

# Bases of power and influence tactics: Concepts for effective military leadership

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Whether good leaders are made or born is still being debated, but scholars agree that a firm understanding of power and influence is critical to effective leadership. Naval officers typically receive leadership training during their commissioning program, but without experience as a basis of comparison the training is often lost once the officer hits the fleet. The purpose of this article is to provide a refresher on bases of power and influence tactics and how to effectively use them for optimum results.

Power and influence are interconnected with leadership, yet the three are not well integrated. Military leaders often fail to employ the appropriate influence tactic or power base to obtain the desired result from their subordinates. Leaders typically use legitimate power, or power given by rank and position, because it is the most recognizable base of power in the military. However, despite its prolific use, legitimate power is the least effective for long-term results. Every leader possesses a variety of power bases and influence tactics. Properly assessing the situation and applying the correct power base and influence tactic will provide the opportunity for positive results.

## Types of power

Power is the ability of one person (the agent) to influence the behavior and/or attitude of another (the target). In other words, it's the capacity of A to influence the behavior of B so that B acts in accordance with A's wishes. Power originates with the target, not the agent. The agent has power only because it was granted to them by others. Thus, power is not exclusive to leaders and managers; subordinates also possess a degree of power. The classic taxonomy of power includes five bases:

- **Coercive Power.** The use of threats or actual punishment to influence the target. The agent seeks to gain compliance through the use of fear; hence it is commonly called "leadership by fear" or "leadership by intimidation."
- **Reward Power.** Compliance with the agent's desire is achieved based on the ability to distribute rewards that the target views as valuable. Reward power relies on the promise of or the ability to deliver a reward in return for desired behavior. The challenge for leaders is to understand what is of value to each follower, and when and how to deliver rewards in meaningful, sustainable, and practical ways. Examples include the power or ability to promote subordinates, the distribution of resources such as office space or

computers, and providing a shortened workday or early knock-off time.

- **Legitimate Power.** The power an agent receives as a result of his title or position in the formal hierarchy of an organization. Targets comply because they accept the legitimacy of the position of the agent and believe that the agent has the right to give orders due to predetermined authority.

- **Referent Power.** Power based on the agent's possession of desirable resources or personal traits. It is the agent's interpersonal skills or charisma which causes the target to identify with or emulate him. Referent power rests heavily on trust, as the target chooses to follow the agent rather than being forced or coerced. It also connects to the target's emotions by creating a sense of attachment with the agent, an admiration of what they stand for, and a feeling of betterment when they are around.

- **Expert Power.** Power based on expertise, competence, special knowledge or skills in a certain area which the target recognizes, respects, and is willing to be influenced by. Expert power is a form of referent power resulting from recognized expertise. Expertise can be established by demonstration, reputation, or appropriate credentials.

Individuals typically inherit two types of power upon becoming a military leader; the legitimate power of the position and the expert power that lead to their appointment. Reward and coercive power generally accompany legitimate power. Thus, leaders may have four of the five powers by default.

## Limitations of power

There are important limitations to each base of power. Reward and coercive power are both highly dependent on the influencing agent. Surveillance is absolutely necessary with each because the agent must apply rewards and punishments, as needed, to keep the target's behavior in line. Expert power is essential because the target inherently looks to the leader for direction and guidance.

However, if the leader's motives are seen as selfish or manipulative, they'll lose the power to influence. The effects of coercive power are short-lived since compliance is to avoid punishments controlled by the agent. It rarely inspires individuals to follow the agent voluntarily in the long-term. In fact, the long-term repercussions of overusing coercive power may hurt the leader as well as the follower. ►

## Influence tactics

Whereas power is the capacity to produce effects on others, influence is the measurable change in attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors that result from the agent's application of influence tactics. The nine common influence tactics are separated into two categories: soft tactics and hard tactics.

*Soft tactics* are those considered friendly or non-coercive and are perceived to be fair. They include:

- Rational Persuasion.

Trying to convince others with reason, logical arguments, or factual evidence.

- Inspirational Appeal.

A request or proposal that attempts to build enthusiasm by appealing to others' emotions, ideals, or values.

- Consultation. Inviting others to participate in planning, making decisions, and changes to obtain buy-in with the leader's initiatives.

- Ingratiation. The practice of getting others in a good mood before attempting to influence them, often taking the form of flattery.

- Personal Appeal. Referring to friendship and loyalty when making a request.

*Hard tactics* involve more overt pressure, generate resistance, and are perceived as being unfair. They include:

- Exchange. Making express or implied promises and trading favors to gain compliance from the target.

- Coalition tactics. The agent enlists the aid of others as a way to influence the target to do something.

- Legitimizing tactics. Basing a request on one's authority or right, organizational rules or policies, or express or implied support from superiors

- Pressure. Using demands, threats, frequent checking, or persistent reminders to influence the target to do something.

The success of an influence tactic can be distinguished by the target's commitment, compliance, or resistance to the desired result. Leaders with a relatively large amount of power may successfully employ a wider variety of influence tactics than those with little power. For example, leaders who use referent power have the widest range of influence tactics from which to choose (e.g.



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consultation, ingratiation, exchanges, inspirational appeals, personal appeals, and coalition tactics) while those who have legitimate power are limited to using only coalition, legitimizing, or pressure tactics.

The challenge is in properly assessing the situational environment, the intended outcome, and the appropriate influence tactics to employ based on the leader's source and magnitude of power.

## Integrating leadership with power and influence

Deckplate leadership is critical to the success of any organization. A firm understanding of the interconnectedness between power, influence tactics, and leadership is instrumental in building and maintaining an effective unit. The best mix of power and influence tactics for optimal leadership is dependent on the leader, the target, the situation, and the intended outcome. Leaders at the deckplate level should make it a priority to appropriately use all sources of power and influence. ❄

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