

Find Your Power in the Workplace

By John B. McHugh

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“The most vital ingredients of power are often the intangibles. Information and knowledge are power. Visibility is power. Personal energy is power; so is self confidence. Showmanship is power. Access to the inner sanctum is power. Obstruction and delay are power. Winning is power. Sometimes, the illusion of power is power.” -- Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game*

Many people don't think that they have any power in their organization because they aren't in the “corner office” or don't have a C-level title. Think again. Even if you are not a boss or are just beginning your career, chances are you do have power in the workplace. This article will show you how to find your power in the workplace, through personal experience and some unlikely examples.

In the book *Power and Influence*, John Kotter states, “After studying this problem for over a decade now, I think I understand why it is that some people are incredibly effective at providing leadership in getting things done inside complex organizations, while most are not. It begins with a way of thinking about the social milieu in which one operates. This way of thinking about what ‘work’ means is different from that held by many of us, especially with regard to issues of power, dependence, and influence.”

You may ask, “I'm not a boss or manager or executive, what power do I have?” It's a fair question. However, realize that *power is not always about what your position is in the organization; rather it is more about your influence*. Let me give you some examples from my career.

Finding My Power in Publishing

I once worked for a company where I was 18 years older than the president and, in fact, I was the oldest of my five peer managers. I also had the most in-depth experience in our business, publishing. Our president, who had limited publishing experience, would privately ask me my opinion on a number of topics. My power in that company was the power of *access because I was knowledgeable and experienced*.

Here's another example of how I had power in a different job. I was the acquisitions manager of a line of books that produced 60% of the company's revenue. My boss, who was the president and editor-in-chief, regarded me as a top performer and one of the smartest members of his staff.

One day the president told me he was going to promote Rick, my peer and colleague, to be editor-in-chief and that I would report to Rick. I liked Rick as a person, but as a leader and manager of people he was a disaster.

When the president gave me this news, I was shocked but I quickly recovered. I told him, “I have reported to you for five years and delivered increased profits and growth each year. I am experienced and you trust me. I take very little of your time. One advantage of the status quo, with me reporting directly to you, is that I can report to you first hand on how the product line that delivers 60% of our sales and profits is doing. I like Rick and he is capable but there are many benefits to retaining our reporting relationship without a middleman, namely Rick.”

Howard replied, “Jack, you’re correct in your assessment, let’s continue with you reporting to me as Rick will have his hands full with his two other inexperienced reports.”

What was my power? First, I had *access* to the president. The second component of my power was *my status as a star performer who had delivered outstanding results*. My power had nothing to do with my position on the organization chart and my power got me what I wanted; namely, to continue to report to the president and not to report to Rick. Of course, what I just related to you remained private between the president and myself.

It Happens in the Military, Too

Here’s an example of my power as an enlisted military reservist. I served in the United Air Force Reserve as an Airman First Class (E-4) — low ranking enlisted man (EM) — I had two personal relationships that helped me with my assignments and promotions.

The Commanding Officer (CO, a captain) of my security police section and I were both graduates of Jesuit universities: my CO went to John Carroll in Cleveland and I went to Xavier University in Cincinnati. The captain was a fan of the Jesuit order and that provided me an entry to develop an off-duty relationship with him. We sometimes had lunch or drinks together far from our base.

My other personal relationship was with the executive officer (XO; second in command of our Air Wing, Senior Pilot, and a LT Colonel) who was a business law professor at a local university in civilian life, whom I called on in my civilian job as a textbook sales representative. We would have lunch when I was on campus.

What was my power? I had *access to power* with my CO and XO, two officers who could help me in my career as an Air Force reservist. Through these relationships I was able to secure a choice job in our section and a promotion. We never fraternized during duty as that was prohibited by military law. While I was on duty it was always “Sir” with a salute, and I always addressed them as either “Colonel” or “Captain.”

Coaches and Players: Who Has the Power?

Finally, here are a couple of examples from the NBA. In 1981 Ervin “Magic” Johnson was a star player on the Los Angeles Lakers. The head coach was Paul Westhead. He was a capable coach, but Magic Johnson disagreed with his coaching strategy. Guess who left the team? Coach Paul Westhead. The inside word was that Magic got Westhead fired.

Another NBA star, LeBron James, has a reputation for being a “coach killer.” James in his tenure at the Cleveland Cavaliers and now with the Los Angeles Lakers has seen a total of six coaches fired. Word has it that LeBron wanted these coaches gone.

You’re probably wondering, “I thought the coach is the boss of the players.” That’s true in theory, but the reality is that players like Magic and LeBron are once-in-a-generation players who are critical to a team’s success. NBA coaches are replaceable because there are many, competent experienced coaches a team can hire. Who had more power in these instances: the player or the coach? The player had more power because of *his role as the star player* while the coach was seen as easily replaceable.

How to Find Your Power

Even if you're just starting your career, look for ways that you can develop your power in your organization. You could contribute to the company's profits, which will always get noticed and is easy to trace back to you. Or you could build a reputation as the go-to person in a crisis. Or you could take on additional projects, as long as you are relatively certain you can see them through to a successful completion. The point is that there are many ways to shine, and it will often start with a great attitude on the job and a willingness to help out. During this time of the "Great Resignation," "Quiet Quitting," and Baby Boomers retiring, company leadership is looking for their next generation of leaders. It's never too early for you to make your mark as a rising star in your organization.

If you want to learn about power in the workplace, I suggest you read *Power and Influence* (Free Press 1985) by John P. Kotter. Kotter provides timeless advice on power and many other aspects of organizational life. <https://www.amazon.com/Power-Influence-John-P-Kotter/dp/1439146799#customerReviews>

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