Leader Influence: A Research Review of French & Raven's (1959) Power Dynamics

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Abstract

After reviewing nearly 70 years of research, this manuscript seeks to compile study results to better understand leader influence by employing French and Raven's (1959) power dynamics. Divided into two categories (i.e. formal and informal), these five power dynamics include referent, expert, legitimate, coercive, and reward power. Each power dynamic is categorized accordingly and dissected between scholarly research and applicable workplace settings between supervisors (i.e. leaders) and employees. Behavioral outcomes from a subordinate standpoint are discussed, and this manuscript concludes that the power dynamic that characterizes different workplace relationships between supervisors and employees has significant effects on work productivity and employee motivation.

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Introduction

In the late 1950s, John R. P. French and Bertram Raven (1959) analyzed the complexities of power and determined that there were five dynamics (or bases) of power: referent, expert, legitimate, reward, and coercive. They defined power as the primary source in achieving results or compliance from another individual. Since then, power has been explored, dissected, and defined in a number of ways. Vecchio (1997) explained power as having the aptitude to modify one's behavior, causing a different outcome. Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson (2003) defined power as the ability to alter another's state by either providing assistance or withholding something of value. Biong, Nygaard, and Silkoset (2010) concluded that power was a strong tool for managers to motivate and manage. Anderson, John, and Keltner (2012) presumed that one's power is relative to the relationships one has with other individuals in the group. Mysen, Svensson, and Hogevold (2012) concluded that power was difficult to recognize, describe, and verify, and held by those in dominant positions. Randolph and Kemery (2011) studied power in managers and determined that in order for managers to exemplify power, there must be a source for this influence. They concluded that the power bases identified by French and Raven (1959) were these sources of influence and likewise, the source of employees feeling empowered.

In summary, power is the potential influence that one has over another person or group, and generally, the one with the power has control over something the other person (or group) desires. The common theme of these definitions is that objectives were attained (or behavior was changed) because of an influencing party. In this manuscript, the focus is on French and Raven's (1959) bases of power (i.e. power dynamics) because the presence of each power

dynamic has a significant impact on not only outcomes, but also the method of achieving those outcomes.

French and Raven's (1959) Power Dynamics

Robbins and Judge (2017) defined power as not only the capacity to influence power, but when the influencee acts in accordance with the influencer's desires. They argued that an individual can hold power, but does not necessarily need to use it (partially or in full capacity). In *Field Theory in Social Science* (1951), Lewin said, "Power among parties is determined by their current states, actions, and possible futures. This implies that power can be exercised, and can influence outcomes, but can also be defined as the potential to influence others" (Pratto et al., 2008, p. 379). The degree to which a supervisor exerts influence, and the exhibited power will affect the employee's inherent motivation to be successful.

If a supervisor projects an unfavorable influence, the employee is likely to feel intimidated, unappreciated, or any other unwelcomed emotion. Thus, the employee would not be as motivated to be successful due to the current state of the supervisor-employee relationship. On the other hand, if a supervisor exhibits a favorable influence, the employee is likely to feel valued, important, and a contributor to the project's success. Thus, the employee would be more motivated to be successful because of the supervisor-employee relationship. Note, the examples of both scenarios are based on this single-instance, rather than the prior relationship history.

The five power dynamics (or bases of power) identified by French and Raven (1959) include referent, expert, legitimate, reward, and coercive. Coercive power is the only power base with negative influence. The other four are considered relatively positive by both the influencee and influencer. Additionally, "dynamics" and "bases" of power are interchangeable throughout the manuscript. These five power dynamics have classification into other categories - formal or informal.

Power Categories: Formal and Informal

Power is segregated into two categories: formal and informal. Specifically, referent and expert power are categorized as informal power because they exist without any recognized formal authority. This essentially means that an individual can demonstrate either referent or expert power without having any official authority or employees align under him or her in an organizational hierarchy (i.e. no direct managerial span of control). The other three types of power (reward, coercive, and legitimate) considered as formal power because they exist because of holding a formal position of authority (French & Raven, 1959; Randolph & Kemery, 2011). As a result of each of these various power dynamics, one person or group is in the dominant position and another person or group is being influenced or in a submissive role. Another way to break down these power dynamics is to categorize them as coercive and noncoercive (legitimate, reward, expert, and referent) (Biong et al., 2010). It should be noted that the delivery approach of the influencer affects the receiving party as well as the outcome(s) of the situation.

Using different types of power in various situations is instrumental in motivating employees. The behavior of a supervisor is reflected by a number of circumstances including: 1) the current professional relationship with his or her individual employees and team collectively, 2) the attitude and loyalty the employees have towards this supervisor (or organization), 3)

the ability to be (and feel) successful, 4) previous outcomes based on similar experiences within the organization, and 5) the supervisor's motivation to be successful. All of these factors play a vital role for supervisors who define and redefine themselves as leaders as they acquire different types of power, and sometimes the thrill of power drives them to want to acquire more power (Prato et al., 2008).

Informal Power: Referent and Expert

Referent and expert powers are the two types of French and Raven's (1959) power dynamics categorized as informal because neither of these two powers require a formal position of authority. Referent power (sometimes known as personal power) is based on respect and admiration an individual earned from others over time. It is defined as "individuals who are attractive and socially adept – because of charisma, energy, stamina, political smarts, gift of gab, vision, or some other characteristic – are imbued with power independent of other sources" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 203). Another way of looking at this power in today's American culture is that those with strong reputations like celebrities sell products (p. 203). Consider Oprah Winfrey, who is not an expert on jeans or skin care, for example. Because of her broad likeability and charisma, consumers blindly purchased items she liked because she identified them as one of her favorite products. This is the *likability factor*, illuminated by those who hold referent power. Vecchio (1997) stated that those with referent power influence others through alluring dispositions (including style, appearance, or through the values they exhibit) and inspire approval, respect, and admiration to want to associate with them. Those who possess this power maintain it for their likeability, admiration, and behavior. In fact, scholars argued that referent power is "the most important managerial tool" (Biong et al., 2010, p. 358).

Moreover, exercising referent power may be a method to obtain legitimate power in a workplace setting, particularly for those holding junior positions in organizations with aspirations of career advancement. These individuals can demonstrate this power to showcase leadership capabilities. For instance, without having any direct reports, a young professional can create a pleasant work environment, treat others with respect, provide high quality output, and share knowledge willingly. He or she can be a valuable go-to resource and gain the respect and admiration through work ethic, behavior, and likeability. Because of all of these favorable characteristics, this person has the potential for a leadership position consideration. However, both sides of reward power should be considered. There is potential caution for those promoted because they hold referent power. They may be likable, but they could lack integrity or the necessary skills to be successful; thus, using their respective referent power to alienate others, cause harm or gain an unfair advantage.

From a research standpoint, Elangovan and Xie (1999) concluded that a positive correlation existed between supervisors demonstrating referent power and subordinates who maintained an internal locus of control and that referent power positively related to work effort. However, the referent power of a supervisor was associated with higher stress levels when paired with an employee with an internal locus of control.

Expert power, the second form of power categorized as informal, is based on an individual's advanced knowledge about a project, a given field or some other specialty, based on education and/or experience, and is not dependent on any formal position in an organization or social status. French and Raven (1959) defined it as power based upon both informational influence and the credibility of the person. Those with expert power add value to organizations,

not only providing others with good technical knowledge or skills, but offering guidance and advice for the betterment of others. Businesses that capitalize on this expertise create a long-standing knowledge base that is imperative for the long-term success of many organizations. Losing these types of experts within an organization can be detrimental to the organization's operations. This type of power crosses disciplines and includes roles such as accountants, legal experts, technical managers, doctors, plumbers, coaches, counselors, electricians, and technology specialists. Unlike other powers, an individual does not need to hold a position of authority to possess expert power.

Expert power is often well-received by employees. Elangovan and Xie (1999) confirmed that subordinates with an internal locus of control demonstrated an increased motivation when submitting to expert power (i.e. expert power positively related to work effort), but there was a negative correlation for employees with an external locus of control. Often times the delivery of the expert knowledge makes a difference (nobody likes to work with a know-it-all), but experts are often sought after in the corporate environment to further a project or initiative. Their insight and knowledge can provide sizable benefits resulting in profitability, a reduction in the duration of the project, and experience/learning for the employee to carry forward throughout his or her career. Most often, employees do not feel threatened and are happy to work with an expert.

Formal Power: Legitimate, Reward, and Coercive
Three types of power (legitimate, reward, and coercive) are categorized as formal power. French and Raven (1959) defined legitimate power as "the legitimate right of some other individual or groups to prescribe behavior or beliefs for a person" (p. 265). They provide three different bases for legitimate power, which include culture, acceptance of social structure, and designation by a legitimizing agent. This is actual authority (or power) an individual holds in a formal organization based on a predetermined hierarchical structure. Some examples of exercising legitimate power in the workplace include hiring and terminating employees, completing performance appraisals, setting behavioral expectations, and delegating tasks. Elangovan and Xie (1999) researched the perception of power and impact on locus of control, and they found that legitimate power had a stronger bearing on those with an internal locus of control. They concluded, "supervisor power constitutes a key source of environmental stimulus for employees, the role of the individual differences in perceptions of and reaction to supervisor power merits critical attention" (p. 360). Furthermore, legitimate power has the greatest opportunity to exhibit fungibility. This is the ability to utilize current power to gain additional power (Berdahl, 2008). Often supervisors demonstrating strong performance are awarded with additional responsibilities including a greater span of control. However, legitimate power can be immediately eliminated once the position is eliminated or an individual no longer holds the position. Additionally, "there is an underlying threat that noncompliance by the subordinate... will entail sanctions" (Biong, et al., 2010, p. 345). Supervisors are expected to behave in noncoercive, ethical manners when demonstrating power (Biong et al., 2010). Understanding the variation in these dyads as potential predictors in the workplace to capitalize on supervisor behavior, employee output, and employee motivation. Sometimes categorized under legitimate power, supervisors utilize both of these power dynamics (coercive and reward) to demonstrate influence and initiate (or motivate) a response from the employee.

The second power categorized as formal is reward power. It is opposite of coercive power. This is the ability "to give or withhold rewards based on performance as a major source of power that allows managers to have a highly motivated workforce" (Jones & George, 2015, p. 333). This is the idea of adding a positive factor to create a positive environment, or removing a negative factor to create a positive environment (Robbins & Judge, 2015) with the understanding that positive working environments result in increased employee effort. For example, one reason a supervisor exhibits reward power is to motivate an employee to replicate a particular behavior or produce a similar outcome. The intention is to create a positive environment within the workplace that serves to motivate employees. Thus, the rewarded employee becomes an example for employee standards and creates an optimal relationship between the supervisor and employee.

French and Raven (1959) found that applying a reward power-type of system led to increased production through monitoring piece-work in a factory-based scenario. Like coercive power, reward power naturally falls under the formal authority hierarchy. While it may be difficult to materialistically reward a large number of associates, a good supervisor can eliminate roadblocks to ensure the greatest possible outcomes and grant equity within those outcomes. Examples of reward power include promoting employees, awarding employees, using words of encouragement to make employees feel valued, granting additional time off, issuing monetary awards, or empowering employees. Empowerment is a form of motivation. Studies have set the stage demonstrating the direct effect of power on employee effort by using empowerment (Locke, 1986; Randolph & Kemery, 2011). These scholars proved the importance of empowerment in the dyadic relationships between supervisors and employees (Locke, 1986). This included using reward power as an empowerment tool for employees to motivate employees, i.e. increase effort. Similarly, Randolph, and Kemery (2011) confirmed a positive relationship between supervisors using reward power and empowering employees. Ironically, Hegtvedt (1988) uncovered that individuals who were in a lower-powered position were perceived as more powerful when withholding rewards. In creating this inequitable situation (i.e. power manipulation), lower-powered individuals were perceived as more influential. This could be a sign of coercive power.

The final of French and Raven's (1959) power dynamics is coercive, and it is the final power dynamic categorized as formal power. Coercive power is the ability to penalize others or remove a positive existing element. Some of the many examples of coercive power used by supervisors include: publicly shaming someone to gain influence, purposefully withholding relevant/important information, excluding certain individuals on meeting invitations, intentionally causing a negative result on a project, not approving time off, sexual harassment, terminating or threatening to terminate or withhold a promotion, or withholding some other positive within the environment (i.e. flextime, vacations, bonus opportunities). This power, when used inappropriately, is not an acceptable practice of management and is often under the legitimate authority category. With legitimate power, those who have a span of control (i.e. direct reports) also have the ability to exercise reward or coercive power.

French and Raven (1959) inferred the utilization of coercive power has a direct influence on an employee's willingness to have a positive impact or improve productivity. The stronger the negative influence, the more dependent employees are on this supervisor for future direction (often for fear of reprimand if delineating from an expected course of action), and are less likely to initiate any type of empowerment he or she may have been granted. An organization

that removes a supervisor using coercive power will be seen as more favorable for removing the negative, but potentially questioned as to how or why that supervisor was granted that position initially. Sometimes supervisors using coercive power are viewed as bullies. A bully, for whatever reason, has a need to dominate and remain in a higher position of power. The other party, whether it be a person or group of individuals, is in position with minimal support and/or confidence. Additionally, Biong et al. (2010) observed that coercive power should be avoided, and other researchers backed the notion that coercive power was less influential in motivating employees (Nesler, Quigley, Aguinis, Lee, & Tedeschi, 1999).

A supervisor exhibits coercive power for a number of reasons. For example, a supervisor may try to use coercive power to motivate employees to stop a particular negative behavior, such as underperforming or behavioral issues like consistent absenteeism. In efforts to emphasize the importance of a given situation, a supervisor may threaten with removing a positive or introducing a negative to try to initiate a specific response or outcome. Teven (2006) found that employee perceptions of their immediate supervisor's use of coercive power "related to negative interpersonal affect, decreased job satisfaction and resistance" (p. 75). Locke (1986) resolved that coercive authority did not promote employee responsibility. Ng and Sorensen (2009) and Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, and De Chermont (2003) both performed meta-analyses that uncovered similar findings. Specifically, when coercive power or influence exhibited in the workplace, it resulted in negative outcomes (i.e. stress and dissatisfaction in the workplace).

Taucean, Tamasila, and Negru-Strauti (2016) conducted a study on leader power in large organizations, and they concluded that employees' perception of leader power accounted for their degree of success within the organization, or lack thereof. Thus, interpreted that employees who work for supervisors who use coercive power are less likely to motivate their employees. Examples of such employee behaviors include working reactively (rather than proactively), completing the bare minimum of required work, or not volunteering for additional work/special projects. Employees working under a supervisor behaving coercively often have an increase in health issues as well (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). Goodstadt and Hjelle (1973) found that those subordinates with an internal locus of control believed they had the ability to influence situations and could be successful. Likewise, they concluded those with an external locus of control did not believe they had any control over various situations, including supervisor influence, and did not expect to have organizational success.

Conversely, there are supervisors that are not able to understand the value of adjusting influence to favorably impact employee motivation. Some supervisors strictly use coercive power, sometimes due to lack of confidence to be an effective authoritative figure (Goodstadt & Hjelle, 1973), regardless of the employee that reports to him or her. As a result, employees under this influence may be more or less likely to be motivated.

Therefore, supervisors using either reward or coercive power can have a significant impact in motivating employees. Supervisors should have the ability to understand how his or her behavior (or influence) affects employee motivation, and thus, develop a significant advantage in maintaining a strong dyadic relationship with his or her employees. Supervisors with this understanding know which type of power (reward or coercive) to exhibit over which employee in order to instigate, or motivate, a response. Other scholars saw the importance of supervisor influence and employee locus of control on motivation. In fact, Etzioni (1961)

created a systemic structure to recognize employee responses to power. Similarly, other research highlighted the interdependent relationship, specifically between supervisors and employees, and validated the importance it has in the workplace (i.e. increasing employee efforts) (McShane & Von Glinow, 2003). Other scholars saw the value of studying power and expanded upon French and Raven's (1959) power research, explaining the psychology of individual employee resulting from supervisor influence (Farmer & Aguinis, 2005). Specifically, they examined subordinate outcomes by way of supervisor influence and concluded the supervisor-employee relationship was a powerful tool in determining employee effort. Thus, supervisor power and employee characteristic alignment showed positive outcomes.

Additional research proved the value of this supervisor-employee dyadic relationship in the workplace. For example, the greater the interdependence between supervisors and employees proved to create a stronger the dyadic relationship between the two (i.e. increasing trust, work effort) which resulted in a more significant impact on organizations and business goals (Sheu, 2014). It was also validated that supervisor-employee working collaborations had the potential to result in valuable synergies that otherwise would not be recognized (Nyaga, Lynch, Marshall, & Ambrose, 2013), further arguing for the need of additional research on specific employee characteristics to improve this dyad. Olekalns and Smith (2013) also evaluated power in dyadic relationships in workplace settings. Their study revealed the importance of power in dyads and how using it in a positive manner results in improved business opportunities, including employment negotiations (externally) or internal relationships. Employee-supervisors dyads cause employee motivation to change because of the type of power used to influence the employee (Coelho, Cunha, & Souza Meirelles, 2016).

Conclusion

Thus, in various types of business settings, demonstrating power (or influence) modifies the receiver's behavior positively or negatively (Kovach, 2020). Supervisors who positively influence employees are likely to produce positive outcomes. The same idea is true for supervisors who negatively use influence on employees- they are likely to produce negative outcomes. These outcomes result from the power exhibited upon the employee. Thus, employee motivation can be altered based on the type of power his or her supervisor exhibits. As studies reviewed in this manuscript reveal, the power dynamic that characterizes different workplace relationships between supervisors and employees has significant effects on work productivity and employee motivation. For example, Randolph and Kemery (2011) found employees perceived supervisor use of reward power impacted employee perceptions of empowerment but specifically, not coercive power. One important outcome of the different power dynamics in the workplace that needs further examination is employees' type and level of motivation.

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