

Power Over vs. Power With

POWER OVER

Perhaps you recall a teacher or two from your school days who required obedience above all else. *Keep quiet, stand in line, do as you're told.* Back then you didn't use the words *power over*, but you were getting an early indoctrination. Some people have *power over* drummed into them at home. Call it the "daddy knows best" or "mommy knows best" approach, where a child is deemed good if he or she complies and obeys. You may have had a boss who routinely told you what to do, who never asked for your input, who used subtle threats and fake praise to control your behavior. If so, you were at the receiving end of the *power over* model.

The *power over* model is embedded in our social systems, practices, structures, laws, traditions, norms, and habits – at home, at school, at work, in the community, in our government institutions, and elsewhere. It is so prevalent, so much a part of our daily life experience, that it often remains invisible to us. We see it like fish see water. Yes, *power over* is efficient. It maintains control. It has a certain ease of use – just quote chapter and verse from the rulebook. It strokes the ego as we see people doing what we tell them to do. But power that is exerted through this model works *regardless of skill, know-how, the rightness of a cause, or the long-term impact on people and their potential.* That's where *power over* becomes problematic and potentially dangerous.



POWER WITH

Perhaps you had a teacher in school who took a different approach. Instead of relying on rules, she showed respect. Instead of pointing out problems, she leveraged strengths. Instead of having to be in control, she guided students in co-creating their own learning experience – right down to where they sat and how they positioned their desks. By year's end, you knew your reading, writing, and arithmetic had a love of learning and a fully charged sense of possibility. Or maybe you first experienced *power with* at home. Your parents could literally lift you up and toss you around, and you loved playing around and going airborne. But they lifted you up in other ways – by valuing your ideas, taking time for conversation, trusting your judgment, and treating you like a full-fledged human being.

Maybe you have had a *power with* leader, mentor, or boss who combined a core of principles with a meaningful mission, who favored the effectiveness of co-creation over the efficiency of do-it-my-way, who saw organizations as social systems rather than machines. Maybe your current leadership fits this description. Maybe you are that leader. *Power with* defies efficient standardization. It takes time. It requires effort and improvisation. It calls for as much emotional intelligence as cognitive intelligence. It forces us to subordinate our ego to the collective good – to put service ahead of position authority. It acknowledges that we are all a part of the same system.



Quick Assessment: Power Over vs. Power With

Instructions:

1. Choose one answer (1 – “Very Strongly Disagree” to 7 – “Very Strongly Agree”) to mark your level of disagreement or agreement with each statement. Answer quickly, honestly, and go with your gut instinct. Your answer for each statement corresponds to the number of points for that statement. So, for example, “Disagree” equals 3 points, “Strongly Agree” equals 6 points, etc.
2. Total up your points from each column into one total number, then use the “Score Results” section below to begin interpreting the results and deciding how to take action.

STATEMENT	Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree	LINE TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1. There is a sense that we are all in this together, even though people have different jobs, titles, and salaries.								
2. People are treated with equal respect.								
3. As conversations unfold, people set aside their own opinions and assumptions in order to reach a deeper collective understanding.								
4. The people who do the work shape how that work is done.								
5. Information and data are widely available to everyone.								
	ALL 5 STATEMENTS TOTAL							



Score Results

5-15 DANGER ZONE: Analyze the situation to understand your group dynamics. Go beyond symptoms to uncover root causes. Use the insights to develop specific improvement steps. Select one action as the top priority. Meet regularly to check progress, share lessons, celebrate successes, and decide on new action ideas.

16-24 IMPROVEMENT NEEDED: Identify specific group dynamics or coalition practices that seem to work against equality. Then focus on the positives, sharing any examples from the past six months in which shared decision-making was practiced. Develop action steps – some that require group involvement, others that can be done individually.

25-30 MORE PROGRESS POSSIBLE: Instead of resting on your laurels, pose a few key questions: Who’s doing what to make equality a strength in your coalition? How are they making it happen? How is this helping the coalition? What can be done to achieve even more progress? ***Craft one or two action steps aimed at making a good thing better.***

31-35 OUTSTANDING: Share stories from the recent past that show “power with” in action. What factors come together to make your coalition so strong? How can these great practices be used to expand or improve other aspects of your community work?

What Now? *It’s Up to You*

EXERCISES TO PROMOTE POWER WITH IN YOUR COALITION: It doesn’t matter whether we are talking about a big organization, a lemonade stand, or something in-between – each day brings new opportunities to turn the *power with* approach into our method of choice for bringing out the best in people. To shape a great future for your coalition, uncover what has worked in the recent past. You can use the following prompts to start rich conversations with your coalition, colleagues, or community members.

PEAK SITUATION PROMPT:

Thinking back on the past six months, describe a work-related situation that truly engaged and inspired you. What unfolded? What made it so positive? Who else was involved? Get to the heart of what made it such an outstanding experience.

GREAT TEAMWORK PROMPT:

Tell a story about a time when you and your colleagues experienced an amazing level of teamwork. It can be a project, a situation, a single day, a moment – anything that stands out as a model of people working well together. Look for a story from the past six months. Describe what occurred. What was it that brought people together? What did you accomplish as a result? What did you learn from the experience?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE PROMPT:

Over the years, you have been in all sorts of situations involving the exercise of power – at work, at home, in the community, and elsewhere. Rewind your memory to find three or four experiences that truly stand out. What worked, what didn’t, and why? What might you do differently in the future based on your insights.



Concepts At-A-Glance: Power Over vs. Power With

CONCEPT CATEGORY	POWER OVER	POWER WITH
PERSPECTIVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The world is generally hostile • Scarcity: I need to get and protect my share at all costs • Mechanistic: the organization as machine • Zero-sum game • Leader as lion • Divide and conquer • Manageable pieces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The world is generally friendly • Abundance: There's enough for everyone • Humanistic: the organization as social system • Synergy: 1+1>2 • Servant leader • Strive to unite • Chaotic whole
PRIORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules • Procedures: How to do it • Compliance • Competition • Extrinsic rewards, threats, and punishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principles • Mission: Why we do it • Commitment • Co-Creation • Intrinsic motivation
ACTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bemoaning what's going wrong • Fixing blame • Dwelling on weaknesses • Hoarding and selectively handing out key information and resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling stories of what's going right • Fixing processes • Leveraging strengths • Freely sharing whatever is necessary for the greater good
RELATIONSHIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear: Instilling fear of being fearful that others will take or diminish our power • Skepticism: You'll mess this up. • Apathy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust: Trusting others and working to earn trust • Confidence: You'll do fine. • Empathy
DECISION-MAKING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusion: A small number of people are best qualified to make decisions for the majority • Group decision-making produces chaos • My way or the highway • Efficiency • Win-Lose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion: The best outcomes unfold when many people are involved in decision-making • Group decision-making fosters commitment • Multiple paths • Effectiveness • Win-Win
LEARNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are empty vessels who need to be told what to do. • A few teach, some learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People bring abundant know-how and learn best by experience. • Everyone teaches, everyone learns