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Power and

Leadership



Singer and Activist, Harry Belafonte, once shared a story of about Martin Luther King while in conversation with Bono from U2 — one of power and leadership. ¹

Back in the early sixties, Robert Kennedy was appointed the US Attorney General of America, and King's campaign for civil rights seemingly hit a wall. When news reached King and his supporters, his team grew terribly despondent. At the time, Kennedy was notoriously disinterested in civil rights, and as an Irish Catholic, he was surely conservative, King's supporters reasoned. This had to mean a major stumbling block to their efforts and dreams. Upon voicing their despair, King apparently slammed his fist on the table and demanded to know if anybody could say something good about Bobby Kennedy. When his people came up empty, King famously replied:

“Well, then, let's call this meeting closed. We will re-adjourn when somebody has found one thing redeeming to say about Bobby Kennedy, because that, my friends, is the door through which our movement will pass.”

As it turned out, that's just what happened. King looked for opportunity, where others saw only obstacles, and it was found in one of Kennedy's closest confidantes at the time, a Catholic bishop. By befriending and influencing the one man who could get to Kennedy, King and his supporters were able to shift Kennedy's thinking in support of the cause. Nowadays, Kennedy is remembered by history as a committed civil rights advocate, and King as an influential and inspiring leader.

King understood, implicitly, the relational dimension of influence. He valued the nuanced humanity in all, finding ways to work together with those who were seemingly against him. He remained dynamic, rather than fixed, and was willing to experiment to find the way forward. He thought expansively about the situation and turned roadblocks into opportunity. He showed great power – but not the kind we're accustomed to.

Leading With Power

Power is a complex subject. Traditionally, we thought of leadership power as “power over” – through command and control. These styles have long been declining as leaders discover many of the challenges they face in our new world cannot be solved through command, positional authority, or tight governance.

Traditional power is largely ineffective in agile teams, cross-functional organisational structures and rapid change. It can erode the collaborative cultures that attract and keep today’s employees, and support people to do their best work. It’s also important to remember that control is an illusion. We don’t magically hold sway over others by being granted an official title, or on the strength of our command.

Leaders are learning there are alternative sources of power. Importantly, this power is accessible by anyone, regardless of position.

Writing for the Harvard Business Review in a recent article “A New Prescription for Power”, Professors Long Lingo and McGinn, invite leaders to spend less time “exerting control and more time mobilising energy and commitment”.² Effective leaders inspire, enable, align and channel movement towards strategic goals, grounded in shared purpose. They influence through non-traditional power.

Here, we build upon the three dimensions of power outlined in their research: **situational**, **relational** and **dynamic**, adding the enduring importance of **personal power** to the equation.

Core Dimensions of Power



Situational Power

Situational power arises from our context. It’s where and how we position ourselves in any given situation and leverage the unique resources at hand so we can have the greatest impact. We may have experienced contrasting degrees of situational power in our different roles or projects, depending on our connectedness to, and position within, our broader ecosystem.

Situational power can be strengthened if we:

- **Think expansively** – about the changes we seek and how these intersect with unique events, trends and groups within our broader ecosystem.
- **Identify hidden roadblocks** – consider the lay of the land, why the change you seek may not been achieved before, and how this could be approached through different means.

- **Look beyond titles** - for those with authority or influence in a situation, who can help movements gain traction.

Example:

Martin Luther King’s story is a prime example of the use of situational power. King and his supporters surveyed the landscape before them with an expansive lens. They looked at how they could influence what they saw to be their greatest barriers at the time, Kennedy’s disinterest and traditional Catholic views, and turned this into one of their greatest opportunities. They sought alternative power bases, looking beyond traditional political leaders to find the person who could shift the dial on their cause.



Relational Power

Relational power is exercised or constrained by our relationship with others. We can garner support, advice, and gain information and resources by cultivating it, or we meet resistance by harming or neglecting it. Beyond our direct interpersonal relationships, the source of relational power most on the rise is that of networks - as seen in the rapidly self-organising social movements of today, able to effect change at scale.³ One of the greatest leadership challenges is how to tap into the power of the network: through empowerment, inspiration, and influence.

To improve our relational power, we can:

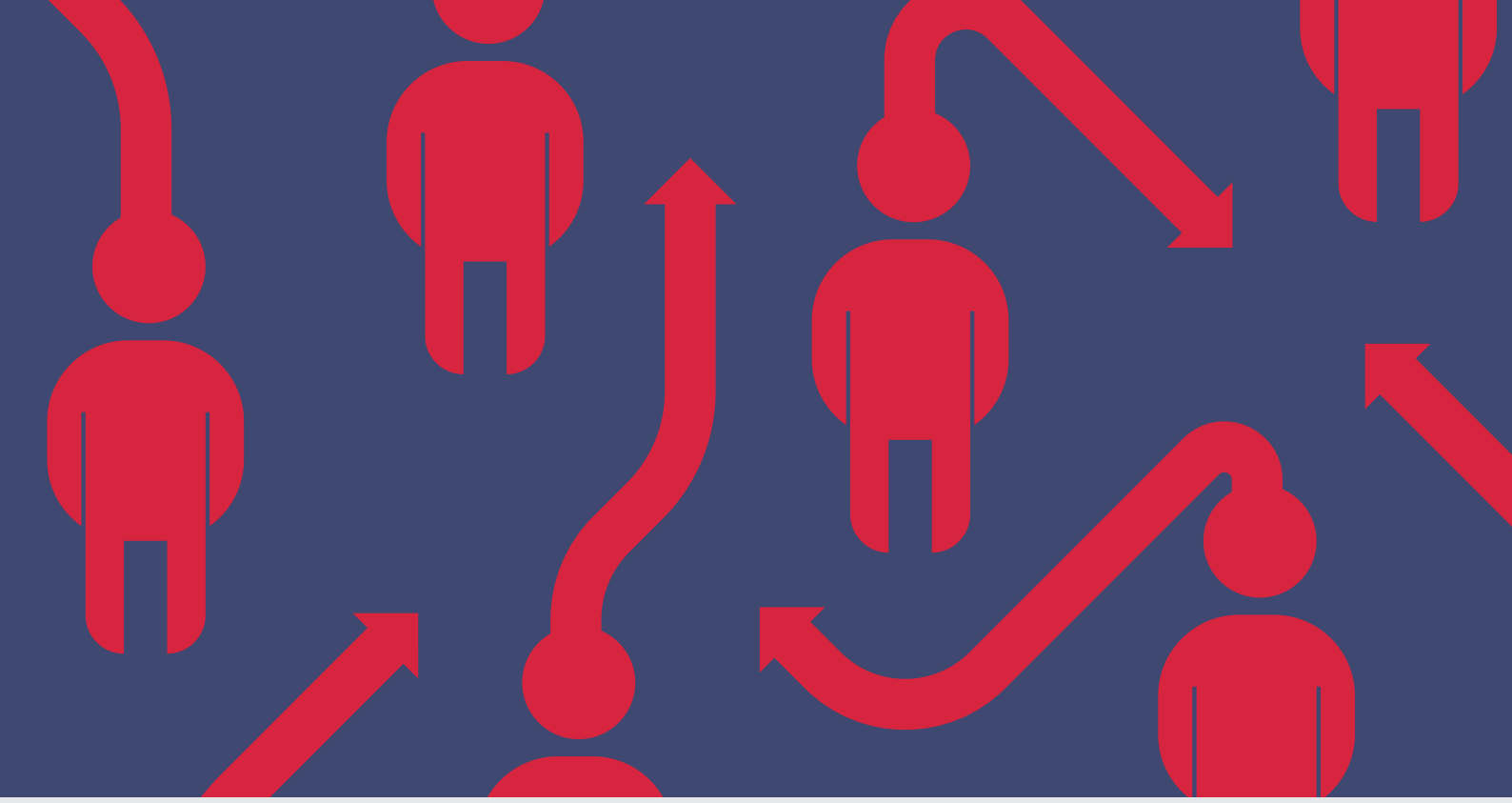
- **Scope out the landscape** – identify allies, potential partners and active detractors, their desires and non-negotiables.
- **Elicit insights and invite co-creation** – invite collaboration from the get-go, instead of pitching for buy-in later down the line. People adopt what they have a hand in creating.

- **Attend to reciprocity and dependencies** – map a network of interdependencies - our position in the flow of resources is likely more important than our title.
- **Leverage the relationships among others** – we need a strategic understanding of when to bring people together to develop and implement new ideas.

Example:

Consider the legacy of Joan Bavaria⁴, a pioneer of socially responsible investing and founder of Trillium Asset Management and CERES, grew almost entirely on the strength of her relational power. She built an organisation where people could talk to her as a peer on almost any topic, and spent her life facilitating partnerships with the companies she invested in. Today her company Trillium Asset Management is worth 5 billion dollars, and her human legacy, CERES, is an organisation that tackles the world's biggest sustainability challenges.





Dynamic Power

Dynamic power employs adaptive tools to help leaders remain relevant and influential. Power is not static⁵. Many leaders fall into the trap of complacency – once they have established influence in a system, they assume it remains. However, influence grows and wanes with changes in the situational and relational landscapes. What worked before may not work in the future. We must constantly evolve and update our approach.

These strategies support dynamic power:

- **Pause, reflect, pivot** – influencing progress is not always a smooth and linear process. As we encounter obstacles/opportunities we may need to take stock, reframe, and retry.
- **Experiment** – by formal and informally experimenting, we are constantly learning what works and what doesn't, enabling us to adapt our approach and increase our chance of success.
- **Wait on resisters** – it can take time for people to come on board with our ideas and movements. Consider how time can be used to your advantage to build trust and open minds.

Example:

Booking.com⁶ is a great example of leaders exercising dynamic power through their practice of constant experimentation. One of the company's core tenets is that anyone at the company can test anything—without management's permission. This means that power is constantly shifting as anyone, anywhere, has the power to greatly impact the company and its customers. Booking.com runs more than 1,000 rigorous tests simultaneously and approximately 25,000 tests a year. Over time, this dynamic power has transformed the company from a Dutch start up to the world's largest online accommodation platform.



Personal Power

Not to be confused with surface-level charisma, personal power is inner strength that radiates, lending leaders a certain gravitas. This quality is hard to describe, but easy to spot. It is a combination of grounded confidence, composure, credibility authenticity, and presence⁷.

Situational, Relational and Dynamic Power sources can only fully be harnessed when a leader can also tap into a deep well of personal power.

By cultivating this quality, you act with purpose and conviction in all you do. Your words hold weight, people are more likely to seek out your perspective, trust and respect your views even if they disagree. It lends a sense of legitimacy, and enhances your ability to win allegiance and move minds and hearts in service of positive change⁸.

There is no shortcut to personal power. It must be developed over time, through cultivating both internal and external qualities⁹.

The following are key actions you can take to set you on your way:

- **Reflect for emotional and social intelligence** – understanding and regulating your own emotions, with a considered understanding of the emotional needs of others, will grant access to greater insight, and enable you to remain level and constructive in the way you conduct yourself and engage with people. Regular reflection is key.
- **Confidence and credibility through conviction** – know your strengths, values, and principles. Have the courage to hold yourself to these foundations in your words, actions and decisions, even when it is difficult to do so.

- **Curiosity and investment in others**
- Balance respectful assertion with an openness to the alternate perspectives and offerings of others. Connect on a human level with people and share your similarities before you explore any differences. Dedicate time to developing, guiding and sharing knowledge and expertise with others.
- **VIBE™ with purpose** – practice purposeful communication through Voice, Intellect, Body language and Energy. How might you ground your energy? What is your authentic voice? How do you sound when speak from a place of confidence and passion? How do you hold yourself?

Example:

Donald Trump is a good case study in the difference between charisma and true personal power. While undoubtedly captivating, the freewheeling, emotionally volatile, entertainment-over-substance, and traditional power play loving American president betrays a lack of depth. Regardless of political persuasion, it's hard not to question his legitimacy, and his actions have seen some Republicans switch sides in a bid to oust him from his post.

Compare this to iconic leaders like Nelson Mandela, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Barack and Michelle Obama and the difference is clearly felt. Also consider non-traditional leaders, like Greta Thunberg, who emerged as a teenager with no official title and on the back of her powerful presence, quickly rose to be the leading figurehead for climate activism. Her influence on the global stage has been dubbed the "Greta Effect"¹⁰, and is a great example of the impact of personal power.

Powerful Questions to Ask



Situational Power

- What is our goal? How does this align with the organisation/ society? Why might others want to support it?
- What existing power bases can we tap into?
- How might I reframe our roadblocks into opportunities?
- Who do others look to? How can I influence and empower those with sway in this situation?
- What other ways could we get the job done?



Dynamic Power

- What do I see emerging in my power landscape? What is new, what is shifting and what remains?
- How might I adapt my approach?
- What small experiments might help us progress?
- How do I empower others to build momentum?
- How do I build in feedback loops to inform my perspective?
- What action can I take now that may foster trust and build an allegiance in future?



Relational Power

- Who is important to this project/goal? What are their goals?
- How might my goals conflict with or support their goals?
- Who depends on me?
- Who do I depend on?
- Who would benefit from co-creating with me?
- How can I connect people strategically?
- How can we mobilise the network?



Personal Power

- What unique value do I bring?
- Why might others seek out my perspective?
- What am I learning about myself and the world today?
- What do I know to be true?
- How do I live my core values?
- What value do others bring? How can I hold space for their valuable input?
- If needed, how might I respectfully disagree?
- How can I communicate more purposefully?

Power Together

Leadership power is most potent when it harnesses or gives a platform to the passion, values and objectives of our broader social system. To be influential and effective in impacting positive change, leaders need to be engaged in life-long learning, attunement, personal development and refinement.

There is no threshold we cross that tells us we've arrived at a place of true power. It is a constantly renewing aggregation of the dynamic, environmental, personal and relational power, not of one, but of many.

Personal power is not about domination. Power is about becoming effective. How far a human being goes in this life, in whatever dimension, essentially depends on how much energy they can crackle.

- Jaggi Vasudev (Sadghuru)

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STUDIO 1, 4 Lambert Road,
Indooroopilly, QLD. Australia. 4068

[P] +61 7 3870 8433

[E] info@performancefrontiers.com

performancefrontiers.com



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