
BOOK REVIEW***POWER: WHY SOME PEOPLE HAVE IT—AND OTHERS DON'T***

BY: JEFFREY PFEFFER

New York: Harper Business/Harper Collins Publishers, 2010

273 Pp. Hardback

Isbn: 978-0-06-178908-3

In this well-known text on individual power dynamics within organizations, Stanford University professor Jeffrey Pfeffer demystifies the interactions and circumstances that contribute to attaining power in organizational contexts. He pushes past the often marketing-infused leadership literature. Documented behavior patterns matter more than potentially self-aggrandizing authors. Using robust stories to personalize the concepts, Pfeffer creates a power attainment strategy.

A leader must ruthlessly assess his or her qualities, avoiding the cliff of self-enhancement (39–42). Performance, by itself, is not enough to realize power. In chapters one and two, Pfeffer provides “seven important personal qualities that build power,” which play out in the midst of the two dimensions of will and skill. Will is reflected in ambition, energy, and focus. “The four skills useful in acquiring power are self-knowledge and a reflective mindset, confidence and the ability to project self-assurance, the ability to read others and empathize with their point of view, and a capacity to tolerate conflict” (43).

Chapter three describes how to position yourself within an organization to draw power, whether to stand out in an emerging department or to join a powerful department or group that already exists. Either approach could prove useful. Chapter four cues up how to get noticed. Asking for help, breaking group rules, and resisting the urge to be liked all contribute to standing out.

Chapters five and six highlight the attractiveness of resourceful and well-networked people. They attend to and support others, sometimes taking on small tasks that could leverage influence. They

widen their resource bases inside and outside of the organization, including any connections with prestigious institutions beyond the organization. Well-networked people understand that “[p]ower and influence come not just from the extensiveness of [their] network and the status of its members, but also from [their] structural position within that network” (119).

Returning to the theme of individual qualities, chapter seven invites the reader to remember that “[w]e choose how we will act and talk, and those decisions are consequential for acquiring and holding on to power” (128). One projects power by knowing how to present oneself to the audience before whom one is acting; use anger more than the weaker emotions; choreograph physical stature, appearance, and gestures; display confidence and humility; manage settings to communicate power and status; and think before speaking, being unafraid of dead spaces in the conversation when necessary. When speaking, one utilizes the rhetorical devices of inserting or denying interruption(s), questioning assumptions undergirding conversations, and honing persuasive language.

In chapter eight, Pfeffer addresses how powerful leaders manage perceptions. “What is important is that you think carefully about the dimensions of the reputation you want to build, and then do everything in your power, from how you spend your time to what organizations and people you associate with, to ensure that is the image that you project” (155). This includes controlling one’s media presence via posts, articles, interviews, and publicized expertise. Power-acquiring leaders take advantage of others who will endorse and promote them rather than indulging in shameless self-promotion.

Chapter nine addresses how to care for resistance and setbacks. Opposition can be overcome by helping others to save face, staying focused so as not to antagonize needlessly, being self-differentiated enough not to take things personally, and consistently pressing ahead, taking initiative when possible, using carrots and sticks to “shape behavior.” When setbacks do come, consider next moves with resolve, do what has led to success to date, and act powerfully,

as if successful, so “your potential allies will not believe their efforts to help you will be wasted” (182).

Chapters ten through twelve discuss the implications of power. Power draws attention, limits autonomy, requires stewarding, distorts trust, and can be addictive. It can foster overconfidence that leads to disconnects with others. Imbalanced power can cause one to trust too much or too little. It can bias one toward old patterns of behavior that do not serve current realities well. It can cause entrenchment and overstaying in a position. Power politics are unavoidable.

One might question whether this text holds promise in the religious leadership milieu. With texts like *Influence Without Authority* (Allan R. Cohen and David L. Bradford) and *How to Lead When You're Not in Charge* (Clay Scroggins), the concept of acquiring power can feel disingenuous, even manipulative. At the same time, how does the imago Dei in a group of leaders unfold? What are the psycho-social behaviors in religious institutions, and how do they differ from those in nonreligious institutions? Where might some of Pfeffer's observations align with servant leadership, e.g., meeting needs with more altruistic motives?

Humans are born with innate power. Groups authorize individuals to exercise formal and/or informal power. Through a religious lens, God ultimately empowers and appoints, often in spite of human gyrations. Pfeffer's work assists in better understanding human power interactions, theologically messy as they might be.

Thomas F. Tumblin
Asbury Theological Seminary
Wilmore, Kentucky