How Confusion Around Power Gets in The Way of Being Powerful

As social change activists, we are very engaged with questions of power. Confronting abuse of power. Power analysis. Speaking truth to power. Organizing those without power. Building the power we need to advance our missions.

Concerns and issues around power are also very alive *inside* our own social change institutions. Sadly, the potential power and impact of many of our organizations and their leaders are weakened by internal confusion around power, authority and hierarchy.

We see at least four major sources of confusion around power:
1. **Awkward or ambivalent leaders**
2. **Lack of respect for hierarchy**
3. **Disempowerment of staff**
4. **Inappropriate use of power**

Challenge #1. Awkward Or Ambivalent Leaders

Many activists are uncomfortable owning and exercising the authority that comes with leadership. Having seen the abuses of power, many of us carry a deep-seated mistrust of power. When our life experience has been about resisting or rebelling against authority, it can be hard to make the switch to *having* power. We may identify more with feeling powerless than powerful.

When people are promoted within an organization, it's awkward to suddenly find oneself having power over one's former peers and to be treated differently by friends. We may have to wrestle with concerns that people won't like us if we're too powerful. Others of us struggle with the **imposter syndrome**: the fear that somehow we've fooled others into thinking that we're more competent than we actually are.

Out of this discomfort with power and hierarchy, our leaders too often try to deny that there are real differences in positional power. We see activist leaders using seemingly democratic or consensual processes, while masking the degree of power they actually exercise. Many of our leaders hold back from making tough or unpopular decisions, such as confronting poor performance and firing. Other leaders, also acting out of awkwardness with power, end up being too controlling or overbearing. Some leaders actually alternate periods of being too hands-off until things are a mess, then swooping in to take control.

This awkwardness or ambivalence around having power is widespread among social change leaders.

Tips and best practices for awkward or ambivalent leaders

To lead well, we need to learn to sit responsibly in the seat of authority and wield the power that is granted to us by our organization. Here are some tips that may be helpful in taking on the mantle of leadership.

1. **Remember you're in good company.**

   When we feel these kinds of discomfort and insecurities, it's easy to begin wondering if we're cut out to be a leader.

   Relax. I have trained, coached and mentored the leaders of our largest social change organizations. Be assured that every one of them has struggles with being a leader. Here's a quote from one of our country's most "powerful" national social change leaders:

   > *I know I'm the president. But inside, I don't feel like a president. I have a hard time being direct with people, telling them what I want them to do. I wish I could say I was being humble. But the truth is, I feel ambivalent about exercising my power.*

2. **Connect with your purpose**

   We usually think of ego trips as being about how *great* we are. Well… being preoccupied with your unworthiness is just another ego trip. Get out of the way. It's not about you – it's about who and what you serve.

   There is a power we can draw from when we deeply connect to the purpose that has called us to this work. In our Rockwood leadership trainings, participants actually craft a phrase or mantra of purpose, a series of words that reminds them of why they do this work. Here are some examples:

   - *I am the hopes and dreams of millions of immigrants, powerful and radiant.*
   - *With love I unleash the power of workers for justice.*
   - *I speak and act for those living creatures that have no voice.*

   Our leaders practice reflecting on their phrase before each significant act of leadership. Remembering to connect with the power of our deeper purpose helps lift us up out of our personal insecurities.

3. **Think power *with* rather than power *over***

   We sometimes hold back our power from a well-meaning but misguided belief that our being powerful somehow diminishes others. While power can indeed be wielded in ways that make others feel smaller, it is completely possible to exercise authority in a way that is respectful, inspiring and empowering of others.

   > *"As you become more powerful, so do those in relationship to you. As they become more powerful, so do you. This is power understood as relational, as power with, not over."*
   > – Ed Chambers, Roots for Radicals

4. Be comfortable with being uncomfortable

Many of us struggle to live up to some image of perfection, of being some stereotype of a "LEADER" that is unattainable – as if there was "perfect" and "worthless" and nothing between the two.

Relax. You will make mistakes. Lots of them. Many of you reading this paper have chosen missions that have no easy end in sight: ending poverty, eradicating injustice, protecting our natural environment. There will be times when people are looking to you for reassurance, for what to do next… and you have no idea what to do. And just when you start to feel comfortable with your current level of responsibility, more than likely you will take on new assignments that once again have you feeling uncertain or insecure.

Here's a tip:
> *Rather than trying to not feel uncomfortable, can you instead focus on learning to feel comfortable with feeling uncomfortable? Breathe . . .*
> *Can you actually <u>welcome</u> feeling uncomfortable?*

Given that you will likely be faced with varying degrees of discomfort so long as you choose to be a leader, learning to feel comfortable with feeling uncomfortable will be a useful practice.

5. Find support

Many, if not most, top leaders feel isolated. There are things you can't talk about with anyone. Things that you don't want to discuss with your board. Concerns you need to keep from your staff. Things that can't be discussed with colleagues. The burden of feeling like you always need to look like you know what you're doing – even when you don't. In our Rockwood trainings, one of the greatest gifts we provide for our leaders is a space where it's actually safe to let down their guard and share with others who also experience the challenges and uncertainties of leadership.

Build support for yourself. This might look like:
- Formal or informal peer coaching with a trusted colleague
- Cultivating a relationship with at least one other person in your organization with whom you can be fully transparent and mutually supportive
- Creating a formal or informal *kitchen cabinet* – a small group of trusted advisors who can serve as a sounding board and support, people outside the organization who have no vested interests other than supporting you and your leadership

6. Invest in training, coaching and mentoring

Most social change leaders have little training and too few professional development opportunities. Perhaps you were a good organizer, campaigner, lawyer or policy wonk. Then one day you got promoted. All of a sudden you're campaign director or ED, trying to figure out how to do this job on your own.

In the corporate world, senior managers usually receive formal training, assignments designed to develop new capacities, and coaching and mentoring to prepare them for larger roles. In the non-profit sector, there is little of this.

The good news is, in recent years there are increasing opportunities for help. Take advantage of them!

Engage in a career-long commitment to your personal development. Find mentors. Create space and time for reflection, new input and learning. Learning new habits of leadership excellence requires practice, and lots of it.

> *The only difference between a master musician and a beginner is*
> *that the master practices a lot more.*
>
> – Yasha Heifetz, world-famous violinist

Time and money invested in leadership development is not a luxury – it's an organizational imperative!

Challenge #2. Lack of Comfort with Hierarchy Among Staff

It's not only leaders who bring to their organizations confusion around power. Our staff often mirrors the ambivalence of leaders.

On the one hand, leaders are continually asked to give clearer direction:
> *"Just tell us what you want us to do!"*

Yet, the day you become a leader, you also become the screen on which people project their lifetime of experiences dealing with authority figures: parents, teachers, other bosses, etc. It is challenging to relate authentically across lines of authority given our experiences in a white-dominated, patriarchal culture that have left many of us with a profound mistrust of those with power.

> *"For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectations and response,*
> *old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as*
> *we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures."*
>
> – Audre Lorde

Activists who spend their days speaking truth to power and fighting against "The System" have a hard time making the switch to being respectful of authority in their own organizations. I was the former board chair of a major environmental group whose motto was, "No compromise!" Imagine trying to facilitate a room full of several hundred members trying to reach agreement, all coming from an orientation of "No compromise!"

Some staff bridle against any hierarchy and all those with power, undermining the legitimate responsibility and authority of their leaders. Younger staff, especially those with no previous organizational experience, may hold leaders and organizations to standards of philosophical/political purity that are simply not practical. Even more confusing, the same people may also give their leaders very mixed messages – alternatively wanting them to take charge, then rebelling when they do so.

When progressive leaders actually do succeed in standing strongly in their power, our collective confusion around power can lead us to tear down our own leaders.

Tips and best practices regarding resistance to hierarchy

1. Be relaxed in your authority

How we show up as leaders can either help alleviate or pour gas on the fire of our staff's confusion around power. Most human communication has to do with non-verbals: voice tone, body signal, and energy. The moods of a leader have an enormous impact on the moods of their staff due to the phenomenon of **limbic resonance**.[1*] A leader's insecurity about exerting their authority creates insecurity in their staff. When that insecurity manifests as tightness and over-control, staff tend to resist. When leaders are awkward with their power, it's like an unskilled rider with a spirited horse. The leader may try to hold the reins too tightly, and people rebel against feeling over-controlled. Or, the leader may hold the reins too loosely, and people run off in their own directions. Leaders who waffle, who deny their power or are ambivalent or unpredictable, predictably drive their staff crazy.

Own your power. Accept the responsibility of your role. It's fine to have a collaborative ethic and style, but be clear in the way you exercise power. Always let people know whether you are asking them or telling them what to do. Issues with authority tend to diminish in the presence of a relaxed and assured leader.

2. Establish clear rules about how power is exercised

Imagine a team trying to play baseball when it's not clear where the foul lines are, how many outs there are to an inning, or who the umpire is. There would be chaos. People would be continually struggling with each other about the rules rather than playing the game.

All too often people in the same organization are operating from different pictures of how power is supposed to be exercised. For example:

- The staff believe they are going to participate as full decision-makers about an issue. The ED expects merely to consult with them, hears the staff members' input, then goes off and makes a decision on their own. The staff think, *"Why bother giving input?"*

- The ED nixes the leading candidate for Major Donor fundraiser. The Director of Development is outraged, believing the hire should be her choice. The ED's position is that she has to work very closely with that position and needs veto power.

- A coalition is meeting. Some representatives have the power to make decisions on their organization's behalf. Others need to go back and consult. This was not clear to everyone, so that when "consensus" is reached, some folks feel betrayed when some member organizations refuse to accept what the coalition representatives "agreed" to.

[1*] ***Limbic resonance:*** The sharing of deep emotional states arising from the limbic system of the brain. We transmit signals that impact not only the emotions of others but such physiological functioning as hormone levels and cardiovascular functioning. This naturally occurring phenomenon is greatly magnified in the relationship of leader to followers.

When rules around distribution of power are not clear, it brings out everyone's worst. Many models of organization can work – as long as there is agreement about the rules of the game. As leaders, you must:

- Clarify job roles and responsibilities, including decision-making authority for each position in the organization.
- Clarify how responsibility and decision-making is to be distributed to the top leader, board, management team, departments, staff, members, etc.
- Create a decision matrix that clarifies, for each and every category of decision, who is to be engaged and the process to be used.
- Ensure that everyone is trained and committed to fully implementing the decision matrix.

    For help in clarifying the decision-making process in your team or organization, see our tool: *5 Pathways to Effective Decisions*

This is not about a piece of paper in a handbook but a clear and shared understanding throughout the organization and its people around power and how decisions are to be made.

3. Enforce the rules

Worse than not having rules is having rules but not following them.
It is critical that leaders model accountability to whatever processes have been established.

For example, if a decision has been delegated to others, the leader must not come back and undo or undermine the decision. Follow decision-processes explicitly and impeccably. Make sure to be transparent and keep clarifying how power is being exercised. For example:

> *The management team and I will be making the decision next week.*
> *This meeting is the time for you to give input. We will get back to you*
> *next Friday and update you on the decision that we make.*

When consulting with staff, you do not need to end up following their input. But, it is important and respectful to walk them through how you arrived at the decision. If people feel that their input is going to be ignored, they will be hesitant to contribute again.

Decision-making processes at all levels must be followed consistently in order to establish stable, dependable patterns that support mature cooperative behavior. Managers and team members must confront staff who don't play by the rules. There's work to be done, and those who can't accept and work well within the legitimate authority structure should be encouraged to find work elsewhere. Make sure in the hiring process that potential recruits understand and are comfortable with how the organization distributes power.

Challenge #3. Disempowerment Among Staff

Leaders have real power: the ability to punish and fire, the power to hold someone up to public ridicule, the power to assign or deny monetary and other rewards. It's all too easy for those with more power to forget the profound impact of this power differential on those with less power. Leaders are often unaware of the degree to which people are filtering information, saying what they think the leader wants to hear and avoiding conflict by not speaking their truths. Here is a sampling of comments from interviews at well-known progressive non-profits:

- *There's fear about saying things to senior management because it might be turned against you.*
- *No one really thinks this project makes sense, but it's not politically correct to challenge it.*
- *Everyone basically tells the ED what we think she wants to hear.*
- *People are afraid to disagree with the President.*

These feelings and behavior are widespread within institutional life.

Feelings of disempowerment may be exacerbated or caused by unskillful behavior of leaders or shortcomings in organizational culture and process. Disempowerment may also arise because of unaddressed dynamics around gender, race, class, sexual orientation and age. However, sometimes feelings of disempowerment have less to do with existing organizational deficiencies and more to do with the personal issue of lack of self-worth that so many of us carry into our work lives.

Disempowerment limits organizational performance. The potential power of our institutions is realized to the degree that we are able to unleash and align the potential energy of all of our people.

Tips and best practices regarding disempowerment among staff

1. Be attentive to the dynamics at play

Most of us like to think that we're approachable and open to feedback, so leaders are often surprised when they hear the results of confidential interviews with their staff and see the degree to which people have been filtering and withholding. We won't be unable to deal skillfully with the dynamics of disempowerment until we are willing to honestly face the real challenges of dealing with these differences in power.

Leaders may tend to get annoyed with their staff: *"Why don't they come to me directly."* Be patient!

> *"I took over as President of a consulting company, replacing a not highly trusted man with a top-down approach. I instituted an open door policy and began having staff meetings and company retreats where people were invited to share their opinions and feelings openly. I thought things were going well until some months later when my two executive assistants sat me down and informed me that staff were not saying things in the meetings that were regular topics of conversation around the proverbial water cooler. On deeper reflection, I saw that in the eyes of our mostly young female staff, I was just an older, confident Harvard-educated man, the next in a series of not very trustworthy male leaders. I talked about things like trust and caring, and asked them to say what they really thought – but*

there was no reason they should trust my words. We did get there. But, it took more than a year of consistent, credible behavior on my part and a lot of patience to create a culture of trust and respect.

2. **Lower the barriers to communication with leadership**

   There are numbers of things leaders can do to ease the barriers between themselves and those with less power. For example:

   - Listen. Really listen. A lot.
   - Be aware that your words have great power. Be careful not to respond to ideas in ways that might be seen as dismissive.
   - Be a human being. Be willing to acknowledge when you're wrong, be forthcoming about your mistakes. Don't compete to be the smartest person in the room.
   - Be kind. The Dalai Lama said, *"Be kind whenever possible… It's always possible."*
   - While respecting your needs for boundaries, make it clear and easy for people to access you when needed.
   - Use anonymous surveys where people can safely gave candid feedback.

3. **Attend to systemic issues**

   Very important! Do not view disempowerment as only an issue of individual shortcomings. What aspects of organizational structures, processes and culture may be contributing to staff feeling disempowered? What changes might support your staff in bringing more of their passion, creativity and power to the team?

   Rather than sitting in your office trying to figure out how to do this, ask your people. They know. You can't empower people. People have to do that for themselves. But as leaders, it's our job to encourage and support our people by helping to remove barriers. Some common examples include:

   - Creating clearer, more regular processes for staff to give input
   - Revising staff roles to play better to people's strengths
   - Providing greater supervisory support
   - Performing a cultural audit to assess the degree to which staff feel supported and empowered by managers

   We also want to attend proactively to issues of disenfranchisement related to social identity.

   Too many of our social change institutions continue to be male-dominated cultures in which women find it challenging to be powerful. We still have many progressive organizations that need to engage with diverse populations where the top positions are mostly held by white people. Use tools from our toolkit like *The Racial Justice Organizational Assessment* and the *LGBTQ Inclusion Assessment* to help ensure an organizational culture that supports the inclusion, dignity and power of all who work there.

Challenge #4. Inappropriate Use of Power

Sometimes, staff resistance to leadership has nothing to do with avoidance of hierarchy or disempowerment. Sometimes the problem is the behavior of their leaders.

Leaders are given power as a sacred trust to be exercised only on behalf of the organization, its stakeholders and the mission. Abuse of power is a jarring phrase, and we usually think of embezzling funds and sexual harassment. But at a more subtle level, inappropriate uses of power are not uncommon:

- Using the platform of leadership to act out personal agendas, such as need for recognition, control or feeling superior
- Allowing personal relationships to influence how people are treated in the organization
- Allowing one's own stress or frustration to come out as harshness or anger at the staff

These represent illegitimate uses of power that undermine the leader's credibility and render the staff less willing to be led.

A different but equally problematic misuse of power is when leaders, however well-intentioned, are doing a poor job that jeopardizes the success of the organization. It is very demoralizing for staff to see their best efforts undermined due to incompetent leadership.

The complaints of staff about their leaders often have merit, and their challenges to leadership may arise out of their lack of trust in the motivations or the competence of their leaders.

Tips and best practices regarding the dangers of inappropriate use of power

1. **Invest in ongoing personal development**

   It should now be clear that the role of leader is exceedingly challenging. With limited funding, competing priorities and chronic overload, social change leaders have historically considered professional development to be a luxury. It is actually a *critical* investment in ensuring that leaders are worthy of trust from the people they lead. The human foibles and shortcomings of leaders are amplified by the power of their position – for good and for ill. It is critical that we not only invest in developing the traditional skills of our position, but the emotional intelligence and personal mastery skills that research is showing to be critical competencies for contemporary leaders.

2. **Ensure checks and balances**

   It is risky to have all the power in an organization invested in one single human being. We all have our vulnerabilities and blind spots. Founders of nonprofits sometimes choose to have "friend boards" that don't provide real oversight. This leaves the entire organization at risk to the leader's behavior. It's unfair to leaders as well. Given the stresses of running an organization, when leaders are isolated with no feedback or limits, it's too easy for shortcomings to spiral out of control. The best insurance against inappropriate use of power is to have some other base of power in an organization beyond a single leader.

3. **Implement performance evaluations**

   We don't know what we don't know. So much of effective leadership has to do with our impact on others and, without feedback, it's virtually impossible to gauge this impact. It's like trying to learn how to play golf without seeing where the ball lands. It is critical that all leaders receive regular performance evaluations and that the board chair, or whoever is conducting the evaluations, give confidential interviews (or surveys) to staff. The evaluation should cover questions of culture and values as well as performance measures.

4. **Ensure protection for staff**

   One of the purposes of contracts, grievance procedures and appeals processes is to provide protection for employees against the arbitrary use of power by their leaders. There should be clear channels for staff to use when they have lost trust in the motivation or competence of their leader(s).

Conclusion

Organizations distribute power in different ways. Some have more levels of hierarchy. Some are more flattened. The problems we are exploring around power and authority in our social change organizations are not fundamentally an issue of organizational structure. There are hierarchically structured organizations where there is high trust and open communication across levels of power, people have the authority they need to perform effectively, and there is satisfying and highly functional input into decisions. Conversely, there are flat organizations and work collectives where power is exercised covertly, where people chronically feel disempowered, where power is abused, and we see ongoing breakdowns and loss of organizational performance due to issues around power and decision-making.

Too much of our precious resources and energy are drained by confusion around power. As leaders, it is our responsibility to forthrightly and effectively address the personal, behavioral and structural issues that contribute to confusion around power and to liberate and align the power in our organizations to help create a more just and sustainable society.