

POWER

Power can be defined as the ability to have an impact on the world. Power may be seen in different forms:

- Power with - power that comes from people acting in co-operation together. Individually, they may be powerless, but together they are greater than the sum of their parts.
- Power to - an enabling power, derived from an inner conviction, acquired knowledge or skill, an investment of trust or assistance from others, or from the ability to use external resources (eg money, tools).
- Power over - the power of dominance in which the will of one person or group prevails.

In our society power is usually interpreted as 'power over' - the ability some people and groups have to make other people do things they would not otherwise do. However, power is not an inert thing that some people just have; power exists in relationships. The power of some depends on the obedience of others. This leads to the question of why people obey, why they actively or passively keep systems going with which they may not agree.

Take the example of a school: everyone involved with it has some power to make an impact on the school's functioning and the people in it. They can do this because they all possess various advantages, or sources of power.

Power holder	Source of power
The Head	Social tradition, the law, controls money, gives rewards and punishments, has information, interface with the outside world.
Teachers	Length of experience, knowledge, socially recognised position, the law, (sometimes), charisma.
Pupils	Numbers, nuisance value, they are the reason for the school's existence.
Prefects	Position in the system.
Governors	Can hire, fire and expel, vested authority, control of budget.
Older classes	Size and strength.
The caretaker	The key, controls the environment, knows how things work, (in relation to the children) is a grown up.
School secretary	Controls information and is a channel of communication.
Bullies	Size, cunning, intellect, physical strength.
Parents	Can raise money, can remove children (the law), co-operation, can become governors.
Secretary of State	law, inspection, ultimately controls resources, civil service apparatus.

Sources of power

The sources of power are the reasons why some people obey others, and can be summarised as:

- legitimacy (democratically elected government/ divine right of kings)
- habit/ social traditions (close to legitimacy)
- control of information and ideas
- skills and knowledge
- physical strength/ size (or weapons) - the ability to threaten
- money, material resources
- 'henchpeople', or agents who carry out the powerholders' orders (police, army)
- incentives (money, status)
- sanctions (fines, prison, death)
- There is also charisma, which may give power to someone who otherwise does not have it, or strengthen the power of someone who has other sources. A very important source of power is the ability to define reality, to be able to say what the world is like and what people are like.

Try it yourself: think of an organisation you belong to for example work, educational establishment, club. Ask yourself who has power in the organisation. Then think about where their power comes from and why others in the organisation obey them. How many of the sources of power listed above can be identified in your organisation?

Power is a relationship, not a possession. Active nonviolence can enable apparently powerless groups to find power together. It is a means of changing uneven power relationships in order to bring about just changes.

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