

TEACHING POWER IN WAYS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENTS'

CAREER SUCCESS:

SOME FUNDAMENTAL IDEAS*

Jeffrey Pfeffer

Graduate School of Business

655 Knight Way

Stanford University

Stanford, CA 94305-7298

pfeff@stanford.edu

*Declarations of interest: none

ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS, (in press)

TEACHING POWER IN WAYS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENTS' CAREER SUCCESS:

SOME FUNDAMENTAL IDEAS

Forty-five years ago, power as a topic was mostly *absent* from management textbooks and courses, including executive education teaching, in the fields of business and public administration. This was the case notwithstanding the fact that power dynamics are invariably *present* in most public and private sector workplaces. Research demonstrates that power affects resource allocations among departments and other subunits as well as decisions on strategic direction in organizations of all types. Research also shows that power affects people's career trajectories, including their salaries and the hierarchical levels they attain.

Former Center for Creative Leadership staffer William Gentry has said that the inability to successfully manage power relationships can cause career derailments. Extensive research by Gerald Ferris and his colleagues as well as other scholars demonstrate that political skills can be reliably measured, and that political skills and accurate perceptions of power distributions and social networks are positively related to career success, the acquisition of power, and some aspects of job performance.

In short, power matters. Furthermore, research by Ronald Burt demonstrates that when people learn social networking concepts in an executive education program, those executives' careers accelerate, a finding that demonstrates that power concepts can be taught. If power is measurable, substantively important, and teachable, the first and most obvious, but nonetheless important, implication is that material on organizational power should be much, much more widely covered in both core, elective, and executive classes taken by people aspiring to leadership positions.

Long ago, analyses of power began, and pretty much ended, with French and Raven's descriptions of five sources or types of power (reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, and referent, to which Raven later added information). In succeeding decades, research substantially expanded to consider, among other important topics, the disinhibiting effects of power on power holders, various strategies and tactics for exercising power, and a more sophisticated understanding of numerous sources of power. Although there are now elective courses on power in more schools than there once were, and power as a topic is more widely found in both textbooks and in a burgeoning research literature, power remains much less widely taught, researched, and written and talked about than other, conceptually related subjects such as leadership. As former U.S. cabinet secretary

John Gardner once wrote, power is part of leadership and inextricably entwined with it. Nonetheless, Rosabeth Kanter's 40-year old comment that power is "America's last dirty word" remains unfortunately still too much the case.

When people learn how to obtain and use power, and when individuals overcome their reluctance or inhibitions in doing so, they can substantially accelerate their career progress and help ensure they will not have to leave a job involuntarily.

In this article, I describe what I and others have learned about how to **teach** power to students and executives in a way that is at once true to the research literature on power, relevant to people's careers, and leads, in many instances, to real change in behavior that helps people achieve greater career success and effective influence.

BEGIN BY ACKNOWLEDGING RESISTANCE TO THE TOPIC & ITS CAUSES

The subject matter of power makes many people uncomfortable. It is useful to acknowledge that fact at the outset and to explore **why** that is the case, as a way of helping people surmount their initial resistance to the topic.

Just World Thinking

One cause of discomfort is people's desire to believe that the world is just and fair. Social psychologist Melvin Lerner's

just world theory argues that people are motivated to believe that the world is just and fair, in part because a belief in a just world serves a number of psychological functions. Just world thinking provides a sense of control and the potential for possible personal efficacy. If the world operates according to just rules, people can learn those rules and be comfortable acting according to them. Because the world is just and fair, behaving according to social norms and ethical guidelines will enable people to achieve just, and more importantly, predictable outcomes.

System Justification Motivation

System justification theory argues that people have a palliative need to justify the status quo and existing social hierarchies, even when such hierarchical arrangements legitimate those same individuals' and groups' inferior and disadvantaged positions. In that sense, system justification theory provides an explanation as to why groups participate in their own disempowerment. One argument is that seeing the world as unjust, without having the corresponding power to change it, will leave people chronically unhappy. Therefore, people are motivated to come up with world views that provide contentment rather than distress. Moreover, justifying social realities

also excuses the requirement for individuals to engage in risky and effortful actions to change existing social arrangements.

Individual and Organizational Interests

Some people find the following confusing: in most if not all classes for executives or younger students, the emphasis in the material is on how to make the **organization** or other entity, such as a work group, more effective and successful. Most of the material on power, and many classes on power, are focused on making the **individual** more successful in attaining power and other markers of career success such as salary and hierarchical position. As much research, for instance on executive compensation, shows, the two outcomes are far from perfectly correlated. It is possible to be part of a successful team or company and suffer career setbacks and even be fired, or to be part of a failing enterprise and to do quite well. Reorienting people to think about advancing their own career interests poses yet another challenge that can make them uncomfortable with the material.

There are at least two justifications for this re-orientation in focus. First, many human resource departments in the U.S. (and elsewhere) have for the past several decades been telling employees that they, the employees, are responsible for their own careers. Fewer companies offer the prospect of long-

term employment, many have people sign statements acknowledging that they are employed "at-will," companies increasingly use contract and other outsourced labor, layoffs are more frequent, regardless of the employers' financial condition, and companies increasingly eschew responsibility for things ranging from retirement to health care. When employers tell employees, through word and deeds, that their workers are on their own, the workers should heed the message.

Second, as already noted, the correspondence between individual and organizational success is not high. Consider a classic case, what happens to founders. As USC professor Noam Wasserman described in *The Founder's Dilemma*, more than 50 percent of founders are replaced as CEO by the time the startup raises its third round of funding, with 73 percent of the founder-CEO replacements coming in cases when the founder was fired. Moreover, founder-CEOs who succeed in building a fast-growing, successful company are actually **more** likely to be replaced. That is because fast growth frequently requires the raising of more outside capital, and those sources of capital are more likely to replace founders. It is also because, as the spouse of a start-up founder told me, no one fights over garbage. The more successful the company, the more likely it is that there will be others who will engage in a power struggle for control.

Acknowledgement of the psychological desire to believe that the world is just, systems are fair, and one important goal of management education is to make organizations more effective, coupled with numerous everyday observations of the many forms and manifestations of injustice, unfairness, and the ways in which individual interests are sacrificed by organizations, permits people to acknowledge many aspects of social reality. People can then begin to at least intellectually appreciate the need to understand and possibly deal with the world as it is, as a first step to changing social and organizational life.

The Leadership Literature

Yet another cause of some people's discomfort with power is a vast and ever expanding leadership literature and the many classes that teach leadership and related topics that convey more about how we might **want** leaders to be and behave— aspirations for leadership—than the **realities** of what we know about how leadership operates in the real world. Although most science, and even much social science is, or tries to be, objective, in the study of leadership often there is not even any pretense of a completely unbiased search for the truth.

Numerous scholars of social influence explicitly set out to demonstrate that "good" behavior is more effective than "abusive" actions. For instance, social psychologist Dacher

Keltner calls his research center the Greater Good Institute. Berkeley professor Cameron Anderson opened a research talk on power and status with the explicit acknowledgement that he was trying to demonstrate that nasty, hostile behavior was counterproductive.

These are just two of numerous examples that illustrate precisely why so much of the leadership literature is and should be suspect. We know from many scientific fields ranging from medical and physical science to the social sciences that people will find what they are looking for, if for no other reason than they will run studies or do analyses until they eventually confirm their beliefs. No wonder so much of leadership teaching comports neither to observed reality nor to relevant social science findings.

As I noted in *Leadership BS*, there are numerous contradictions between what is commonly taught in leadership classes and books and what we know from extensive social science research. For instance, although leader modesty is valued and praised in much leadership teaching, an extensive, even vast, research literature demonstrates that narcissism and unwarranted self-confidence predict being hired, obtaining promotions, and other indicators of career success, including, in some instance, aspects of job performance.

For the most part, the leadership literature values authenticity. Herminia Ibarra, in both written work and a lecture available on YouTube, and Adam Grant in his *New York Times* essay, "Unless You're Oprah, 'Be Yourself' Is Terrible Advice," both make similar points about the problems with the "be authentic" advice. Being true to your authentic self excuses people from having to develop and grow. As Grant related, before he became a skilled presenter, being true to himself would have meant not speaking in public very much if at all. Second, leaders often need to be true not to how they are or are not feeling, but to what the people around them need from them—confidence, energy, focus—regardless of how they may want to behave in the moment.

As yet another example, although almost no leadership class would teach people to engage in strategic misrepresentation, a large literature on lying suggests that lying is reasonably common in everyday life and seldom sanctioned. Important, revered historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln lied, for instance, about where the Southern peace delegation was. Steve Jobs was famous for his "reality distortion field," the idea that if Jobs said something often enough and with enough conviction and skill, what was not true at the moment might become true—the self-fulfilling prophecy in action.

Thus, material on the realities of power confronts the dilemma that principles of power, to the extent they are evidence-based, are at least to some extent in conflict with what people have learned in other contexts and from other sources as well as different from what they may want to believe. As the CTO of the *Wall Street Journal* told me to explain why he had a hard copy, audiobook, and e-book version of *Power*, the material in that book was asking him to do things that did not come naturally, because of how he was raised and his prior education.

The Stages of Learning About Power

Because of the discomfort arising from the desire to believe in a just world and the differences between an evidence-based understanding of power and what people have learned in other classes and other settings, people will go through stages as they learn about and become more comfortable with power. On the first day of my elective course on power, I describe these stages.

First, confronted with material that makes them uncomfortable, individuals often experience denial, something that afflicts at least some of my social science colleagues as well. Denial manifests as trying to find instances where power principles don't hold and the leadership literature seems to be

true. For instance, people will argue that principles of power don't apply in particular settings such as small, entrepreneurial organizations or in high technology, other cultures such as in Europe or Asia, for millennials of a different generation and values, and so forth. I confront those claims with both evidence and logic that suggests that power and its manifestations are largely unchanged and unchanging across time and across contexts.

Denial is typically followed by anger, as people do not always appreciate having their fundamental beliefs challenged. My view is that education is, or certainly should be, mostly a process of causing people to question what they thought they knew. If education were just about reinforcing what people already thought, it would add only trivial value as people would leave the class not much different than when they arrived.

Sadness sometimes follows anger, as people come to understand the findings of a social science literature that does not always paint the most uplifting or inspiring picture of organizations or people and their power-relevant social interactions. For instance, in *The Power Broker*, Robert Caro described how Robert Moses, over a forty-year career, built parks, playgrounds, and swimming pools all over New York City, Lincoln Center, bridges, roads, and public housing, and became

influential in urban design. But Moses also made deals with politicians, on occasion giving them advance notice of where he would be building and construction contracts to obtain their support. Caro's extensive historical material on Lyndon Johnson, detailed in his four-volume (with a fifth on the way) *Path to Power* series, can cause people, who admired Johnson for his passage of important civil rights and social welfare legislation including Head Start and Medicare, to become more circumspect in their evaluations of his behavior. Johnson may have stolen his first election to the Senate from Texas. He gave dictation to aides while sitting on the toilet, and was often abusive to subordinates. He opposed the first attempt to pass federal anti-lynching legislation. The reality is that many people in both public and corporate life have used unattractive means to acquire the power and resources that then permitted them to do great things. Observers are sad to see the reality of their heroes' behavior.

If the class is successful, a sense of acceptance follows the feeling of sadness. With acceptance, people master important power principles and come to understand that if they are to successfully navigate, let alone change, organizational life, it is useful, indeed, necessary, for them to comprehend how the world works and why it works that way, and the basic theoretical underpinnings that explain and predict behavior. It

is also useful for them to put their learning into practice, a topic to which I return later in this article. Most fundamentally, they need to come to terms with organizational and social life as they are if individuals are to effectively navigate and cope with the world.

Self-reflective exercises that ask students to think about how the topics have played out in their own lives and what they might have done differently based on what they have learned, and how they intend to use the material in the future, help anchor conceptual learning with lived experience. As former M.I.T. faculty member Donald Schon noted, self-reflection promotes learning. U.C. Davis management professor Andrew Hargadon once commented that many people who think they have 20 years of experience, don't. They just have one y

kear of experience repeated 20 times. Directed self-reflection seeks to ensure that people systematically reflect on and learn from their actions.

SOURCES OF POWER

When people learn about the sources of power, they can work to acquire these determinants of power for themselves. Fundamentally, power comes from a) a set of individual qualities

or attributes that individuals can improve through practice and coaching, and b) a set of structural conditions that people can seek to develop. In teaching people about the possible sources of power, we implicitly convey the message that someone's power resources and position **can** be improved, thereby encouraging them to take action to do so.

Personal Attributes and Their Development

Because effort is required to achieve power, one quality associated with power acquisition is ambition—the desire to acquire power which leads to the willingness to expend the effort to do so. Ambition is not fixed. People are much more likely to seek power—or for that matter, try to accomplish anything—to the extent they feel personally efficacious and believe that success from their actions is at least plausible. Few individuals want to waste their efforts on lost causes. One important consequence from learning material on power and seeing examples of similar others who have achieved power is providing people with a sense of personal agency and a set of role models that suggest that achieving power is possible for them, too.

Related, but distinct from ambition and drive, is the quality of self-confidence. Research consistently demonstrates that even unwarranted self-confidence predicts interview success, getting hired and obtaining promotions, and rising to

powerful positions. University of Virginia professor Peter Belmi's research focuses on the social psychological processes through which social class reproduces advantageous outcomes. He has found that higher social class people exhibit more self-confidence, and because self-confidence affects obtaining powerful positions, higher social origin individuals have advantages in the competition for power because of their inherent greater levels of confidence.

No path to power is going to be free from obstacles, opposition, including competitors, or setbacks. Therefore, persistence and resilience are useful if not essential qualities for achieving positions of influence. Persistence is related ambition—to the extent that someone wants to achieve a position of influence, that individual will be more willing to persist in efforts to achieve that objective. For instance, Willie Brown, whose mother was a cleaning lady and who grew up in a town in Texas where discrimination against African-Americans was pervasive, became the two-time mayor of San Francisco and speaker of the California Assembly for some 14 years. Brown lost the first time he ran for the assembly and he also lost his first race for speaker. He did not let these setbacks derail his political ambitions. Reed Hastings, the enormously successful CEO of Netflix, was not only fired from his first CEO role, he has said he would have fired himself. Resilience is developed by

seeing others overcome setbacks and by learning to not take negative events personally.

Emotions, including energy, are contagious. People who are energetic inspire others around them. Former casino company Caesar's CEO Gary Loveman has noted that one of the roles of senior leadership is to exhibit energy, because others need that energy—intellectual energy and sheer kinetic energy. Energy is partly a result of physical conditioning and training and also a consequence of mental state. Ambition and resilience both help to develop energy.

Because management is fundamentally about getting things done through others, the capability to ascertain where others are coming from, the source of their desires and actions—empathic understanding—is a crucial power skill. Most commentators on the late U.S. president Lyndon Johnson note that he was not only a great reader of others, he spent much of his time assiduously observing and talking with others to ascertain their hopes, fears, and desires. While practice in listening to and apprising others helps, training people to look at how others are rewarded and the sources of their information about the world can also be useful.

Possibly the most important individual quality producing power is that of not obsessively worrying about what others

think of you, a quality that also permits individuals to be able and willing to engage in conflict. As Gary Loveman of Caesar's has famously quipped, "if you want to be liked, get a dog." Leaders are charged with getting things done and making sometimes difficult strategic decisions, for instance, to downsize and restructure to preserve the economic viability of the enterprise. The people laid off almost certainly won't like the individual responsible for these decisions. Innovation, in products or processes, is often disruptive, and few people enjoy having their routines disrupted. Consequently, leaders of fundamental change often provoke criticism and resistance. Moreover, rising to power invariably means winning competitions for promotions, and those who lose out are not necessarily going to be happy with the outcome. For all of these reasons, the capacity to act without needing to be popular is a crucial quality that we see in many powerful leaders in domains ranging from politics to business.

How to develop these qualities? Have people rate themselves, and possibly have current or former work-relevant peers rate them, on their possession of personal attributes that are useful for acquiring influence. Once people see where they could use improvement, individuals can develop and execute, possibly with the help of an executive coach, specific

activities designed to build more strength in qualities that are useful for acquiring power.

Structural Sources of Power

Power also derives from people's positions. In its simplest manifestation, formal hierarchical rank provides power. People defer to rank and title. Deans, CEOs, presidents, and others are powerful because of their title and the other perquisites that often accompany such formal roles. Stanley Milgram's classic obedience to authority studies demonstrated that people defer and accede to authority that comes from formal roles, titles, or symbols such as uniforms that signify formal rank.

In addition to formal roles and responsibilities, as research going back literally decades demonstrates, people's informal positions in structural networks also provide power. For instance, in some of the earliest studies, individuals who were central in communication networks obtained power. Central network positions provide individuals with more information than others because they communicate with more people and they have more direct contact and therefore the opportunity to build relationships through that contact because of their structural centrality.

Research by University of Chicago sociologist Ronald Burt demonstrated that people who occupy brokerage positions—those who fill structural holes by connecting groups, departments, or individuals together who benefit from being connected but otherwise would not be linked—derive power, and often career advantages and economic returns, from their brokerage activities.

The literature on social networks provides one other important insight: the value of weak ties. Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter has noted that strong ties are one's friends and weak ties are one's acquaintances. People to whom one is strongly tied—typically family, close friends, and work colleagues—are likely to share the same information and social relationships. It is weak ties that are the most able to provide nonredundant information and contacts—the novel connections and insights that provide greater unique value. Because people typically find it easier and more pleasant to associate with those with whom they have stronger ties, because of the positive effects of similarity and familiarity on liking, cultivating a larger number of weak ties requires more conscious and effortful networking activities.

People can analyze their networks by using the numerous, widely available, and free online exercises and tools. They can

then use these analyses to diagnose where they should expend more networking effort. Individuals can consider how much time they spend networking and with whom they spend the most time, as well as which individuals will be most critical for their career success. Time should be spent on the most career-critical ties. Most fundamentally, people can be encouraged to think strategically about their social relationships and how they can acquire more advantageous structural positions, and then act on those insights.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS FOR BUILDING INFLUENCE

Some of the most important outcomes from teaching people about power is to increase their sense of personal agency and also the frequency with which they take strategic actions to achieve their goals and build their influence. As in the case of building the personal attributes associated with power, providing either peer or executive coaching can be helpful in having people push themselves beyond their comfort zones to do things they didn't think would or could work. Here I discuss a selection of evidence-based strategies that people can do to build their power and that can be included as part of their learning.

Creating Resources

We know that resources are a source of power, in part because resources can "buy" support and are a signal of success. Moreover, because people are typically attracted to power and want to associate with success, they like to bask in the reflected glory of seemingly successful others, where that success can be signaled by resource acquisition. What people sometimes insufficiently appreciate is that people in almost any position can, if they try, create resources that can then provide them with power.

Jason Calacanis, an angel investor, early investor in Uber, author of a book on angel investing with a very successful podcast and a series of events for start-ups, began his career in New York wondering what it took to get on the cover of the magazines he saw as he walked by newsstands. Then he figured out that the people with the real power were those who decided who went on the magazine covers. Calacanis started two "magazines" covering Silicon Alley, one called Cyber Surfer, to focus on the New York high technology scene. Although initially he charged for the publications, he soon began giving the magazine away and charging for advertising. Importantly, with a publication, Calacanis had an excuse to interview anyone in the high technology world and, through that process, begin to build relationships with powerful individuals. He decided to start a list of the 100 most influential companies and people in

Silicon Alley. By creating this list and the ranking, and making it somewhat controversial, he made himself and his publication a focus of conversation and attention. Those individuals who ranked high on initial lists, people such as technology investor and commentator Esther Dyson, were willing to meet with Calacanis because he had performed the important service of increasing their visibility even as he fed their egos.

It does not cost much to create a ranked list, manufacture an award, start a blog, or curate an event. Jonathan Levy began hosting dinners in his home in New York in 2009, and today his Influencer dinners are sought after invitations in cities across the country. Creating venues, publications, and lists puts one in the center of an ecosystem custom designed to build visibility and power. Consider how John Bryne's *BusinessWeek's* ranking of business schools built circulation for the magazine and helped his career and influence in the business school world. Bryne was smart enough to ensure that the business school ranked first in the initial list was Northwestern, at the time not the most obvious choice. By doing something different and controversial, the magazine helped ensure it would get more attention.

A former student interested in environmental sustainability used his technical knowledge and Stanford brand to start a

journal. He was following in the steps of Henry Kissinger who, early in his career at Harvard, started a foreign policy journal, *Confluence*, that had limited circulation but an important role in building Kissinger's network and stature in part by giving him the opportunity to reach out to solicit articles from powerful people in the foreign policy world.

Acting and Speaking with Power

How people look—their body language—and how they sound and the words they use, affects their power. A long research tradition in political language going back to the late University of Illinois professor Murray Edelman demonstrates that words matter. The controversy over whether or not “power posing”—taking an expansive, dominant pose—affects the individual's testosterone or cortisol levels misses the point. Power posing and body posture, including facial expressions, may or may not affect the individual taking the pose, but the research literature is unequivocal that posture and body language affect how **others** perceive and react to those focal individuals.

Acting skills, like most skills, are learned. People can learn to strategically display emotions, even those they are not currently feeling, just as professional actors learn to take on roles. People can learn how to move, to stand, to gesture, and

to use their voice to convey more authority and power in their interpersonal interactions. Individuals can master how to generate applause, pause for emphasis, use humor to disarm others, and employ lists to create an impression of comprehensiveness. Such training can and does make people more effective in situations ranging from job interviews to taking command of task groups.

Getting Others on Your Side

As marketing guru and author Keith Ferrazzi noted, people need the support and help of others to achieve almost anything, and particularly objectives of consequence. In political contests, although numbers of supporters may not be definitive, having more rather than fewer allies is almost always helpful. Here are a few theoretically-grounded ideas that make attracting support more likely.

First, people like and offer to help those who are, or are perceived to be, similar to themselves, including others who mimic their behavior including voice and gestures, and people who remind them of themselves even in unimportant ways, such as sharing similar initials, birthdates, or having similar fingerprint patterns. Because people generally think well of themselves—the self-enhancement motive—they naturally think positively about others who are similar to themselves.

The late Jack Valenti was for 38 years the head of the Motion Picture Association of America. Prior to that, he was hired as an aide to President Lyndon Johnson out of the Kennedy motorcade in Dallas. Johnson was instrumental in getting Valenti the MPAA job and supporting him in his career. Valenti named one of his three children John Lyndon and another Courtney Lynda. He married one of Johnson's secretaries, Mary Margaret. Although this represents an extreme degree of creating similarity, almost everyone will have something in common with others, and reminding them of what they share in common is a great way of attracting support.

Second, the norm of reciprocity suggests that people will return favors, so doing favors for others is a way of building alliances. Senator Lyndon Johnson was only one of two Senators who stood in the rain at the funeral of the daughter of Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia, a gesture that did not go unnoticed.

Less frequently considered is the technique of asking others for favors or help. If someone does something for another, the first person, having made an investment in helping the second, will be psychologically committed to that other's success and will therefore be more likely to become a supporter and continuing to provide assistance. Asking for help is also quite flattering, as it implies that the favor-doer is important

and has something to offer the person making the request. Research suggests that people are often hesitant to ask for help and underestimate others' willingness to provide assistance, leading to the advice: "if you need help, just ask."

Once again, Lyndon Johnson provides an apt illustration. In the Senate he would feign having forgotten his glasses as an excuse to borrow a pair of "readers" from an opponent who had no way to gracefully decline the request. The gambit opened up the possibility of conversation, and had a potential enemy acting to do something for Johnson.

Creating resources, building relationships, and acting and speaking with power are just some of the strategies and tactics for building a power base. They have the advantage of being reasonably readily implemented by people at any stage in their careers, and that they are remarkably effective when employed.

EXAMPLES OF THE USE OF POWER IN CAREERS

Teaching power using examples such as Robert Moses, the powerful New York City parks commissioner profiled in Robert Caro's book, *The Power Broker*, former president Lyndon Johnson, or for that matter other historical, political and business figures confronts the problem that the students can not relate to these people. They seem too dissimilar and from a different world and time. Therefore, beginning about fifteen years ago

and continuing to the present, I developed case materials on people more similar to the students. I intentionally focused on business school graduates who in some cases were about five to ten years post-graduation at the time of the case. I sought people who worked in industries that the students either came from or intended to go into or both, settings such as high technology, finance, real estate, and consulting. In short, the class sought to use as examples people from environments and careers as well as life stages where the students could readily see themselves.

Moreover, I began to bring to the class panels of former students who had taken the class, so they could share their experiences in using the materials from the course in their own lives. Importantly, former students could relate how they could use power and still look at themselves in the mirror. In general, using teaching materials and class visitors that are proximate in both age and life experience to those being taught seems to make the lessons stickier and more relevant.

Some of the people I have used on my panels include Omid Kordestani, the first business person hired at Google. Kordestani, a Stanford business school graduate from 1991, was working at Netscape in the mid-1990s. In his opinion, his career was not progressing as fast as he preferred. So, as he

told me at a breakfast, he decided to implement, in an extreme version, a lesson from my power class. In the class, we review evidence that suggests that technical job performance is neither sufficient nor even necessary for career success, in part because performance is itself often subjectively defined and in part because relationships often matter more for career outcomes.

Kordestani said that he essentially stopped doing many of the technical aspects of his job, instead spending time building relationships with senior executives at his employer and also, in his sales and business development role, traversing the Silicon Valley and other high technology ecosystems creating contacts and discussing the emerging internet economy. As a result, when it came time for Google to recruit a business person for its team, Kordestani surfaced early and often in their search.

As his recruiting meeting at Google was drawing to a close late in the day, Kordestani offered to take the team out for dinner—on him—to continue their discussions in a more informal and relaxed atmosphere. As he told my class, that dinner was probably the best investment he ever made. Intelligent and charming, with experience in the high technology field,

Kordestani became one of the earliest employees at Google and today has a net worth approaching \$2 billion.

Other former students—and I use the plural intentionally and include women and men—have gotten themselves onto various *Forbes* “30 under 30” lists, have organized conferences, started awards, created alumni networks in cities where there were none, and done numerous other things to build a personal brand and networks of colleagues who can be and are helpful in their careers. By showing up and telling their stories, these alumni not only bring ideas like “creating resources” to life, they provide realistic, accessible, relatable role models for the current students to emulate—and to aspire to. Being invited back to the class has turned out to be a surprisingly motivating “award” that encourages current and recent graduates to use the materials from the class.

THE PRICE OF POWER

It is important for people, regardless of their career stage, to understand that power comes with certain costs. By understanding the price of power, people can make informed decisions about what trade-offs they are willing to make in its pursuit. Evidence suggests that for the most part, these costs,

which different people will perceive and evaluate differently, are unavoidable.

The first cost is visibility. The more powerful someone is, the more important the position that individual occupies, the more others will be interested in what she is doing—and therefore, seek out information about her activities and also spend more time observing her. Simply put, personal privacy disappears with power. The absence of privacy affects not only the individual with power but also, in many instances, their family members and friends, who may not have signed up for the constant scrutiny nor benefit as much personally from the power.

A second cost is autonomy. The late social scientist James G. March once told me that a person could have autonomy, or power, but not both. Power comes with a set of obligations and responsibilities that delimit people's ability to do what they want, when they want to.

A third cost is time. Doing what is required to obtain power and to hold on to it invariably requires time and effort. Time spent on building and maintaining social relationships, one's personal brand, and acquiring and deploying resources is time that cannot be spent on other things, including time with friends and family. It is not by accident that many successful

people have strained ties with intimate others such as wives and children.

A fourth cost is rivalry and enmity. The higher the position, the more the power, the more other people will want the role. As a consultant to Swiss CEOs told me, once you are CEO, most if not all of the people reporting to you will think they are more qualified for the position than you are. Some of these rivals will be willing to wait for you leave or retire, others will not. Therefore, there are power struggles. Not surprisingly, there are more power struggles at the top, when the prize is much bigger, than farther down in the hierarchy where victory brings fewer spoils.

Exposing people to the price of power I see as analogous to the concept of a realistic job preview. People should see what they are likely to confront before they confront it, so they can be prepared.

HOW POWER IS LOST

In teaching about power, people should understand how and why power is lost, so they can take appropriate actions to maintain their positions if they are interested in doing so.

Research on the effects of power on power-holders suggests that power leads to people becoming insensitive to others,

believing that the rules do not apply to them, and becoming overly focused on attaining their own wants. In short, power often leads to disinhibited behavior. Although breaking the rules can create power—because of the heuristic association between having power and the ability to break the rules—at some point violating social conventions, and particularly not paying sufficient attention to what others want and need, can cause those in power to create enemies and alliances that bring them down.

Second, acquiring and maintaining power requires effort. After some time, sometimes years, people get tired of expending that effort and either voluntarily step down or are pushed out of their position because they have lost the energy to fight. Constant vigilance also requires effort, so people are surprised when others come after them. When people get tired of doing what is required to hold onto power, they don't.

Consider the case of George Zimmer, the founder and very much the face and brand of the company, the Men's Wearhouse. Running a retail business is difficult, and after almost forty years, Zimmer wanted to step into an executive chairman role and have someone else deal with the day-to-day challenges of selling tailored men's clothing. In 2011, he appointed Doug Ewert as CEO. In the summer of 2013, Zimmer was forced out of the company

in a very public spat. There had been disagreements over strategy and over Ewert's moves to substantially increase CEO compensation. There are many sides to this story, but as is often the case, people newly elevated into powerful positions do not want their predecessors looking over their shoulder or being in a position to second-guess their decisions. Moreover, when Zimmer stepped out of his CEO role, he signaled to the board that he was beginning to phase out of the company and move on to other interests. The board, comprised of people Zimmer had known in some cases for decades, nonetheless sided with the successor, the person who was younger and more likely to remain, fight for his job, and prevail in a power struggle.

Third, as one colleague put it, the half-life of enemies tends to be longer than that for friends. Enemies remember any slights and battles better and for a longer time than friends remember favors and pleasant experiences. Therefore, he argued, over time, one acquires enemies at a faster rate than one acquire friends, unless someone is particularly fortunate. So after a while, the growing number of enemies and rivals is sufficient to cause a person to lose their position.

PUTTING THE KNOWLEDGE OF POWER TO USE

Toward the end of any experience entailing learning about power, people need to put power to use. Research shows that knowledge that is not applied soon abates, as anyone who has studied a foreign language or mathematical concepts that they do not use can attest. Using what people have learned about power will often generate more acceptance of the material as individuals see that the ideas work and they can implement them. And putting knowledge into use also encourages and indeed makes possible reflective practice.

There are many ways to put power to use, including in-class exercises and peer coaching. However useful, talking with peers or practicing power in artificial classroom situations remain too distant from really practicing power skills. Therefore, I assign, both for my in-class and online students, what I have come to call a "doing power" project. With the help of experienced executive coaches who work with the students to push them to expand their objectives and be bolder, people are encouraged to set out a reasonably specific, influence-oriented objective, strategize on a broad range of things they might do to achieve it, and then act on their plans. Sometimes, amazing things happen.

In the spring of 2012, Philipp Herrmann, a Stanford MBA student from Germany, found himself with an approaching deadline

as the end of the quarter loomed. He intended to return to Germany and, with a partner, start a venture capital and consulting firm (the two are often combined in that country). He knew that, as a graduating MBA, his odds of success would be vastly increased if he could increase his visibility and legitimacy in the internet economy space. It happened that a leading German business magazine was launching a search for the 100 most influential people in the internet economy. Herrmann's doing-power project was to get on that list.

That summer he sent me a screen shot with his name on the list. Because he was one of the youngest people in this very visible, high-prestige set of names, he was invited to go on a trade mission with Prime Minister Angela Merkel, and many other opportunities eventuated. Recently, Herrmann sold part of Etventure, the name of the firm, to EY (formerly Ernst and Young) where he now serves as an equity partner in charge of much of their innovation and venturing activity. He tells this story to the class to illustrate an example of how one doing-power project worked.

David Bowman used his doing-power project to become the CFO of Blue Bottle Coffee upon graduating with an MBA from Stanford. Within a very few years, he was the COO of the company prior to its acquisition by Nestle in 2017. Another individual, joining

Amazon, used the doing-power project to figure out the best place to enter the company and how to accelerate their career. Out of 100 people joining Amazon that year from top business schools, this person received the highest ratings and enjoyed the fastest promotions.

Having people use their knowledge, particularly when successful, reinforces the course lessons. Having people implement power concepts, at a minimum, ensures more practice and more retention of the knowledge.

Furthermore, in order for people to navigate power dynamics successfully, they need to build their skills in diagnosing power distributions, the relevant players, and what those others are doing. Therefore, in another major assignment, I ask students to diagnose the power dynamics in a company or setting where they have been or are thinking of going. In some cases, this diagnosis has led people to see that their sponsors are on shaky ground and that the course members are not as valued as they thought. In several cases, people have changed where they went to work based on their understanding of the power dynamics and the implications for their career prospects.

Table 1 summarizes the sequence of materials and concepts I have described. Experience shows this is a reasonably effective

way to teach power to people in either full-time, online, part-time, or executive programs.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

LESSONS LEARNED

In an increasingly competitive and possibly overcrowded management education marketplace, one question is: does this approach to teaching power and the subject matter work? A definitive answer would require data that do not presently exist, but the anecdotal evidence suggests that power is a very successful course. IESE uses some of the power material in a short, focused program called Getting Things Done, and indeed, material on power would seem to be foundational for teaching people about strategy implementation and organizational change. At Stanford, in the business school's online programs, the power elective has consistently drawn by far the most enrollments and achieved the highest course ratings. In the full-time MBA program, two 68-person sections are invariably full with, in recent years, some 150 people on the waiting list. Peter Belmi's similar class at the Darden School at Virginia quickly became the most popular elective at that school with course ratings often averaging 5 on a 5-point scale. Gabrielle Adams taught three sections of power at London Business School,

Nathanael Fast has taught the material for years quite successfully at USC, and the list goes on.

Somewhat ironically, the material on power seems particularly appreciated—and relevant—in programs where the content feels more countercultural. One conjecture is that students apprehend the reality of a world in which “old power” figures and tactics seem on the ascendance, and appreciate receiving both the social science concepts and practice in using them relevant for such a world.

In this article, I have endeavored to describe what I and others have learned about how to present material on power in ways that enhance individual’s careers and their effectiveness in getting things done, in the context of an environment not always hospitable to the message. *The End of Power* was on Mark Zuckerberg’s suggested reading list, and *New Power* argues that the internet and social media have fundamentally changed power dynamics. Meanwhile, authoritarian governments are on the rise in countries ranging from Brazil to Hungary. Facebook, typical of Silicon Valley companies, has shareholder voting rights that ensure Zuckerberg will retain control almost regardless of his actual shareholdings. And it turns out that social media are wonderful tools for maintaining power, not redistributing it. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Executives frequently say they wished they had learned material on power earlier in their careers. But it is never too late to master the understanding of power and the political skills that such knowledge can enhance. Executives and younger students appreciate the realism of material that explains what is going on in business and political life even at the expense of uplift and feel good stories. It seems that, to quote the rock group, The Who, people do intuitively understand that the new boss is pretty much the same as the old boss. And most people value the ability to not get fooled again.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

Power: Why Some People Have It—and Others Don't provides a review of much of the social science literature on power, examples of power in use by ordinary people, and is the text for the elective class I teach at Stanford and others teach elsewhere. *Leadership BS* is a prequel to power. That book illustrates the many problems with much of the conventional wisdom promulgated by the large, and mostly ineffective, leadership training and development industry, including documenting the failure of leadership teaching over the decades to change leadership behavior or effectiveness.

Mark Granovetter's *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers* demonstrates the importance of weak ties. Ronald S. Burt's *Brokerage and Closure: An Introduction to Social Capital* illustrates the effects of holding brokerage roles on careers and the complex trade-offs between structures that facilitate brokerage and structures that help build trust.

Political Skills at Work: Impact on Work Effectiveness by Gerald Ferris and colleagues includes a political skills inventory that is useful in self-diagnosis, as well as research showing the importance of political skills for career success and job performance. The book documents the development of valid and reliable measures of political skill.

The research literature includes numerous treatments on political language and its importance in building influence. One of the best and most concise treatments can be found in *Our Masters' Voices: The Language and Body-Language of Politics* by Max Atkinson.

Google Scholar (www.scholar.google.com) is useful for accessing specific topics such as the importance of even incidental similarities in inducing cooperation, whether or not agreeableness is related to career success, the social science research on lying including its frequency and consequences, the

effects of narcissism and overconfidence on getting hired and promoted, and numerous other power-relevant topics.

TABLE 1.

ONE SEQUENCE OF MATERIAL FOR TEACHING POWER

Sources of Resistance and Discomfort

Belief in a just world

System Justification

Emphasis on unit v. individual success

Leadership literature

Sources of Power

Individual attributes and qualities

Structural position

Strategies and Tactics for Building Influence

Resources

Acting and speaking with power

Attracting allies

Examples of Similar Others Who have Garnered Power

The Price of Power

How Power Is Lost

Putting Knowledge to Use: Doing Power Projects