

A CCL Research White Paper

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

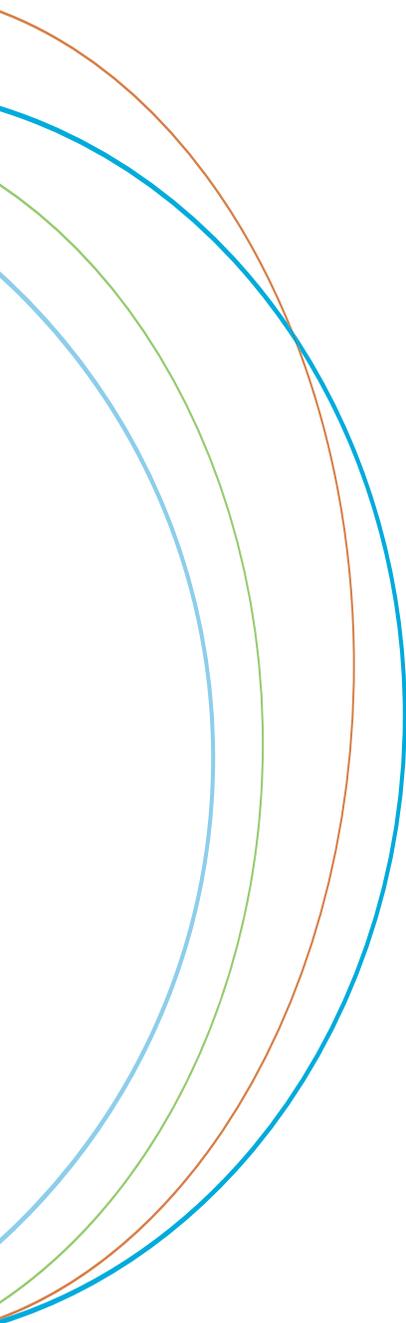
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# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership



## CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
Background	5
Power and Leadership	6
Sources of Power	8
The Power of Relationships	12
The Power of Information	14
Understanding the Organization's Role	15
How Leaders Leverage Power Effectively	17
Reflection Questions	19
Resources	19
References	19
About the Authors	20

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ideas2Action (I2A) project is a Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) initiative aimed at achieving its goal of “ideas into action.” The purpose of the project is to provide our participants and clients with research that is timely and relevant to current challenges. The research questions are also designed to aid in continuously updating CCL program content and providing knowledge that is compelling to our participant groups.

The purpose of this research is to understand how leaders use power, to learn about the situations in which power is exerted and to describe how individuals and organizations can improve their leadership through the effective use of power.

The major findings of this research included:

1. Most leaders surveyed (94 percent) rated themselves as being moderately to extremely powerful at work. There is a notable correlation between leaders’ level in the organization and how powerful they believe themselves to be at work.
2. 28 percent of the leaders surveyed agree that power is misused by top leaders in their organization.
3. 59 percent of the leaders surveyed agree that their organization empowers people at all levels.
4. 41 percent of the leaders surveyed indicate that they would feel more powerful at work if they had more formal authority.
5. The top three most frequently leveraged sources of power are: the power of expertise, the power of information and the power of relationships. The power of punishment, or the ability to sanction individuals for failure to conform to standards or expectations, is the least-leveraged source of power.
6. The three sources of power leaders believe will be most important to leverage in the next five years are the power of relationships, the power of information, and the power to reward others.
7. The power of relationships is most often used to promote one’s own personal agenda.
8. Leaders suggest that the power of relationships can be better leveraged by identifying desired relationships, investing in those relationships, and repairing damaged relationships.

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## BACKGROUND

The concepts of power and leadership have been and will continue to be interconnected. While an individual may exert power without being a leader, an individual cannot be a leader without having power. For this study, the I2A team defined power simply as 'the potential to influence others.' This definition helps demystify power and puts into perspective the importance of using power in order to be an effective leader.

In organizational settings, leaders must exert power to achieve individual, team, and organizational goals. Leaders must be able to influence their followers to achieve greater performance; their superiors and peers to make important decisions; and stakeholders to ensure the vitality of the organization.

### HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

During a five-month period of 2007, data were collected from participants attending a CCL program via two complementary research methods. The first asked participants to complete a short survey on computer kiosks during their weeklong participation in a CCL program. These data were returned to them by the end of their program week.

The second method was an Internet survey that participants volunteered to take part in approximately two weeks following their CCL experience. This survey was more in-depth and allowed the I2A research team to better understand the high-level trends that emerged from the in-class survey.

### WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE RESEARCH?

#### *In-Class Survey*

The initial survey on leadership power focused on high-level trends and was completed by 260 participants attending a leadership development program at CCL's Colorado Springs, CO USA campus. The typical participant was a male (73 percent), between the ages of 36 and 50 years old (68 percent), representing upper-middle management or the executive level (64 percent).

#### *Post-Program Survey*

Approximately two weeks following the CCL program, 45 participants who volunteered received an Internet survey that posed qualitative questions about power and leadership. The typical participant was male (64 percent), between the ages of 36 and 50 (70 percent), at the executive level (43 percent).

FIGURE 1

DEMOGRAPHICS: GENDER	IN-CLASS PERCENTAGE	POST-PROGRAM PERCENTAGE
Male	73%	64%
Female	24%	36%
Not Identified	3%	

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## BACKGROUND (CONTINUED)

FIGURE 2

DEMOGRAPHICS: AGE	IN-CLASS PERCENTAGE	POST-PROGRAM PERCENTAGE
26-30	1%	2%
31-35	8%	9%
36-40	19%	25%
41-45	24%	25%
46-50	25%	20%
51-55	14%	11%
56-60	8%	8%
61+	1%	

FIGURE 3

DEMOGRAPHICS: LEVEL IN ORGANIZATION	IN-CLASS PERCENTAGE	POST-PROGRAM PERCENTAGE
First Level	1%	2%
Middle Management	17%	30%
Upper Middle Management	28%	16%
Executive	36%	43%
Top Management	15%	9%
Not Identified	3%	

## POWER AND LEADERSHIP

We wanted to gauge the perception leaders have of their own sense of power. Based on the sample of leaders surveyed, most recognize that they possess power at work.

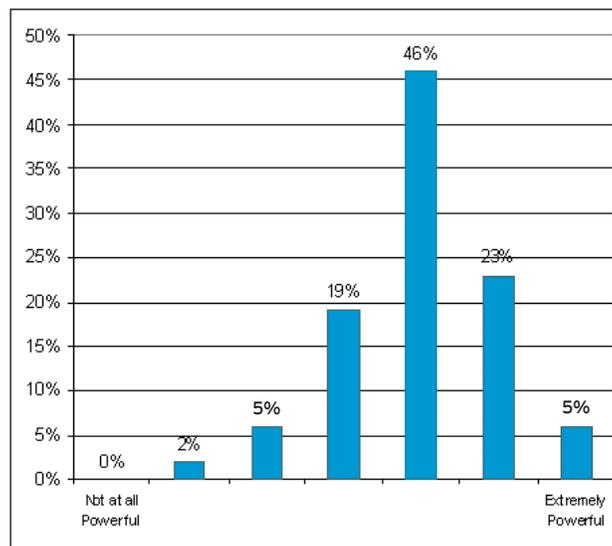
There is also a notable correlation between how powerful a leader believes he or she is at work and that leader's level in the organization. Leaders at a higher organizational level tended to rate themselves as more powerful at work, while those lower in the organizational hierarchy tended to rate themselves as less powerful.

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## POWER AND LEADERSHIP (CONTINUED)

**How powerful do you think you are at work?** Survey participants were asked to rate how powerful they think they are at work on a 1 to 7 scale where 1 equals 'Not at all Powerful' and 7 equals 'Extremely Powerful.'

FIGURE 4



We also sought to understand how power is perceived within organizations. The data indicate some tensions around distribution of power.

Most of the survey respondents (59 percent agreement) believe that their organizations work to empower their people at all levels, and 53 percent of those surveyed agreed that their organization rewards leaders for empowering people.

Even so, over half (55 percent agreement) stated that power is concentrated among a few select individuals in their organization. Twenty-eight percent of survey participants agreed that power is misused by top leaders within their organizations.

Only 29 percent believed that their organizations teach their leaders how to effectively leverage their full power.

These organizational trends relative to power and leadership suggest that while power is not typically misused by top leaders, it does tend to be concentrated to a select few individuals. However, the flatter organizational structures and self-directed work teams that were first implemented through the empowerment movements of the 1980s and 1990s are becoming commonplace. This trend may increase the level of empowerment that employees experience in future years.

Organizations also reward leaders who empower the people they lead, thereby encouraging overall employee empowerment; however, fewer organizations take the opportunity to teach leaders how to effectively use the power they possess. This leaves the definition of appropriate and effective use of power largely up to individual leaders.

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## POWER AND LEADERSHIP (CONTINUED)

**The Perception of Power.** Survey participants were asked whether they agree or disagree with a number of statements about power in their organizations.

FIGURE 5

	PERCENTAGE AGREE
My organization empowers people at all levels.	59%
In my organization, power is concentrated in the hands of a few select individuals.	55%
My organization rewards leaders for empowering their people.	53%
My organization teaches leaders how to leverage their full power.	29%
Power is misused by top leaders in my organization.	28%

## SOURCES OF POWER

When most people think about power, their minds go immediately to the control that high-level leaders exert from their positions atop the organizational hierarchy. But power extends far beyond the formal authority that comes from a title (or from having a corner office with a view).

Leaders at all levels have access to power; often that power goes unrecognized or underutilized. Previous research in this area has identified seven bases of power that leaders may leverage:

- The *power of position* is the formal authority that derives from a person's title or position in a group or an organization.
- The *power of charisma* is the influence that is generated by a leader's style or persona.
- The *power of relationships* is the influence that leaders gain through their formal and informal networks both inside and outside of their organizations.
- The *power of information* is the control that is generated through the use of evidence deployed to make an argument.
- The *power of expertise* is the influence that comes from developing and communicating specialized knowledge (or the perception of knowledge).
- The *power of punishment* is the ability to sanction individuals for failure to conform to standards or expectations.
- The *power of reward* is the ability to recognize or reward individuals for adhering to standards or expectations.

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

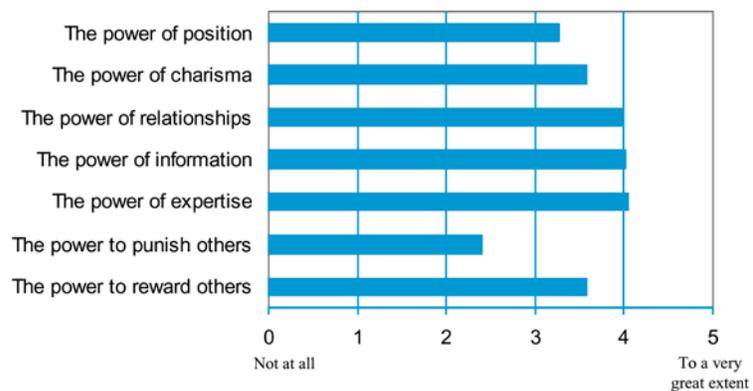
## SOURCES OF POWER (CONTINUED)

In the survey, respondents were asked to identify the extent to which they currently leverage the various sources of power at work. The top three most frequently leveraged sources of power are: the power of expertise, the power of information, and the power of relationships.

The least-leveraged source of power is the power of punishment. The low reliance on punishment raises some important questions for leaders: Why don't leaders use punishment power more frequently? Is it because it is needed so rarely? Or are leaders reluctant to use punishment power because it is too draining and difficult to do so?

**Putting Power to Use.** Survey participants were asked, "To what extent do you leverage the following sources of power at work?" The figure below represents the average ratings for each base of power.

FIGURE 6



Survey respondents were also asked to identify which of the sources of power would be most important in the next five years. Eighty-nine percent of participants reported that the power of relationships would be most important in the next five years followed by the power of information (57 percent). This finding is illustrative of leadership in the age of networks. The proliferation of technology has contributed to the development of vast and fast social and informational networks. The leaders of the future will need to know how to leverage such networks to advance their relationships as well as their procurement of real and useful data.

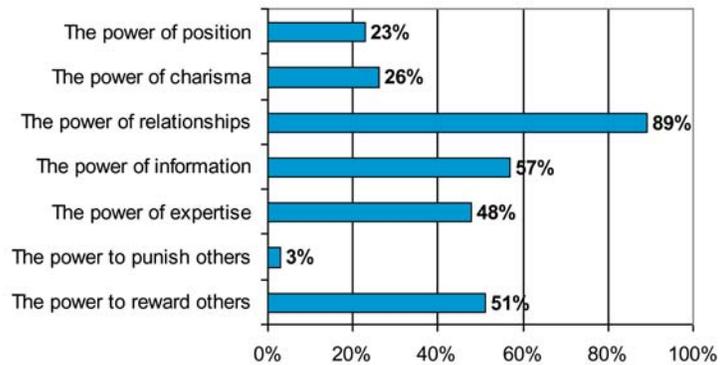
The power to reward others ranked as the third most important source of power (51 percent), with the power of expertise ranking fourth (48 percent).

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## SOURCES OF POWER (CONTINUED)

**Looking ahead.** What are the three sources of power most critical for you to leverage in the next five years?

FIGURE 7



The initial survey piqued our interest as to whether different sources of power were more often leveraged with different stakeholders. In the post-program follow-up survey, respondents were asked which sources of power they tend to use with their boss or superior, peers, or direct reports.

The results indicated that the power of expertise, the power of information and the power of relationships were most used with boss and superiors, peers, and direct reports. This finding parallels the above discussion and suggests that survey respondents are not leveraging other distinct sources of power with the different stakeholder groups.

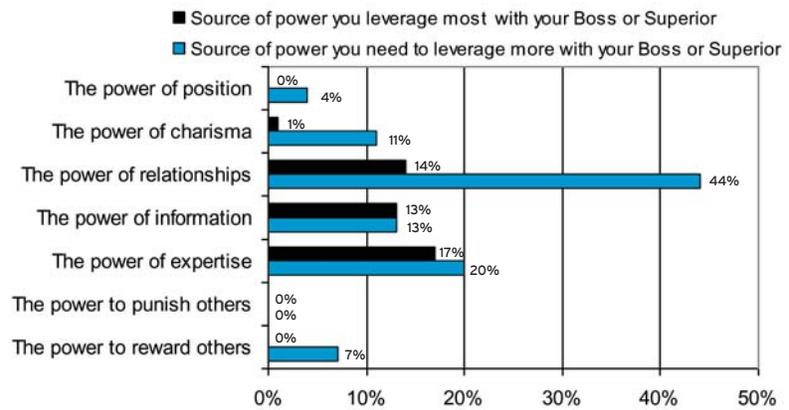
The same follow-up survey indicates that respondents need to leverage relationship power even more with all stakeholder groups in order to be perceived as more effective. With direct reports, respondents say that it is also important for them to leverage the power to reward more than they currently do.

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## SOURCES OF POWER (CONTINUED)

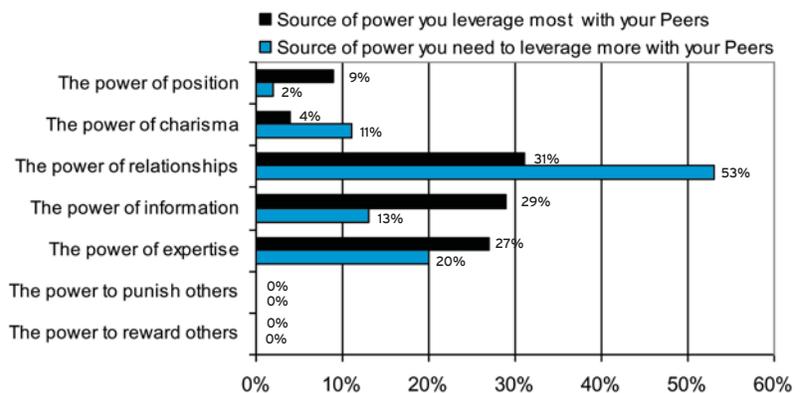
**Power and the Boss.** What source of power do you leverage most with your Boss or Superior currently? What source of power do you need to leverage more with your Boss or Superior in order to be a more effective leader?

FIGURE 8



**Power with Peers.** What source of power do you leverage most with your Peers currently? What source of power do you need to leverage more with your Peers in order to be a more effective leader?

FIGURE 9

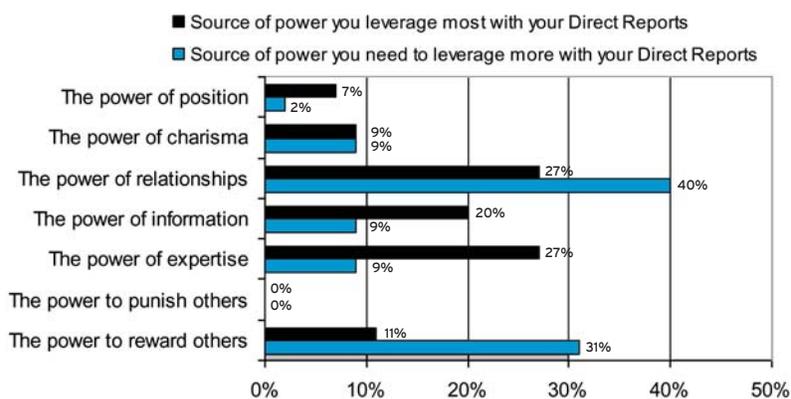


# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## SOURCES OF POWER (CONTINUED)

**Power and Direct Reports.** What source of power do you leverage most with your direct reports currently? What source of power do you need to leverage more with your direct reports in order to be a more effective leader?

FIGURE 10



## THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

Survey respondents recognized the power of relationships as a source of power they frequently leverage today, and a source of power they believe will be important to leverage in the future in order to be more effective leaders. Given the emphasis on relationships reflected in the initial survey, we probed further about it in the post-program survey. We asked respondents to describe the situations in which they use the power of relationships and reflect on what they need to do to better leverage this power.

When asked about a situation in which they leveraged the power of relationships, survey respondents frequently discussed promoting an agenda. They described this in three different ways: promoting their own agenda, promoting someone else's agenda, or promoting the organization's agenda.

### *Promoting One's Own Agenda*

Slightly more than half (52 percent) of the survey respondents described a situation where they promoted their own agenda. Typical responses described how respondents used the power of relationships to "move [their own] project along," to ask for [their] project to "be given more priority," or to have colleagues help advocate for something the respondent "felt strongly about." Each of these instances illustrates situations in which survey respondents sought to advance their agendas ('my project,' 'my agenda,' 'my decisions').

### *Promoting Someone Else's Agenda*

Almost a quarter (23 percent) of the responses described situations in which survey respondents promoted *someone else's* agenda. Many of the situations involved developing or mentoring employees and leveraging the trust established in the relationship, or

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS (CONTINUED)

advocating for that employee. Other situations described how survey respondents utilized their social network connections to assist others. Examples of typical responses include helping a colleague fill a position by “introducing him to another person in my network,” or assisting with a project through “personal contacts.”

### *Promoting the Organization’s Agenda*

A third type of situation in which survey respondents leveraged the power of relationships was in promoting the organization’s agenda (19 percent). These situations were not focused on the “self” or specific “others.” Instead these situations focused on how the power of relationships advanced the goals of larger organizational entities. Examples included how the power of relationships could be used to influence organizational change, “minimize conflict” between functional groups, or empower a broad employee base.

**Using Relationship Power.** Survey participants were asked to give an example of a situation where they leveraged the power of relationships. The responses fell into three main themes.

FIGURE 11

	PERCENTAGE
Promote own agenda	52%
Promote someone else’s agenda	23%
Promote organization’s agenda	19%
Miscellaneous	6%

Given the potential advantages and disadvantages of leveraging the power of relationships, it is important to understand how leaders can improve their use of relational power. In the post-program survey respondents described what they need to better leverage the power of relationships. Their responses can be summed up in three words: invest, identify, and repair.

### *Invest*

The majority of responses (46 percent) spoke to the need to find the time and energy to invest more in existing relationships. Many of the respondents expressed the need to “spend more time with others,” to keep “in touch” with others, or participate in more socializing on non-work-related topics. A number of the respondents expressed the need to share more about themselves with others, and to also listen and learn more about others.

### *Identify*

Twenty-six percent of the responses spoke to better leveraging the power of relationships by identifying a specific person with whom the respondent needed to establish a relationship. Survey respondents identified the need to develop better relationships with “my boss,” “senior executives,” “my peers,” and even to get more out of relationships with “my customers.”

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS (CONTINUED)

### *Repair*

The survey respondents (23 percent) also recognized the need to repair damaged or neglected relationships. Responses described building or rebuilding relationships with a focus on creating more trust. The survey respondents also recognized the need to repair their own image. They spoke of being “more tolerant” and demonstrating confidence.

**Improving Relationships.** Survey participants were asked to give an example of what they need to do to better leverage the power of relationships. The answers fell into three main categories.

FIGURE 12

	PERCENTAGE
Invest	46%
Identify	26%
Repair	23%
Miscellaneous	5%

## THE POWER OF INFORMATION

Another source of power that respondents identified as being important to leverage in the next five years is the power of information. Again, we asked respondents to describe situations that illustrate how they leverage the power of information.

As would be expected, the situations reveal that it is not enough to possess information; rather the perception of power comes from the ways in which information is controlled and communicated. The majority of responses (78 percent) described one of three ways for leveraging the power of information.

### *Information Agent*

Most respondents (30 percent) leveraged the power of information by playing the role of central node or conduit. These terms describe how respondents put themselves in a place to centralize new information, and then once they have that information, they become a conduit to informing others. Respondents describe themselves as “well connected” with access to unique, little-known, and relevant pieces of information. Being a central node or conduit creates a reputation for being the one to come to for the best information. The respondent’s unique position in the information network afforded them access to information and allowed them to be the distributor of that information.

### *Informing Others*

One way in which information was used (by 14 percent) was simply to inform others. Respondents described their use of data analysis to inform a decision or to provide options for superiors. In some situations, respondents used the sharing of information

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## THE POWER OF INFORMATION (CONTINUED)

with customers in order to build trust and credibility. The informing of others illustrated in these situations was less deliberate or tactical than the situations where respondents described themselves as central nodes or conduits. Informing others is more about leveraging the power of information through communication rather than control.

### *Influencing Others*

An extension of informing others is the purposeful use of information to influence and persuade others. Twenty-four percent of the situations described how the respondents used information to “sell others on an idea,” having enough information to “propose a solution” and “back up my idea.” These situations differed in tone from those of informing others because the examples went beyond simply sharing information to detailing the respondent’s ultimate purpose to influence and persuade others on a particular position or outcome.

**Using the Power of Information.** Survey participants were asked to give an example of a situation where they leveraged the power of information. The majority of responses (78 percent) described one of three uses of information as power.

FIGURE 13

	PERCENTAGE
Central Node or Conduit	30%
To Inform	24%
To Influence or Persuade	24%
To Refute or Correct	11%
Miscellaneous	11%

## UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANIZATION’S ROLE

Individual efforts are important to leveraging power in order to be a more effective leader, but organizations also play a crucial role.

While close to 60 percent of the respondents agreed their organizations empower people at all levels, far fewer (29 percent) agreed that organizations were teaching leaders how to leverage their full power. To better understand the organizational role in how leaders could more effectively use power, we asked participants in the post-program survey to respond to the following question: What support do you need from your organization in order to be more powerful at work? The responses tell an interesting story of organizational needs.

### *Formal Authority*

The highest percentage of responses (42 percent) indicated that respondents would feel more powerful if they had more formal authority. Such leaders report needing “clear direction on scope of authority” or “a different title” or “autonomy to make financial

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANIZATION'S ROLE (CONTINUED)

decisions." In light of contemporary organizational structures, it is interesting that such a great percentage of leaders would report needing more authority. With so many global organizations operating with complex matrix structures, leaders are finding that they lack the formal authority to act on their own.

### *Support*

After formal authority, the second greatest organizational inhibitor of the respondent's power was a lack of support. Twenty-five percent of the respondents indicate the need for support. Support is defined in terms of time (to learn, to think), openness (of culture, of individuals) and encouragement. For instance, one participant indicates needing "transparency and openness" while another reports needing "my management to trust [me]."

### *Visibility and Culture*

The final two organizational needs as indicated by survey respondents included visibility and a culture/structure that will enhance their power. Thirteen percent of respondents indicate needing to "be seen." For instance, several participants report needing "recognition" for the work they've done while another reports needing "continued high-exposure, high-reward assignments." An additional 13 percent of respondents indicated the need for an organizational culture or structure that supports them being more powerful. Risk-averse, change-dreading cultures are reported as inhibiting the exercise of power. These findings reinforce the reality that even an individual with the most potential to influence can be rendered impotent in a context that doesn't support his or her ideas.

**The Organizational Role.** Survey participants were asked, "What support do you need from your organization to be more powerful at work?"

FIGURE 14

	PERCENTAGE
Formal Authority	42%
Support	25%
Visibility	13%
Organizational Culture/Structure	13%
Miscellaneous	7%

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## HOW LEADERS LEVERAGE POWER EFFECTIVELY

The findings from the CCL study suggest that leaders can be more effective when they emphasize the power of relationships and the power of information, and also develop their other available bases of power. Strategies for leveraging power effectively include:

**Make relationships a priority.** Identify the people with whom you need to establish or develop a relationship. Your ability to use the power of relationships will be compromised if you are not connecting with the right people. Invest time and energy into your existing relationships. Seek to understand others better and acknowledge the needs of others in order to build the social capital required to influence others now and in the future. Repair damaged relationships and the image others may have of you. Look for ways to reestablish trust with others through face-to-face interaction and the sharing of honest feedback. Be aware of how others perceive you and look for ways to influence the perception by soliciting feedback from trusted others.

**Don't overplay your personal agenda.** While the power of relationships can be an effective method for promoting your own agenda, it also runs the risk of having you perceived by others as self-serving, not a "team player," or even deceitful. Leaders will need to be aware of these negative perceptions if they are to effectively leverage the power of relationships. Be careful to ensure that advancing your own agenda is not perceived as a misuse of power.

**Maximize your communication network.** Think about the people you communicate with the most. Are they providing you with access to unique information or redundant information? Look to expand your communication network to find people who may be untapped sources of information.

**Be generous with information.** If you are a central node or conduit of information, remember that keeping information to yourself has potential negative consequences. Share information broadly and with integrity. You don't want to be perceived as hoarding information for your personal gain. Of course, you don't want to make the opposite mistake and reveal confidential or personal information.

**Make the most of your position.** Research and experience suggest that authority does not automatically accompany a formal leadership role. We can all think of peers who, despite their similarities in tenure and level, may have more or less power than we do. In other words, *position ain't always power*. To increase perceptions of your position power, find subtle ways to communicate your formal authority. You might include your title on your e-mail signature, communicate in meetings where you normally keep quiet, or modify your style of dress so that you resemble people at the level above you. Meanwhile, expand your use of other sources of power.

**Develop your brand of charisma.** How would you feel if you were in an audience where your normally low-key CEO "borrowed" the style of an energetic, larger-than-life motivational speaker? At best you might be amused; at worst, you would see the CEO as a pathetic impression of the real thing. The key to better leveraging the power of charisma (whatever your level of charisma may be) is to make small changes in your image while maintaining your authenticity. Maintain the characteristics that make you who you are, but try to identify two or three behaviors that might increase your ability to connect with others (such as making more eye contact, smiling more often). Practice those new behaviors, enlisting help from a coach or mentor.

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## HOW LEADERS LEVERAGE POWER EFFECTIVELY (CONTINUED)

**Be the expert.** Perhaps the most interesting thing about power in general is that it is in the eyes of the beholder. You can't just have power de facto unless there are people willing to perceive you as having power. The same holds true for expert power – it comes from actual expertise (such as an advanced degree or relevant experience) or the perception of expertise. Don't be shy about putting your credentials on your business cards or on your e-mail signature, or talking about your experience and expertise.

**Tailor your power to reward others.** Many leaders mistakenly assume that leveraging reward power only means giving people more money. While this option sounds attractive, it is not always possible. Instead, consider recognizing and incenting your team members in other ways. Ask your team members what they would find rewarding. Some team members may find a group picnic or outing highly rewarding. Others may find such an event tedious or tiring. Time off or flexibility of hours might work for some employees; others may not even take notice. Whatever their incentive, don't make the mistake of assuming that one reward fits all.

**Reward with words.** Give positive feedback and give it often. CCL's experience with leaders across industries tells us that during the course of a typical working relationship, it takes a ratio of 4:1 (4 positives for every negative) for a receiver of feedback to believe that the feedback has been fair. This does not mean that you have to give a team member four positive pieces of feedback every time you have a negative message to deliver. What it does suggest is that many of us have a long way to go in terms of acknowledging what our people are doing right. (*Special note for spouses:* Researcher John Gottman has discovered that a ratio of 5 positives to 1 negative is the minimum standard for married couples.)

**Punish with purpose.** While the power of punishment may conjure up terrible images, it can actually serve a very useful purpose. In today's context of complex, global organizations, many employees are frustrated by lack of accountability at all levels. When team members fail to live up to expectations, a good dose of corrective (but kind) feedback can work wonders – not only to get the job done, but also to establish more power for yourself. Communicate and enforce your standards, but be sure to provide support along the way. Also, be explicit about consequences for behavior or results that don't meet expectations – and follow through consistently.

**Teach others.** Leveraging your full power does not require that you hoard it. If you want to empower the people you lead, you also need to teach them to use the power they have available to them. Think about the people you lead and rank order them based on their power. What are those at the top of the list doing effectively? What could those at the bottom of the list be doing better? Use seven bases of power as a way to evaluate, communicate, and teach about leadership power in your organization.

# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Are you as powerful as you could be at work?
- What sources of power are you good at leveraging now, and what do you need to work on?
- What about your organization gets in the way of being as powerful as you could be?
- What could you do for your people to help them be more powerful?

## RESOURCES

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# The Role of Power in Effective Leadership

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Judith Steed** is a Research Associate and Executive Coach at the Center for Creative Leadership. Judith seeks to identify and measure the sustainable business impact of executive development programs. She leverages both research and evaluation to better understand and strengthen program designs in service of improved personal and organizational leadership. She is particularly interested in the connection between personal transformation and professional productivity.

**Kyle Meddings** is a senior at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs studying Management and Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management as well as Leadership Studies. He is also a fourth year scholar in the Chancellor's Leadership Class. Kyle has been serving as an intern at the Center for Creative Leadership working with the Ideas2Action project team.