Power, Influence and Persuasion
Sell Your Ideas and Make Things Happen
by Harvard Business Essentials

What You Will Learn
1) What the three primary sources of power are;
2) How to gain power;
3) Why using influence and persuasion is better than using direct power;
4) How to frame an issue to influence others;
5) How to make a presentation; and
6) Why you should not manipulate others.

Recommendation
Power: In most of the world, it just isn’t what it used to be. In olden times, some crazy king would give the thumbs-down, and another wretch would lose his head. Not anymore. Today’s tyrants, bland-faced and impeccably dressed, line up for TV chat shows. They write feel-good books. They seek your acceptance and approval. Not too long ago, the typical CEO was the absolute ruler in his (or, far less often, her) commercial domain. Today, no one in the workplace has such unbridled power. In an age of consensus and collaboration, command and control are out; influence and persuasion are in. Exercising power involves the right framing, careful presentation and the strategic use of influence.

Power Behind the Throne
In the 17th century, Cardinal Richelieu was the primary adviser to King Louis XIII of France. Richelieu was known as the éminence rouge (the red eminence), due to his extraordinary ability to influence and persuade his monarch. France’s next king, Louis XIV (the “Sun King”), claimed absolute power as a divine right. But his ministers routinely influenced his decisions with abject flattery. Richelieu and the French ministers were masters at using their persuasive abilities, as well as their individual influence, to exert great power from behind the throne. This has many parallels in today’s workplace. You cannot be an effective executive unless you understand persuasion, influence and power, and know how to put these forces to work.

“Everyone...is routinely on the giving or receiving end of power, influence and persuasion – often simultaneously.”

Power Is Vital
No organization – indeed, no social system – can achieve its goals without power. What happens in the absence of power? Governments fall apart. Police forces slip into chaos. Businesses cannot function. In a democratic society, citizens never want to grant their leaders too much power. They fear its abuse. The reverse is true in the workplace. There, employees expect their supervisors to possess clout. Powerless bosses are almost always ineffective. For instance, they cannot secure the resources to achieve important goals. Inevitably, this leads to morale problems. The executive with power manifests it by...
making decisions, allocating resources and motivating employees. A position of authority does not automatically translate into power. In fact, newly appointed managers depend heavily on others, including their direct reports, bosses, peers and suppliers, to authenticate their authority. Without cooperation, power means nothing.

Managers fall into three basic types. “Affiliative managers” try to earn popularity rather than using power to get things done. “Personal power managers” seek power to accomplish their own goals. “Institutional managers,” the ideal kind, employ power to achieve the organization’s objectives. Are you this kind of manager? If not, you can use self-awareness and behavioral change to alter your style. Start by seeking a role model to emulate.

“For the manager, understanding how to obtain power and use it wisely is an essential, though seldom recognized, skill.”

Your Sources of Power
Power derives from position, relationships (who you know) and personal factors (what you know, who you are). Your position confers limited authority. The CFO cannot organize employment policy and the sales manager cannot lead procurement. Your position may put you in charge, but don’t expect others to follow like robots just because you’re the boss. This never works. Still, guard your position. Do not let others encroach upon it – and they will if you give them a chance.

Unlike positional power, “relational power” depends on your connections. You can link with other people through coalitions to increase your power. For instance, as a sales manager, you may want to create a united front (a “natural” coalition) with the product development unit to resist budget cutbacks that would kill an important new product. Or you might ally with another internal group on a crucial one-of-a-kind project (a “single-issue” coalition). Relational power depends on the people you join with to serve a common cause. Reciprocity becomes essential. You increase your relational power when you perform a valued service for your allies, putting them in your debt (as in the movie The Godfather). Be judicious regarding the relationships you enter. Make sure that the upside outweighs the downside.

You can develop “personal power” based on various facets of your experience and character, including expertise, superior accomplishments, self-confidence, charisma, novel ideas, enthusiasm, credibility and reputation.

“Power has value for the organization only when it is used to accomplish legitimate goals.”

Putting Power to Work
Use direct power judiciously. If you don’t, you will create problems among your staff. People prefer solicitation, engagement and mutual agreement over direct orders. Treat them as colleagues, not
subjects. If you don’t, they will resent you and undermine your authority. You should exert direct power during a crisis, because that is when employees want a strong leader. Overall, though, think of direct power as a battery. Use it too often and it becomes drained.

Instead of blunt power, try influence, applying power indirectly to affect other people’s behavior and attitudes. Examples include securing collaboration among departments, encouraging elevated standards and helping others support corporate objectives. Ideally, get people to do what you want while letting them feel as if they have chosen this course of action for themselves. You cannot influence others if you are impervious to influence. In the 1980s, GM’s senior executives, who were focused on routine leadership, did not heed information (that is, influence) from their reliability and quality managers, who warned that Japanese automakers were outperforming GM on quality issues that mattered to customers. GM’s bosses refused to listen. Don’t make that mistake.

Outline the limits of your influence and power. Determine how to extend your reach in strategically meaningful areas. This often goes hand in hand with increasing your power – be it personal, relational or positional. Use the “currencies” at your disposal – a plum assignment for a subordinate, technical help for a supervisor – to increase your personal punch. Sometimes, you must exert leadership without authority. Perhaps you oversee external vendors or direct a cross functional team whose members report to other managers. In such cases, your direct orders may carry no weight. Use this five-step plan to exercise authority when you do not have it:

1. **Set goals** – Your team can achieve nothing without clear objectives.
2. **Proceed systematically** – Adopt a step-by-step approach to identify your challenges and find the best way to proceed.
3. **Organize “mini-reviews”** – This is a good way to assess progress routinely.
4. **Get others engaged** – Teams work best when all the members can contribute.
5. **Supply feedback** – Recognize and thank people who do well. Make them feel important.

“Like electricity, power is invisible, but you can feel and observe its effects.”

“All new managers are surprised by how much they depend on others to get things done.”

“Pulling rank is seldom an effective use of power.”

**Projecting Influence**

Leaders can use three primary methods to influence and persuade other people:

1. **Framing** – The way you frame issues depends on the way you see (or prefer to see) them. An investment adviser sees a room full of people as potential clients. A religious zealot sees them as potential converts. How you frame ideas, problems and activities can have a substantial impact on the
way others regard them. To exert subtle influence, reframe workplace issues so that your employees see them your way.

2. Information – To exert influence, muster financial facts that support your position. Of course, your facts will have little impact if your credibility is in question. Strive to establish a reputation of absolute honesty and objectivity. Use your personal power, derived in part from these attributes, to influence others by sharing meaningful information.

3. Technical expertise – While CEOs have executive authority, most do not possess the specialized expertise to make technical decisions. Thus, your technical expertise can become an important source of power and influence. In an increasingly complex world, technical specialists’ ideas and opinions carry great weight. Use your hard-won professional knowledge to influence the decisions of others, including senior executives.

The Basics of Persuasion
In an environment where everyone pays homage to teamwork and consensus, but still questions authority, the old “General Patton-style” of executive management no longer works. Today, persuasion, not command, is what counts. Persuasion involves effective communication plus these three factors:

1. Credibility – You cannot influence others if they don’t have faith in what you say. You must be trustworthy, sincere and believable, and you must offer sound ideas.

2. Audience awareness – The most credible, engaging person cannot influence a group’s members without understanding who they are and what matters to them. Identify your audience’s primary decision makers and most respected participants (the “influencers”). Find out how receptive your audience will be to your ideas. When you speak to a group, routinely monitor the members’ body language and assess their reactions to your message. Solicit the insights and opinions of those who have experience with the group.

3. The merits of your case – Offer logical, fact-based arguments that speak to your audience’s primary concerns. Eliminate or neutralize all notable alternatives, be politically savvy and cite endorsements from respected parties.

“Position confers authority to act within a certain scope, but not beyond it.”

“For managers – those with power and those without it – persuasion is the primary means of changing behavior and affecting decisions.”

Win Their Hearts and Minds
You may embody credibility and intelligence, and understand your audience deeply. Your argument may be brilliant and rock-solid. But if you don’t communicate well, you won’t persuade anyone. You’ll know the music, but you’ll be unable to sing the song. To plan a presentation, first select your structure. Will you solve a problem, present both sides of a case, offer a cause and effect model, or provide a “motivational sequence?” Discussing a problem and solving it works with uninterested or uninformed
audiences. To present two sides of an argument, detail your opponent’s position, refute it and argue your position. This works with hostile groups. You could also explain a problem’s causes, and then show how your plan addresses each one. This persuades mixed audiences. To motivate a supportive audience, first wow them with a compelling fact, unusual statistic, telling anecdote or funny story. Segue to explaining how your plan meets their needs.

Start a formal presentation by engaging the audience. Compliment them. Refer to a previous speaker they enjoyed. Speak positively about the event. Couch your main point in a context that will be meaningful to the audience. Use your narrative to tell a story. Your argument is the meat of your presentation. Don’t overload it (and your audience) with too many facts and figures. Use transitional comments – such as, “There are five reasons to vote yes” – to keep your audience alert and engaged. Refute your opponents’ arguments. Conclude by appealing for support and approval. Never summarize at the end of your presentation.

Instead, inform audience members how they should think, feel and act. Include evidence that strongly makes your case. Spell out the benefits that will accrue for the audience when they adopt your plan. Use words that “affirm, attest and assert.” “Guaranteed,” “free,” “easy” and “proven” have special power, but only use them if they apply. Paint vivid word pictures. Use engaging metaphors, analogies and rhetorical questions. Appeal to your listeners on an emotional level, as well as an intellectual one. Expect resistance and dispel it by speaking directly to their distrust and fears. To counter your detractors and deflate your critics, refer to your opponents’ arguments early in your presentation. Use “persuasion triggers” to establish a bond with the audience, like espousing your affection for their industry or their town. People respond to authority, so establish yours subtly through proper attire, a take-charge style and other signals.

The ancient Greeks, masters of rhetoric, used triads or three-item lists, rhetorical questions and parallel sentence structure to great advantage. Do the same. At the end of your presentation, allow people to ask questions. This engages people while letting you remake your primary points, thus reinforcing important information.

“To further boost your odds of persuading those who have the power to accept or reject your proposal, tailor your arguments to fit their decision making style.”

“Credibility is a cornerstone of persuasion. Without it, your audience will dismiss your proposal.”

**Ethical Considerations**

Want to become a master persuader, known for your ethics and smart tactics? Use the win-win principle: In all transactions, make sure everyone gains. This is the ethical way. It is also the smartest way. Of course, the opposite tactic is manipulation – using your power, influence and persuasive abilities to get others to act against their best interests. This is both wrong and shortsighted. Think not? Trick people just once. When they find out what you have done (and they will), they will never trust you again.
Your ability to influence and persuade them will be gone forever. Always use your power honestly, ethically and wisely.

“In the most successful persuasive situations, people first accept the presenter’s proposal unconsciously, based on their emotional response.”

“Influence is power in a velvet glove.”

“Power, influence and persuasion can be used for both good and evil. The challenge for management is to create an organizational culture in which the good side prevails.”

About the Author
The Harvard Business Essentials series, which began in 2002, provides advice, coaching, information and guidance on business topics. Drawing on content from Harvard Business School Publishing and other sources, these guides provide a practical resource for readers in a variety of fields. To assure quality, a specialized content adviser closely reviews each volume.