

PERSONAL POWER

INCIDENT 1: I was driving along a country road near a pond when a goose and her goslings, looking at me rather imperiously, began to cross directly in my path, with no hesitation, no apparent concern about the course of my vehicle, and with no attempt to alter their pace. Miffed, I slowed to a crawl and waited for them to pass.

INCIDENT 2: (from the movie “Godfather Two”) A young Vito Corleone lies in wait for the current don, daring to catch him alone where he is tacitly granted free passage without bodyguards. As the opportunity presents itself, the ruthless Vito simply shoots the don and in so doing, takes control and authority, bypassing the traditional succession protocol.

INCIDENT 3: In 1965, in their second championship fight, Muhammad Ali knocks out Sonny Liston in the first round with a less than robust punch. On explaining later why he didn’t get up, Liston said he was fearful: “that guy is crazy; he would do anything.”

BEYOND THE NORM

These incidents all provide examples of individual behavior deviating from the norm in such a way as to grant power on the actor. Some acts are innocent (the goose), some noble (e.g. Mahatma Gandhi), and some ruthlessly abusive (the Godfather). I seek to explore an underlying framework for the accumulation of power achieved by going beyond the norms.

A community establishes norms of behavior to ensure structure and stability for its constituents. Members “agree” to stay within acceptable behavioral boundaries in order to benefit from knowing what to expect from the community as a whole and from individuals within it.

We focus on four distinct venues in which norms operate, designating an activity and a context for each venue:

<i>ACTIVITY</i>	<i>CONTEXT</i>
• Requesting resources	Self (personal); authority
• Negotiating conflict	Interpersonal
• Managing systems	Society; institutional (culture)
• Interpreting events	Information; knowledge

The norms for each vary with the community. Although we mainly focus on organizational life, examples from other arenas will shed light on the granting of power connected with going beyond the norms.

For some preliminary examples of norms in these venues, consider the following. In case of an individual asking for resources, there are formal channels and a designated grantor, who makes a final determination – the requestor may make an appeal, but is expected to accede to authority. In case of conflict, many normative scenarios hold sway. One common to organizations is Argyris’ Model I theory of action, in which individuals hold to various governing values and strategies in the face of conflict, such as appearing in control, rational, and polite – while still trying to “win.” In the case of societal institutions, people are expected to fit in and obey the law or the rules. This can refer to following organizational policy in the context of corporate life or following a “code of honor” in gang life. In the case of interpreting events, conventional wisdom holds sway. Standard explanations exist to account for all sorts of happenings, in particular political behavior. Hallway conversations and those around the water cooler also have an expected rhythm and flow.

Sources of power

Power flows from going beyond the norms, but only under certain conditions. The individual needs to balance pushing the envelope with other aspects of behavior, or else he or she runs the risk of ridicule and even expulsion. Power resides in a combination of attitude, ability, advantage, and common actions. (The latter refers to persistence, proactivity, and challenge.) For the first three, along with the norm breaking behavior, consider the following table:

Venue	Activity	Attitude	Ability	Action	Advantage
SELF	REQUEST	ENTITLED IMPASSIONED	SELF- PRESENTATION	ASKS WHY; DOES FIRST	OK WITH REJECTION
INTERPERSONAL	CONFLICT	OUTSPOKEN AGGRESSIVE	WILLINGNESS TO CONFRONT	ESCALATION	FEARLESS
SOCIETY	SYSTEM	DRIVEN	PRESENT A VISION	APPEALS TO HIGHER POWER	LONG TERM PERSPECTIVE ; SACRIFICE
INFO	INTERPRET EVENTS	ASSURED & IN CONTROL	PERSUASIVE	SELECTS ARGUMENTS	NO DOUBTS

The power can be put to positive or negative use. For example, Darwin’s interpretation of biological phenomena advanced the cause of science, while Jim Jones’ views led to 900 deaths among his followers.

With respect to the self, an individual making a personal request has power if he or she feels genuinely entitled to it, presents it well, and persists with it over time. This person will go farther with the request than most others if, seemingly paradoxically, he or she can handle rejection (rendering him or her unfazed by minor setbacks). This does not mean that the individual accepts the rejection: that simply leads to the next “appeal.”

With respect to interpersonal contexts, an individual enmeshed in a conflict has power if he or she has the capability of speaking out and can be confrontative, labeling ordinarily undiscussable issues (bringing deeper relational truths out into the open). This individual is at ease with conflict and doesn't need to be liked more than he or she needs to champion a cause or a venture or a point of view. That is, this person can go beyond the specifics of the conflict to challenge the relationship as a whole; he or she does not mind getting his or her hands dirty. He or she shows a willingness to escalate and projects strength. In one scenario, the individual's goal is to connect with others, overcoming the conflict; in another, the goal is simply to win, treating others as adversaries.

With respect to society as a whole, or organizational institutions, an individual who has a vision for change and lobbies for that vision takes power. If this person will sacrifice many aspects of everyday life to fulfill his or her mission and can keep an eye on the long range perspective, then he or she has power. The individual's power stems in part from being admired, but more so from the ability to bring many aspects of organizational life/society together and the willingness to go places where others would not (out of fear).

With respect to information and knowledge, an individual who puts him or herself in a position to interpret events (including his or her own behavior) gains power if he or she appears self-assured, marshals arguments in a persuasive fashion, and has no doubts as to the validity of his or her thinking. Excellent lawyers gain their power through these abilities. They are the ones who establish landmark precedents.

Community collusion

Besides the traits, certain other conditions must be in place. Norms need to evolve over time even though, paradoxically, they provide stability. The community will stagnate unless it balances stability and growth. The confluence between community need and individual seizing of the initiative is also a precondition for power inhering in extending the norms. The individual acts as an agent of change, aligning his or her inclinations with the community's.

The community implicitly encourages some to take this power, but by design, without acknowledgment. It must formally endorse its current norms, even while allowing for and actually hoping to get them to change/grow. Just as a political speech or a formal announcement in an organizational context cannot be fully explicit and must be read between the lines, so must the powerful read between the norms. For a community to grow and change itself, it paradoxically must claim to preserve itself, to keep its majority share holders, the good

corporate safety oriented citizens, from panicking and thus to preserve its own stability in the process.

Thus, in effect, the community has periodically small windows of covert collusion with potential powerful individuals, secretly supporting them or at worst, appearing ambivalent even as it sees its norms violated. For example, some of the furore over Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton had to do with his calling too much attention to himself as a maverick with too much arrogance: he broke part of the window on his way through and various sectors of society could not ignore the shattered glass.

Society can afford only a small percentage of norm extending power seeking individuals, but that fits with the fact that most members of a community prefer to take a back seat and bask in the warmth of the security it provides. In general, members of the community sit back and watch the actions of those who go beyond the norms with a critical eye. They can judge the non-normative behavior while covertly applauding it.

Why? Those who push for resources beyond current levels and practices may benefit the rest of the community – raising all boats, as it were. Certainly, Curt Flood's push for free agency, originally a personal act, had institutional implications as well as improving the salary structure for all baseball players and even athletes in other professional sports.

Those willing to confront others in difficult interpersonal situations help elevate a relational consciousness, making it easier for people to speak their minds and label the truth as such. Our receptivity to new techniques in negotiations increases, so that we consider, for example, "win-win" scenarios rather than just zero-sum games.

Pushing for wholesale changes in society/institutional life tends to split the community: some see the agent of change as a visionary who will help create a new and improved lifestyle for all, while others see him or her as a demagogue. This dichotomy exists for the other venues as well, but is more dramatic here. In general, the power may be admired if it serves others or is sincerely sought. Otherwise, as in the baseball strike of 1994, the players will be vilified.

Similarly, creating a new framework for interpreting events can be divisive, as in Darwin's case. This venue generally requires the most time for acceptance.

Power Dynamics

The dynamic in each dimension is energy/responsibility. When, for example, an individual doesn't simply accept a rejection of his or her request, but finds

ingenious ways to persist so that the grantor must continue to consider it, the responsibility shifts to the latter, requiring energy to deal with it. Pushing back against the demand not only takes extra energy, but it forces others to take responsibility for their refusals. The onus is on others to react.

When in conflict, an individual does not back down or level off, but instead ups the ante, it takes energy for the other person to “stay in the match.” The other has the responsibility to respond (the ball is in his or her court). The powerful person doesn’t go away, but rather keeps the pressure on.

For those individuals with a vision, intent on changing some aspect of society, societal representatives are forced to expend energy in responding to the proposed change. Even if they welcome it, they must assume the responsibility to contain it or let it flourish. The stakes are very high, so a small miscalculation can be disastrous. Actually, even in the person pushing a request, there can be a huge ripple effect, as the Flood case illustrates.

Abuse of power

The powerful person has the capacity to use that power in an abusive way, i.e., at the expense of others (even if purportedly for their benefit). Abuse lies mainly in manipulation – of self presentation, of others, of society, and of information.

With respect to the self, an individual can use power to wear others down with a relentless barrage – a squeaky wheel tactic. This person makes it so unpleasant for others to resist him or her, not taking no for an answer, that others capitulate even while believing they should not. In another form of the abuse, the individual has such a sense of entitlement and such an ability to charm that he or she gets the prize through disarming others, often inducing them to believe they should give in even should the request appear of questionable merit.

With respect to others, an individual’s fearlessness and willingness to openly confront can turn into a weapon, and he or she becomes an intimidator. He or she also uses this attitude to deter others from entering the fray, because of the implied capacity for unlimited escalation: as in the Muhammad Ali case, there appeared to be nothing holding him back, nothing he wouldn’t do. In verbal contexts, the equivalent is “Virginia Woolf” syndrome, in which the relational truths are used to inflict pain on others in almost a gratuitous fashion.

With respect to society, the powerful individual becomes abusive when he or she attains cult standing, turning the quest into a mechanism to gain a flock and to seek out adoration. What appears to be a community focused effort masks self-serving goals. Narcissistic charismatic leaders tend to manifest abuse in this

manner, creating climates in which followers tend toward subservience and self-doubt.

With respect to information, the powerful individual engages in theoretical abuse: this means that he or she undermines others' feeling and reasoning processes, imposing his or her own. Sometimes, the imposition is subtle, revealing itself in a failure to elicit and support colleague and follower thinking. One avenue for such abuse comes from the interpretation of the individual's own behaviors: he or she will argue convincingly, for example, that they serve the community rather than the self. This means that with respect to the other three dimensions, even apparently outrageous requests are justified, along with interpersonally aggressive actions, and any vision for societal change deflects probes into a personal agenda.

AND IN CONCLUSION

The most striking aspect about this sort of personal power is the goose – finding the right mix of “natural” entitlement without real arrogance, knowing just how wide the window can open so that others, e.g. humans, feel they must capitulate to the extending of the norms, in this case, traffic protocol. The goose can only take it so far: ideally, norm extension is not so elastic, but rather a way of moving to the next level. Norm extension has its dark side also as in the case of misguided charismatic narcissists like Jim Jones. In any case, we have to deal with an uneasy alliance between grantor and power seeker.