Understanding the Fluid Nature of Power

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Managers interact with large numbers of internal and external constituents to accomplish various tasks. What is accomplished (or not accomplished) depends to a great extent on the understanding and use of power (both by and toward the manager) as daily interpersonal interactions occur.

However, the very idea of power is disconcerting to many (most) people in business. Although at one time or another everyone attempts to influence the behavior of others, explicit references to power are considered in bad taste. One reason that managers avoid talk of power in their own work is that they wish to avoid talk of conflict - even though conflict is clearly endemic to business life.

In his book, <u>Power Over Power</u> (Cornell University Press, 1981), David Nyberg presents a balanced discussion of the basic forms and fluid nature of power. According to Nyberg, the central task in the exercise of power is eliciting from others the consent necessary to put one's plan into action. He differentiates among four different types of power and discusses their relationship to conflict, authority and consent. These forms of power are **force, fiction, finance and fealty**, each of which has relevance for today's business managers.

Force is the most primitive and least stable form of power. It occurs when actual or threatened physical harm is used to force consent (obedience) from the otherwise unwilling. Also, it is usually the threat, rather than the actual use of force that induces obedient consent, and consent so won is contingent on the continued presence of the threat. This form of power is inherently unstable due to the large investment of resources needed to maintain compliance and the animosity of those being controlled.

Fiction refers to the use of words and ideas to win consent. A good "storyteller" can induce belief and arouse commitment in the listener, creating ways of thinking about certain plans. It involves cajoling, arguing, convincing, rallying and any number of other equally effective techniques. Critical to this use of power is a team of dedicated employees and other managers who share a consistent "vision" of a particular initiative vis-a-vis overall company goals.

A third class of power, **finance**, takes its major tenets from the principles of behavior modification and economics. Finance involves offering or withholding rewards to people (using available resources) in order to make social conditions more consistent with a particular plan. Consent is "bought". For example, this form of power can be seen in the selection of projects to be funded, equipment to be purchased, the providing of technical assistance, and general budget allocations. A pitfall here is that sometimes persons being thus influenced will attempt to get the particular reward without giving exactly what is expected, thereby "short-circuiting" the system.

Fealty concerns power that closely approximates balanced trust, shared understanding, and a mutual plan for action. Therefore, consent is assumed and needs no management and

enforcement. This leaves more resources (time, energy, attention) available for the plan itself. This is power in its most stable form, involving reciprocal, cooperative commitment. Understanding power in this form holds the key to long term success involving the informed goodwill and personal motivation of the employee. Delegation and consent merge into mutual cooperation, making fealty the most efficient form of power.

Understanding and using power effectively is both an art and a science, and requires a willingness to learn from both successes and mistakes. With ongoing practice and persistence, managers can effect positive change in not only their company, but in their personal and professional relationships.

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