

HARNESS YOUR SOURCES OF POWER FOR GREATER SUCCESS

How do you feel about the use of power?

Women are often uncomfortable with—and conflicted by—the use of power. For many, 'power' holds a negative connotation because they think of it as *having power over someone or something*. Yet, power is seen as an important component of leadership, and the effective use of power is seen as critical to the success of executives.

To achieve greater success—both in the workplace and in their personal lives—women need to better understand power, where it comes from and how to use it effectively.

Joann M. Eisenhart, Ph.D., Senior Vice President for Human resources, Facilities and Philanthropy at Northwestern Mutual, studied the topic in her doctoral dissertation, *The Meaning and Use of Power among Female Corporate Leaders*. Her research focused on how female corporate leaders describe and use power. Twenty women from eight Fortune 1000 companies were interviewed for the study. The women were senior-level leaders, mainly mid-career, and ranged in age from 35 to 54.

As a result of the research, five distinct sources of power were identified.

- Position power
- Expertise and credibility
- Relationships
- Personal qualities
- Empowering others

Let's explore each of the five sources of power. What do they mean? How are they used? How do women feel about using them? What are the practical tips you can use to harness each of the five sources of power to achieve greater success?



Power Source #1: Position Power

» **Key to Success:** Think of position power as power 'with' instead of power 'over.'

Position power is the assumed authority granted by virtue of a person's title or role within the organization. A certain amount of power and influence comes with any position. In her research, Eisenhart found almost half of the women said they did not feel good about using power related to their position, suggesting they may be resistant to the use of forms of power that could be perceived as coercive.

Reflecting on her own experience, however, Eisenhart acknowledged that people are put into positions of power because they are believed to have the knowledge, information and ability to move things forward – a responsibility leaders have an obligation to embrace. The challenge is to make sure they are clear on the difference between

assuming decision-making responsibility and adopting a 'Because I'm the boss' attitude.

"If you make all the decisions, the rest of the team feels disempowered," said Eisenhart. "So you have to find the right balance. Effective leaders are neither dictators nor abdicators of responsibility. They are somewhere in between." Eisenhart says she's become comfortable with her use of position power by adopting an approach she calls consult-decide. "I consult with the team, get all the perspectives to make sure I'm thinking as broadly as possible, and then make a decision. I think of it as power 'with' instead of power 'over.'"

BALANCE POSITION POWER

- **Be clear about how a decision will be made.** Whether you use the consult-decide approach, make a decision unilaterally or empower others to make the call, be upfront and clear with your team about how any given decision will be made. When the expectation is clear, decisions can be made with a greater level of confidence.
- **Give others an opportunity...** If members of your team always look to you or to someone else to make a decision, they won't learn the value of taking a risk, making the decisions and living with the outcome. Do them a favor; give them a chance to succeed by giving them the chance to fail. And always have their back, no matter how the decision plays out.
- **...but don't be apologetic when you need to make the call.** Sometimes, however, consensus-building or empowering others to make a decision simply aren't appropriate. Don't apologize for taking the reins when you need to. It may make sense to use your position power, for example, when a decision needs to be made quickly or when having a sense of the bigger picture is required.

Power Source #2: Expertise and Credibility

» **Key to Success:** Knowing your stuff is one thing; demonstrating it builds credibility.

This source of power can be derived from having expertise in a given field or by demonstrating a track record of delivery through which the individual has gained trust and credibility in an organization. In Eisenhart's study, approximately three quarters of the women interviewed suggested that their ability to influence a situation comes at least partly from their expertise and credibility.

Similarly, Eisenhart said expertise and credibility are central to her use of power. "I need to know my craft, my industry and I expect that of everyone on my team," she said. "When I joined Northwestern Mutual, I rested on the confidence that I know how human resources can help deliver business results."

She cautions, however, that having expertise does not necessarily translate into having credibility in the workplace. Knowledge is critical, of course. But it's also expected; most people are hired for their expertise. From her perspective, the key to credibility is being able to use that knowledge and expertise to solve problems. "We all know people who got straight A's in college but have trouble translating their skills in a real-world setting," she said. "Unless they're able to share their expertise with others in a way that's clear and meaningful – and apply their knowledge in a way that's valuable – they may not be viewed as credible."

continued on page 3 >>

>> continued from page 2

BUILDING CREDIBILITY

- **Seek out ways to demonstrate your value.** Be honest about what you're good at, and then find ways to leverage your strengths in the workplace. Ask for assignments that will allow you to take advantage of those skills. Try to get on projects where you can shine. Your expertise is only as good as the ways in which you can demonstrate that it's valuable – to your team and to your company.
- **Learn how to build expertise quickly.** In today's fast-paced business environment, the more easily you can learn and adapt, the better. You may be the most experienced person in your position today, but who knows what your job will look like five years from now? To remain relevant you'll need to be a flexible, quick study. And this is particularly true if your goal is to rise through ranks of management. Successful C-suite leaders have mastered the art of learning and know how to build a necessary level of expertise quickly.

Power Source #3: Relationships

» Key to Success: Don't overdraw the emotional bank account in your professional relationships.

Women judge themselves to be highly successful in building relationships. Nearly half of the women interviewed said having relationships is an important part of how they are able to influence others.

In his classic self-help book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey uses the 'emotional bank account' as a metaphor to describe the amount of trust that's built in a relationship. "If I make deposits into an emotional bank account with you through courtesy, kindness, honesty and keeping my commitments to you, I build up a reserve and earn your trust. But if I have a habit of showing discourtesy, disrespect...and betraying your trust, eventually my emotional bank account is overdrawn."¹

In both professional and personal environments, women are often aware of the emotional bank account and the value of making regular deposits, according to Eisenhart. "Every once in a while something goes south, and when you've built up a reserve of trust within a professional relationship, you'll get the benefit of the doubt," she said. "For example, I may fail to invite someone to an important meeting at work and, if I've built a trusting relationship with them, they are more likely to give me the benefit of the doubt vs. assuming I purposely omitted them for some nefarious reason."

¹ Covey, Stephen R., *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1989, Print

UTILIZE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

- **Follow Stephen Covey's advice and do these six things:**
 1. Be understanding. Empathize. Act with kindness.
 2. Keep commitments.
 3. Clarify expectations.
 4. Attend to the little things before they become big things.
 5. Show personal integrity.
 6. Apologize when making a 'withdrawal' from the emotional bank account.
- **If developing relationships doesn't come easily, practice.** Take a colleague to lunch. Ask to participate in a group project. Even if you prefer to work on your own, you can learn to form great relationships with a little practice. And remember, you don't have to be best friends with your colleagues. But by earning the trust of a professional relationship, you'll build a reserve of good will.



Power Source #4: Personal Qualities

» Key to Success: Charismatic leaders communicate clearly and with intent.

Have you ever been so inspired by hearing someone give a speech or a presentation that you'd do almost anything to get to know them better or work with them? As you think about that experience, ask yourself a question: aside from their message (which may have been intellectually stimulating or aligned closely with your personal beliefs), why did you find yourself drawn to them?

Many great leaders possess intangible personal qualities that cause people to want to follow. Charm. Personality. Charisma. Whatever it may be called, this 'presence' acts like a magnet, and since the dawn of time charismatic leaders have achieved great things based on their ability to inspire.

In Eisenhart's study, over half the women who were interviewed said they, at times, drew power from personal qualities such as

charisma. "There's nothing wrong with tapping into the power of your personality to get things done," said Eisenhart. "The challenge comes when leaders use their charisma to make up for a lack of expertise, credibility or vision, or to take advantage of others."

British author David Straker put it this way: "The values of a charismatic leader are highly significant. If they are selfish and Machiavellian, they can create cults and effectively rape the minds...of the followers. If they are well-intentioned towards others, (charismatic leaders) can elevate and transform an entire company."²

² Changing Minds, *Charismatic Leadership*, retrieved 9-10-2014 from: http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/styles/leadership_styles.htm

LEVERAGE PERSONAL QUALITIES

- **Charismatic leaders take many forms.** From the quiet allure of Mahatma Ghandi to the fist-pumping action of a coach on game day, leaders of all styles use their charisma to inspire others. Your personality can be one of your greatest assets if you use it in a way that's genuine to you and positive for your situation.
- **Clearly articulate who you are and what you believe.** Charismatic leaders are focused. To effectively tap into your personal qualities as a source of power, have a point of view, define your beliefs and live in accordance with them.

Power Source #5: Empowering Others

» Key to Success: When you use your candle to light another, the room gets brighter.

Several women interviewed for Eisenhart's study brought the concept of empowerment into their descriptions of power. While they did not explicitly define power as empowerment, per se, women described feeling most powerful when they gave their power away.

Eisenhart's own experience takes empowerment beyond the value of what it can create personally and instead, focuses on what it can achieve for the collective good. "No one loses when you give power to others," she said. "When you use your candle to light another, the whole room gets brighter."

"When I think about the power of empowering others, I'm reminded of the scene in the movie *The Blind Side* when Michael, an aspiring football star, asks his mother how she'd feel if he chose to 'flip burgers instead of playing football.' Her response was simple. 'It's your decision. It's your life.'" Eisenhart used that same line when a member of her team – out of loyalty he said he felt to her – was conflicted about taking a new position. "As leaders, we have to feel comfortable giving people we trust the power to make their own decisions with the understanding that we'll help and support them if needed."

continued on page 5 >>

>> continued from page 4

NAVIGATE EMPOWERMENT

- **Don't confuse delegating with empowering.** When you delegate, you ask someone to act on your behalf. You assign a task with the expectation that it's completed in the way you've requested. Empowerment, on the other hand, gives someone the authority – the power – to act on their own. You do more than assign a task; you assign responsibility and give the individual the latitude to realize that responsibility in whatever way makes sense to them.
- **Don't empower selfishly.** Sometimes people in a position of authority will empower others to make decisions simply because it's convenient for them. As a leader, don't think about empowering others only to make your life easier. Instead, think about how empowering others can help them grow and learn.

Recognize Your Sources of Power

Whether you are conscious of it or not, nearly every situation you're in involves dynamics of power. At work. At home. Even at dinner with your parents or during a night out with friends. Who makes the decisions about where to go, what to eat and who'll pick up the tab?

The next time you interact with others, make yourself aware of how you—and the people around you—use the five sources of power.

- Position power
- Expertise and credibility
- Relationships
- Personal qualities
- Empowering others

Recognize them. Experiment with your use of power. Identify which ones feel genuine to you and then look for ways to use them to better yourself, your family, your career and your company. For example, say you decide you're most comfortable with relationship power. That awareness may allow you to better evaluate potential career opportunities. Would you be the right fit in an organization that prioritizes position power?

By recognizing and harnessing your own sources of power, you can become a more effective leader and achieve greater success.

84%
of women believe
happiness is the most
important component
of personal success*



*Northwestern Mutual 2014 Elements of Success Study

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Prior to joining Northwestern Mutual in 2011, Eisenhart was senior vice president for human resources at Pfizer Inc. From 1985 to 2001, Eisenhart worked at the Rohm & Haas Company where she spent eight years in human resources and organizational effectiveness and eight years as a research scientist in the polymers division.

Eisenhart holds a doctorate in human and organizational development from The Fielding Graduate Institute, where her dissertation research focused on the topic of women, leadership and power in large corporations. She also holds a doctorate in inorganic chemistry from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Illinois-Urbana.

Eisenhart is on the Board of Advisors for the University Wisconsin-Madison Department of Chemistry and the Board of Directors for the American Red Cross of Southeastern Wisconsin.