

Ironies Leaders Navigate

*What the Science of Power
Reveals about the Art of Leadership
and the Distinct Art of Church Leadership*

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CHAPTER 1

A Redeeming Look at Power

How Exactly Are Leadership and Power Related?

The answer to this question presents itself when definitions of each are placed adjacent. Consider three pairings as examples:

Power is deliberate or purposive influence.¹

—Morton Deutsch

Leadership is intentional influence.²

—Michael McKinney

[Power is] the ability to bring about desired outcomes.³

—Peter T. Coleman

Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.⁴

—Warren Bennis

1. Deutsch, *Resolution of Conflict*, 87.
2. McKinney, "Leadership Quotes."
3. Coleman, "Power and Conflict," 112.
4. McKinney, "Leadership Quotes."

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By social power we mean an individual's potentiality for influencing one or more other persons toward acting or changing in a given direction.⁵

—George Levinger

Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.⁶

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

Even as definitions of power and leadership vary from one another and increase in complexity—chapter 2 will compare ten of each—the two basic conclusions presented in the introduction remain safe. First, every act of leadership is an act of power. Second, the better we understand power, the better we understand leadership.

Exploring power does indeed reveal much about leadership. Power, including the many forms it takes and the many dynamics that shape it, has been studied in careful detail. Even a basic overview shines a bright, almost clinical light on leadership and leadership settings. Still, the study of power does not offer anything new about leadership. It merely takes a closer look, naming dynamics already experienced within leadership settings. Even the ironies revealed should make sense in light of examples provided. Offered here is merely a detailed appreciation of challenges already navigated by leaders and those they seek to lead.

THE IRONY OF DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE

To better understand power, the second thing to understand is that different people understand power differently. The third thing to understand is that different people understand *other people's power* very differently. But before all this, the *first* thing to discuss when discussing power is that people generally don't like discussing power. Call this *the irony of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Though power and leadership are practically synonymous, and though

5. Levinger, "Development of Perceptions and Behavior," 85.

6. McKinney, "Leadership Quotes."

power is at work whenever leaders lead, "Leadership is always a fascinating topic,"⁷ while the open discussion of power is often considered "bad taste,"⁸ a sign of a distressed relationship.⁹ This irony appears to increase as power increases: Hocker and Wilmot observe how "people who hold high power positions are particularly prone to denying they have or use power."¹⁰

To be clear, power itself is very attractive. "The overwhelming evidence seems to indicate that the powerful tend to like power, use it, justify having it, and attempt to keep it."¹¹ Rather, we just don't like talking about power. Andy Crouch, author of *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, describes being repeatedly urged to use a less "abrupt and unsettling" term for his subject.¹² Several factors help to explain why people, especially leaders, might resist discussing the power inherent within leadership. For instance, power is the active element within many polarizing dynamics, e.g., *power hungry, power struggle, political power, overpower, firepower*. Lord Acton's famous statement, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely," furthers this notoriety. Others do come to power's defense with arguments like:

*Power doesn't corrupt people, people corrupt power.*¹³
—William Gaddis

*There is nothing wrong with power if power is used correctly.*¹⁴
—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Yet, even as these statements confront power's bad reputation, they acknowledge that it is very often guilty by association.

7. Vecchio, "Introduction and Overview," 1.
8. Kipnis, *Powerholders*, 2.
9. Ury et al., *Getting Disputes Resolved*, 7–8.
10. Hocker and Wilmot, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 115.
11. Coleman, "Power and Conflict," 124.
12. Crouch, *Playing God*, 25.
13. Brainyquote.com, "William Gaddis Quotes."
14. King Jr., "On Power and Love."

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Power is at its most recognizable in overtly competitive settings like sports, elections, and elimination “reality” shows. These spectacles captivate precisely because they offer dramatic win/lose platforms. Beyond these formal arenas, but perhaps because of them, people often equate power solely with struggle. “In many discussions, the concept of power is linked only to the ability to overcome resistance.”¹⁵

Associating power with opposition also makes sense given power’s integral connection with conflict. Power has been called the “architecture”¹⁶ and “structure”¹⁷ of conflict. Indeed this book draws heavily upon conflict-related scholarship. Conflict situations can be dissected and examined according to the sources of power each party controls. Further, the collaborative resolution of conflict often involves parties becoming aware, redirecting, and even explicitly refraining from using those sources of power available to them. That power has so much in common with leadership, and that power structurally undergirds how conflict is managed, also sheds light on a dynamic many leaders already appreciate: leadership often looks and feels like conflict management. In other words, what instance of leadership is *not* an instance of either resolving, or avoiding, or instigating, or, in a word, *managing* conflict? In fact, many definitions distinguishing great leaders from leaders address how great leaders embrace conflict:

*A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be.*¹⁸

—Rosalynn Carter

All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the

15. Deutsch, *Resolution of Conflict*, 87.

16. Folger, et al., *Working Through Conflict*, 136.

17. Hocker and Wilmot, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 105.

18. Ibid.

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*major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership.*¹⁹

—John Kenneth Galbraith

*Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate, and doubt to offer a solution everybody can understand.*²⁰

—General Colin Powell

Power's connection with conflict, competition and coercion helps to explain why leadership seldom conspicuously associates with power, despite their near synonymy. In fact, of the entire "Top 100 Best Quotes on Leadership," as published by *Forbes*, only one mentions power. And this one—Seneca's caution that "He who has great power should use it lightly"—doesn't mention leadership.²¹ Nevertheless, a better understanding of power helps bring all these quotes, and the many thousands that didn't make this list, into sharper focus.

A REDEEMING LOOK AT POWER

Despite any bad reputation, "power is neither positive nor negative—power just is."²² A newborn's first cry is a reflexive effort to *bring about desired outcomes*. Referring to power as bad or good "is akin to classifying our breathing function as good or bad."²³ Confronting the perception that power is equated solely with coercion, Deutsch responds: "This seems too narrow a view. It overlooks the possibility that power can be facilitative as well as coercive, that it can liberate as well as restrain, that it can be 'for' as well as 'against.'"²⁴

19. Kruse, "100 Best Quotes on Leadership."

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Hocker and Wilmot, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 73.

23. Ibid.

24. Deutsch, *Resolution of Conflict*, 87.

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In short, power is at work when good—great or small—comes from people *purposively influencing* each other. It is, for example, an act of power (and leadership) when:

- An eight-year-old girl specifies in her birthday party invitation that guests should bring items for the local animal shelter in lieu of gifts.
- The CEO of a capital investment firm closes its doors and ushers staff from Boston to New York City, where they walk the streets and hand out flyers in hopes of finding a coworker's runaway daughter.
- Two college softball players carry the batter from the opposing team around the diamond, lowering her so that she can touch her foot to each base, because she has just torn her ACL hitting a home run against them and can't walk, and the rules state the home run won't count unless she touches the bases and that her own teammates cannot help her.

Power is at work when the president of the United States bends down and allows a five-year-old boy to rub his hair, to confirm that they are like each other. When Jesus Christ tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, every benevolent act ascribed to the main character is an act of power.

Saying "Please" or "You can do it" or "Your way is better" or even "I love you" are acts of power, if they *purposively influence* another, if they work to *bring about desired outcomes*. It is an act of power when a father counts to three and lets go of the bicycle, jogging behind as his five-year-old daughter pedals on alone.

And as their near-synonymous definitions reveal, every act of leadership is an act of power. In all the myriad forms it takes (see chapter 3), power is how leaders *purposively influence* those they strive to *intentionally influence*. Power is the stuff under the hood of leadership. A leader seeking to understand power is like a surgeon examining her instruments before operating, or a pitcher scrutinizing his pitching on slow-motion video.

Power is the means by which leaders lead. So what is power, exactly?