

Leadership Through The Lens of Power

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“How many world leaders do you think are just completely out of their mind?”

So asked Jerry Seinfeld, the famed stand-up comic, to Barack Obama in a 2015 episode of “Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee.” This starts them off on a funny and insightful discussion about leadership and what it takes to maintain perspective in a position of high power.





Remarking on power's effect on our judgment, Seinfeld says: "Privilege is toxic, sadly ... Things that people struggle to achieve, they get to positions of power, influence, money, they can do things ... [power] has a toxic effect on their judgment."

Obama then turns the tables, and interrogates Seinfeld: "Has it happened to you?" Because, he continues, "you seem like a completely normal guy."

"But I'm putting on an act," counters the comedian, "like everyone else does for you."

It's been well-documented by [myself](#) and [others](#), how a high power role has the capacity to alter our judgment, perceptions, and behavior. In a high-ranking role, we have greater immunity from social pressures, act in a more disinhibited fashion, and tend to be more enamored with our ideas and less interested in others'. Our sense of control over events is heightened, as is our confidence in predicting (mostly) positive outcomes. We also display less empathy towards others, are less able to judge their emotions, and tend to treat them as a means to an end.

These are some of the reasons power is corrupting. But here's the thing: power doesn't only alter our judgment, it also changes how people perceive and relate to us.

Between the person in power and those in her sphere, there exists **a lens of power**: a magnifying glass that distorts perceptions, communication and relationships. The act we put on for people in power—whether conscious or not—alters our relationship to them, and hence their perception of themselves. People depend on the reflection of others to get a sense of themselves. But when a lens of power distorts this reflection, we are at risk.

How does this lens of power operate? We hold a variety of (often non-conscious) feelings and attitudes towards those in power: we may admire them, fear them, feel jealous of

their positions in society, or distrust them. We regard leaders as symbols or roles, and not just as people. We project positive and negative feelings alike onto them. And we hold them to higher—and unrealistic—expectations.

Peering through the lens of power, it's easier to judge a leader by our projections and expectations rather than by the leader's true actions. In some sense, this critical eye helps us keep those in power accountable for their words and actions, but it also distorts our understanding of leaders, causing us to either assume the worst, or, in some cases, neglect the worst.

Let's look at how this distorting effect plays out:

People see a leader as a symbol or role, and not just as an individual.

Power draws projection. Leadership is the role, and not just the person in it. Yet we often impute God-like attributes to our leaders, and they become the target of others' admiration, jealousy, and projections—both positive and negative. Thus, the leader is subject to higher, and often unrealistic, expectations.

Josef Ackermann, former CEO of Deutsche Bank, described the first time he realized he had become a role rather than an individual: right after Ackerman ascended to CEO, a colleague took him aside and told him, "From now on, you must remember that you are two people. You are the person whom you and your friends know, but you are also a symbol for something. Never confuse the two. Don't take criticism of the symbol as criticism of the person."

Obama himself also became a symbol—and he realized it early on. During the 2008 Democratic Party presidential primaries, the then-candidate told a reporter:

I had become a symbol for the next thing. So, some of it was undeserved, but what it told me was that people really were looking for something different. ... I joked with my team—and it wasn't entirely a joke, it's something I still think about—that the country was looking for a Barack Obama. Now, I'm not sure that I am Barack Obama, right? But they were looking for an idea like that.

Leaders rarely get accurate feedback

Due to fear, self-interest, bias, or a combination thereof, people may not feel free to speak honestly and candidly with leaders. The higher you travel on the organizational ladder, the further you are from what's happening on the ground. You no longer receive immediate feedback about your actions, nor do you experience the consequences of your decisions and actions as others do. It's easy to live in a bubble, surrounded by others

who have a personal stake in your powerful role: dependent on you for a promotion, or afraid of losing their livelihood. Soon, everyone in your bubble reflects back to you only what you want to hear and you lose the ability to see yourself or your decisions clearly, or to evaluate your effectiveness.

The more we distance ourselves from feedback, the more the truth is discomfoting. When we hear feedback, we minimize it, disregard it, or discredit the messenger as a trouble maker, or someone who doesn't fit in.

History is replete with leaders who surrounded themselves with sycophants, disregarded uncomfortable facts, and cherry-picked the feedback that confirmed their view. This is why it's so important for leaders—and their organizations—to get independent feedback. Living in the bubble of our power, we come to believe we can assess ourselves without bias. The Pentagon, for instance, believes the military should be in charge of investigating and prosecuting sexual assault within the military — through its own chain of command — [even though a large percentage of sexual assaults reported are committed by members of the victim's chain of command](#). Is this hubris? Or self-protection? The military is not alone: universities as well are under attack for their (mis)handling of sexual assault on campus. Whenever we believe in our capacity to assess ourselves without bias, the results can be skewed, and at worst, lead to dire results.

Leaders are subject to judgments against power and authority.

Power has a bad rap. It's the rare individual who hasn't had some negative experiences with authority. And a general mistrust of power — and those in power — is widespread. This results in skeptical, antagonistic, or even hostile attitudes and behavior towards leaders, whether deserved or not.

Consider the low voter turnout in countries where voting is not mandatory, such as the US. In [a BBC article](#) about dwindling numbers of voters during the 2016 election, one told reporters that his decision to stay home was his “way to protest the system for throwing American people overboard.”

In the workplace, this attitude results in apathy, hopelessness, and the feeling that “what I have to say doesn't matter.” This is not only personally disempowering, but achieves the paradoxical effect of creating the reality one fears: that those in power cannot be trusted. When we don't trust ourselves to engage with leaders as people, to give feedback, and contribute, our disengagement creates the set of power relations we fear.

Leaders are subject to others' grievances and grudges, past and current, which could not be aired.

When you step into a role, you inherit the leftovers from the person before you. You also

become a symbol of the organization, both its good, and also bad attributes. Sometimes this places high expectations on you to deliver, yet at other times, it involves grumbles and grievances.

As a leader, the slights, hurts, and offenses (real and perceived) that an employee suffers at the hands of organizational policy, or that a subordinate or peer has endured at the hands of others, accumulate over time and can erode others' sense of trust in leadership. People may continue to see you through the lens of the past. Feedback can be used, not just for honest evaluation, but as an opportunity for retribution.

How to Navigate The Lens of Power

So how do we manage being in a high power role? How can we stay lucid, given these consequences of being in a high power role? Here are a few ways leaders can successfully navigate the image of power they present to others:

Know you are a role, not always an individual

Simon Sinek says, "the cost of leadership is self-interest." Despite its popularity, you cannot take refuge in just being "authentic." Everything you do and say becomes a cultural norm to obey or resist. You will be unfairly criticized, your actions misinterpreted, your failures excused. It's critical to be aware of others' projections, stereotypes, and unrealistic expectations of the role, and ultimately, onto you. You cannot take criticism personally, yet paradoxically, you have to be open to all feedback, whether or not it's something you personally are responsible for.

Know how to bridge the intent–impact gap

Nowhere is the intent-impact gap wider than in relationships of asymmetrical power. When you occupy a position of power, your words and actions carry additional meaning. People will interpret, magnify, and distort everything you do and say. The key is to recognize this warped or misrepresented reflection before you inadvertently mirror it. Know that intent and impact are not the same; develop your emotional self-regulation; and become adept at reading other's feedback so you can more accurately assess the impact of your words and actions.

Know how to gain legitimacy

Legitimacy is in the eye of the beholder. Just because you have a title on your door, or a reserved parking spot, it doesn't mean you have earned your leadership credentials. Whether or not people follow you depends not on your title, but on your actions. And your legitimacy needs to be earned from each and every person you hope to lead—with every interaction. And keep in mind that legitimacy is not a one-time ticket valid for all transactions: it has to be earned anew, moment by moment, through your interactions, behavior, and communication. You need to know how to manage your impression—how

you actually come across, and not just what you intend.