institute and is based on the papers these organisations prepared on the subject of power and authority. In particular these notes draw on a paper entitled “Reflections on Authority and Power in Groups and Systems”, by Colin Quine of the Grubb Institute. This paper formed part of the course materials for a Diploma course in consulting and facilitating, organised by the Craighead Institute in 2002. A copy of this paper can be provided for further reading.

The key extract from these papers refers to work undertaken by Bruce Reed of the Grubb Institute in the early 1970's which led him to define power and authority in the following ways:

Power is an attribute or quality of persons or groups.

Authority is an attribute or quality that is attached to roles within a system.

1

In this presentation we are going to focus on the term power. Reed distinguished between four different sources of power.

P_x Personal Power

P_i Instrumental Power

P_p Projected Power

P_o Official Power

Personal power (**P_x**)

This is the power that each of us has, based on our skills, experience, know-how and personality, combined with our particular personal resources of appearance, intelligence, character, temperament etc. Your gifts are examples of your personal power.

This power can be inherited (how you look) or acquired (through developing knowledge and skills), but you have responsibility for how you use it.

Personal power is always available for our use because it belongs to us. However, we can be in circumstances where, for example we are experiencing high levels of uncertainty or anxiety, and we can lose touch with our personal power and feel “powerless” or “de-skilled”

Instrumental Power (**P_i**)

This is the power you have because you have control over resources. These resources can be money, information, contacts, equipment. All these resources are external to the person (unlike personal power) and their access to this power may be under the control of someone else (for example, their line manager).

2

Whilst control over and access to money is a very obvious example of this power, contacts, networks and information are also extremely important when you are trying to influence change. Exercising this power means developing these relationships and using those connections.

Projected Power (**P_p**)

This is power attributed to or given to you by other people. Leadership of groups and organisations depends on capacity to attract projected power. When you are leading groups you are carrying this kind of power, projected onto you by the people who are following you or supporting you.

The person does not have any control over whether they are given projected power and projected power can be both

- positive. (for example, believing you are a good person because you are a priest) and
- negative (for example, believing you know everything about everyone in the office because you are the boss's wife).

Celebrities carry projected power. It can also be given to people because of their relationships to other people who are seen as powerful. As this power is given to you by others, you cannot control it.

People can be seen as charismatic leaders because others project a certain kind of power onto them. The power comes from the way others regard you, the qualities and attributes they assume you to have. If something disrupts this view of you (a scandal or previously hidden information) this power can evaporate in an instant.

This power is connected to reputation and public perception. It can operate negatively with people who have previously been socially devalued. People who are trying to change traditional attitudes have to be acutely aware of this kind of power.

Official power (**Po**)

This is the power that you have because of your title, office or position. This may be because you are called the Chief Executive, the Director, the Manager, the Head teacher, the Minister. The office of course also gives you access to instrumental power.

3

This type of power is based on people's expectations of the title, not the person. Official power can operate, regardless of the person, their capabilities, their personality or whether they are even known or recognised. It can operate on the basis of their signature. This also means that the power will be passed onto the next post holder and not remain with the past post holder.

These different kinds of power help us understand why we might be powerful in some areas and powerless in others. By examining our own sense of the power we carry, we can increase the power we have and use it more consciously.



Individual Exercise

Mapping power

Why do we do this

This is another attempt to help you reflect on and evaluate your current situation and think about how you might amend or improve it.

Acknowledging and owning the power you have is an important part of the process of becoming a person who can make change happen. You have to also be aware of when projected power may be working against you.

How do we do this

4

Everyone will individually be given some time to think about their own personal power and take their own notes on the attached sheet.

Using the four definitions of power outlined in the presentation notes, please write down your own description of how these kinds of power are realised in your own life. If there is an obvious gap, you may want to think what you can do about this.

Total time 30 minutes



Mapping my power

Please take this page to note down your own sense of the different kinds of power you think you have at this stage.

Personal power – Px For example, your knowledge, skills, personality, appearance, ability, gifts.	
Instrumental power – Pi For example, your control over resources such as money, equipment, information and people. All the networks and connections you have access to.	
Projected power – Pp For example, the way others see you and what they invest in you. It can be influenced by public perceptions and attitudes. Remember that this power can be positive and negative.	
Official Power – Po For example, any posts you hold (chair, treasurer etc) or titles you have (for example, job titles or roles).	

Where are you currently powerful?

Where are you vulnerable?

What can you do to change the current situation?