

Interpersonal Forms of Power

French and Raven identified five forms of interpersonal power that managers use: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert power.⁷

Reward power is based on the agent's ability to control rewards that a target wants. For example, managers control the rewards of salary increases, bonuses, and promotions. Reward power can lead to better performance but only as long as the employee sees a clear and strong link between performance and rewards. To use reward power effectively, the manager should be explicit about the behavior being rewarded and should clarify the connection between the behavior and the reward.

Coercive power is based on the agent's ability to cause the target to have an unpleasant experience. To coerce someone into doing something means to force the person to do it, often with threats of punishment. Managers using coercive power may verbally abuse employees or withhold support from them.

Legitimate power, which is similar to authority, is based on position and mutual agreement. The agent and target agree that the agent has the right to influence the target. It doesn't matter that a manager thinks he has the right to influence his employees; for legitimate power to be effective, the employees also must believe the manager has the right to tell them what to do. For example, in some Native American societies, the chief has legitimate power; tribe members believe in the chief's right to influence the decisions in their lives.

Referent power is based on interpersonal attraction. The agent has referent power over the target because the target identifies with or wants to be like the agent. Charismatic individuals are often thought to have referent power. Interestingly, the agent need not be superior to the target in any way. People who use referent power well are most often individualistic and respected by the target.

Expert power exists when the agent has specialized knowledge or skills that the target needs. For expert power to work, three conditions must be in place. First, the target must trust that the expertise given is accurate. Second, the knowledge involved must be relevant and useful to the target. Third, the target's perception of the agent as an expert is crucial. Using easy-to-understand language signals the target that the expert has an appreciation for real-world concerns and increases the target's trust in the expert.⁸

Which type of interpersonal power is most effective? Research has focused on this question since French and Raven introduced their five forms of power. Some of the results are surprising. Reward power and coercive power have similar effects,⁹ and both lead to compliance. That is, employees will do what the manager asks them to, at least temporarily, if the manager offers a reward or threatens them with punishment. Reliance on these sources of power is dangerous, however, because it may require the manager to be physically present and watchful in order to apply rewards or punishment when the behavior occurs. Constant surveillance creates an uncomfortable situation for managers and employees and eventually results in a dependency relationship. Employees will not work unless the manager is present.

Legitimate power also leads to compliance. When told "Do this because I'm your boss," most employees will comply. However, the use of legitimate power has not been linked to organizational effectiveness or to employee satisfaction.¹⁰ In organizations where managers rely heavily on legitimate power, organizational goals are not necessarily met.

reward power

Power based on an agent's ability to control rewards that a target wants.

coercive power

Power that is based on an agent's ability to cause an unpleasant experience for a target.

legitimate power

Power that is based on position and mutual agreement; agent and target agree that the agent has the right to influence the target.

referent power

An elusive power that is based on interpersonal attraction.

expert power

The power that exists when an agent has specialized knowledge or skills that the target needs.