

Power Play

Acquiring real clout – the kind that helps you get stuff done – requires bare-knuckle strategies.

By Jeffrey Pfeffer¹

When Laura Esserman, MD, MBA, became the director of the Carol Franc Buck Breast Care Centre at the University of California at San Francisco, in 1997, she had big plans – for both the centre and medicine more generally. She hoped to boost the institution's prominence and patient throughput by delivering integrated care in one attractive setting. Women would not have to go from place to place for the various diagnostic procedures and treatments they needed, enduring anxious, multiday delays as they waited for test results. A woman could arrive in the morning with a suspicious lump and leave at the end of the day with a treatment plan. To accelerate overall progress in treating breast cancer, Esserman wanted to increase the ease and speed of enrolling patients in clinical trials and to build an informatics system that would capture data about treatment outcomes from many sites. All of this represented a sensible strategy, and it has worked out well: The centre now sees many times more patients than when Esserman took over; a new website has led to increased and easier enrolment in clinical trials; and the Athena project, which collects data from multiple UC medical centres, is under way.

None of this was easy to accomplish. For Laura Esserman, as for all executives working in interdependent systems full of strong-willed people with their own agendas, having a plan was only the first step. Although she was the centre's director, she had little say in many personal decisions. Each of the departments she wanted to bring together had their own objectives and concerns. While she and her team were thinking about patients' outcomes and service experiences, the CFO had to worry about the budget and bond ratings. The facility was housed in a state building, so even if Esserman raised private money to refurbish it, she would have to navigate myriad approval processes and constraints. In sum, Esserman was in a position similar to that of anyone who has tried to shepherd a cross-functional project, such as a new information system or product offering, through a large organisation: She had lots of responsibility but virtually no line authority to compel anyone to do anything.

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We could soft-pedal what is needed in such situations by talking about leadership skills and emotional intelligence – but why not tell it like it is? What Laura Esserman needed was power.

Strategies don't implement themselves, of course. And not everyone in an organisation agrees about what should be done: As the aphorism goes, "Where you stand depends on where you sit." We all make decisions based on the information we have and the objectives we're pursuing, and these things vary from position to position. Many leaders in both government and the private sector have remarked on large systems' resistance to change. To succeed with her ambitious agenda, Esserman had to develop her ability to build and wield power. This proved at least as important as her considerable medical acumen.

Power is the focus of my teaching at Stanford – and not just power as a spectator sport. I aim to give my students the insights and tools that will enable them to bring about change, get things accomplished, and, not incidentally, further their careers. The learning occurs through studying powerful people, mining social science's understanding of human behaviour, and practicing. In this article, I will outline some of the most important principles involved. I urge you to use them as you seek to implement your own goals.

Make Your Peace with Power

If you're like many managers, you may already be uncomfortable with where this discussion is heading. As the organisational behaviour expert Jo Silvester writes, politics is generally regarded as the "dark side" of workplace behaviour. Researchers have described it, she notes, as "inherently divisive, stressful, and a cause of dissent and reduced performance." Some evidence supports this view. A perception that politics predominates in a workplace tends to decrease job satisfaction, morale, and commitment and increase intentions to quit.

But empirical research shows just as clearly that being politically savvy and seeking power pay off. A study by David McClelland and David Burnham examined the correlations between managers' primary motivations and their success. Some managers were motivated primarily by affiliation – they had a fundamental desire to be liked. Others were motivated by achievement – attaining goals and gaining personal recognition brought them satisfaction. Still others were interested in power – they wanted to be able to influence others. The managers in the third group were the most effective. (See "Power Is the Great Motivator," HBR January 2003.) Consider also the research of Florida State University's Gerald Ferris and his colleagues. They developed an 18 item Political Skill Inventory (PSI) and used it to evaluate school administrators and branch managers of a national financial services firm. The PSI proved to be a good predictor of success in both instances: The school administrators with high PSI scores were more likely to be considered effective leaders by

those who reported to them, and the high-scoring branch managers typically had received favourable performance reviews.

Zia Yusuf is another case in point. At the software company SAP, he built and ran the corporate consulting team – an internal strategy group – and an initiative called the “SAP customer focused ecosystem,” which linked suppliers, users, and developers. He had a successful career there even though he had no background in software or engineering, because he was skilled at what he called organisational dynamics – the ability to get things done. As Yusuf says, you need two things to succeed: substantive business knowledge, so you know *what* to do, and organisational or political skills, so you can *get* it done.

IDEA IN BRIEF:

Any new strategy worth implementing has some controversy surrounding it and someone with a counter-agenda fighting it. When push comes to shove, you need more than logic to carry the day. You need power.

Learning to wield power effectively begins with understanding the resources you control. Money is not the only one. Whatever you have – a valuable network, access to information – can be meted out or denied to gain leverage.

You can also push past obstacles through sheer relentlessness. You should avoid wasting political capital on side issues and dispense with opponents in ways that allow them to save face.

You may find such power plays and the politicians behind them unsavoury – and they can be. But you’ll have to get over your qualms if you want to bring about meaningful change.

The effective use of power is becoming increasingly important. Yes, we have flatter organisations and more cross-functional teams than we had in the past. But getting things done in a less-hierarchical system actually requires *more* influence. And as strategies become more complicated, the importance and difficulty of effective execution increase accordingly. When he ran SAP’s corporate consulting team, Zia Yusuf was able to prevail when recommending difficult strategic changes, such as reorganisations that would cause people and groups to lose power. In putting together the ecosystem function, he had to enlist cooperation across the company. How did he succeed? First, he brought in exceptionally talented people and held them to high standards. Second, he tried to defuse interpersonal tensions by focusing on data and analysis, and by ensuring that the analysis was unimpeachable. Third, he had an extraordinary ability not to become defensive or take

things personally when others disagreed with him, which further reduced the emotional temperature of interactions.

Although power skills are important, many people don't develop them. Understanding why is an important first step toward overcoming any reluctance you may have about power. (See the insert sidebar "Do you Shy Away from Power?") And you might even come to relish building and using power, as one young woman I know did. Having long disdained "playing politics," because she thought she wouldn't like it or be good at it, she agreed to give it a try in a low risk situation. She had joined a student committee that was organising the events for a weekend when admitted but undecided applicants would visit her school. She decided to see if she could take control of the committee, and she devised ways to measure her success (for example, tracking the percentage of communications that flowed through her and how often decisions went her way). To her surprise, her little experiment not only worked but caused no resentment – the other committee members were glad someone else had stepped up. By the time the applicants arrived, she was enjoying the recognition and praise she was receiving and had concluded that she liked this power stuff after all.

The Exercise of Power

What constitutes power? Simply put, the ability to have things your way. And having things your way when others' best efforts are also required, and when those others may have their own ideas about what should be done, means that you need some basic forms of leverage.

When push comes to shove, powerful people do several things to advance their agendas:

Mete out resources. Whenever you have discretionary control over resources important to others – things like money, equipment, space, and information – you can use them to build your power. (Think of it as a new golden rule: The person with the gold gets to make the rules.) You can always find opportunities to help those whose support you want. Although the quid pro quo rarely needs to be explicit, helping people out evokes reciprocity – the almost universal principle that favours must be repaid. And your ability to garner support will become self-sustaining. People want to join the side that appears to be winning.

It's important to remember that although money always provides leverage, it is not the only source of power. Access to information or influential people can be even more valuable. Consider the story of Klaus Schwab, who in the early 1970s was a Swiss-university professor with doctoral degrees in economics and engineering. He might well have confined himself to an academic career. Instead he organised what soon became the European Management Forum, a meeting of European business leaders who wanted to help their

companies respond to America's growing economic success. Observing the synergies at the meeting, he realised how valuable a global economic organisation could be. If business

Do You Shy Away From Power?

You need power to push any important agenda through. So what's been keeping you from assembling your power base? And when a situation has called for a power play, what's given you pause? If you're like many of the students and executives I've counselled, three big barriers stand in your way.

BARRIER 1: The Belief That The World Is A Just Place

The pervasiveness of the belief in a just world – social psychologists call it the “just world hypothesis” – was first described by Melvin Lerner decades ago. He argued that people want to think the world is predictable and comprehensible and therefore potentially controllable. Once they happily persuade themselves of that, they embrace the corollary: If they do a good job and behave appropriately, things will take care of themselves. And when they see behaviour they consider inappropriate or self-aggrandising or to be “pushing the envelope,” most people believe they have nothing to learn from observing it: Those engaging in such behaviour may be successful at the moment, but in the end they will be brought down. However, believing in a just world makes people less powerful in two important ways. First, it limits their willingness to learn from all situations and all people, even those they don't like or respect. Second, it anesthetises them to the need to proactively build a power base. People who believe the world is a fair place typically fail to see the land mines that can damage their careers.

BARRIER 2: The Leadership Literature

Most books by well-known executives and many lectures and courses about leadership should be stamped “Caution: This material can be hazardous to your organisational survival.” That's because many leaders touting their careers as models to be emulated gloss over the power plays they used to get to the top. The teaching on leadership is filled with prescriptions about following your inner compass, being truthful, letting your feelings show, being modest and self effacing, not behaving in bullying or abusive ways – in short, prescriptions that reflect how people with those in positions of power behaved. There is no doubt that the world would be a much better place if people were always authentic, modest, truthful, and concerned about others, instead of simply pursuing their own aims. But wishing that's how people behaved won't make it so.

BARRIER 3: Your Delicate Self-Esteem

People are often their own worst enemies, and not just in the arena of power. This is the case in part because people like to maintain a positive self-image. Paradoxically, one of the chief ways people preserve their self-esteem is by putting obstacles in their own way (if not pre-emptively surrendering). The body of research on this phenomenon, known as “self-handicapping,” is immense. But the logic is quite simple. People want to feel good about themselves and their abilities. Obviously, any experience of failure puts their self-esteem at risk. However, if they *intentionally* do things that could diminish their performance, they can view disappointing outcomes as not reflective of their true abilities. For instance, told that a test is highly diagnostic of intellectual ability, some people will choose not to study the relevant material or to practice, thereby decreasing their performance but at the same time providing an excuse that doesn’t implicate their natural ability. Similarly, if people don’t actively seek power, the fact that they don’t obtain it doesn’t have to be seen as a personal failure.

and political leaders from around the world came together to discuss pressing economic and social issues, the benefits would go far beyond the exchange of ideas: Such a gathering would constitute a one-stop resource for the media and an arena for business deals. (As one person in the organisation put it, “Contacts ultimately meant contracts.”) Thus was born the World Economic Forum, which now has more than 300 staff members who run meetings all over the world. Schwab sits at its head and has the ultimate say about who attends. If you don’t think that counts as having a powerful resource, you haven’t been to Davos.

Shape behaviour through rewards and punishments. In companies as in governments, people reward those who help them and punish those who stand in their way. Even the charming, gently and scrupulously honest John Gardner, the founder of Common Cause and a man of considerable distinction, recognised this reality. He once told me about his time as Lyndon Johnson’s secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. It was a time when HEW’s programs were being significantly expanded under the Great Society, and not everyone was pleased. Gardner told people they would be firmly within their rights to oppose his agenda. But he wanted them to know there would be consequences if they did.

Here’s an example from the corporate sector. The chair of the compensation committee at a medical device company took the CEO to task over a stagnant stock price. Sales had grown, but profit margins were lower than projected. The CEO had already been angling for a larger compensation package and, by engaging an expert negotiator as outside counsel, got the board of directors to acquiesce. With that victory, he gained the upper hand in the

confrontation over the disappointing stock price. Soon his opponent had lost the chairmanship of the committee and his seat on the board. Coincidence? Possibly. But the other board members took note nonetheless.

People who effectively wield influence make it clear that you will get rewards if you help them and problems if you don't. John Jacobs, a political reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner* and a columnist for the McClatchy newspapers told me that when, as a young reporter, he wrote a negative article about the new speaker of the state assembly, Willie Brown, he was made aware that individual reporters could be barred from the floor of the assembly – which would make their jobs much more difficult, of course. When Jacobs wrote a favourable piece, he received a gift basket. He noted that in such situations, being granted or denied access had subtle – or maybe not so subtle – effects on how he and other reporters viewed the political figures they were covering.

Advance on multiple fronts. Laura Esserman's plans met resistance in many quarters, but they never came to a halt. When faced with obstacles on one front, she shifted to another. During a period of little progress at UC San Francisco, she focused on building a scientific and clinical reputation and forging relationships at the national level, working with, for instance, the head of informatics at the National Cancer Institute. She knew she could later deploy her national visibility and ties to local advantage. She also continued her medical practice, thus adding to her cadre of loyal patients and ex-patients, some of whom had great wealth and connections. Even when most thwarted in her efforts to make systemic change, she kept advancing, one advocate at a time.

It's a long way from breast cancer in San Francisco to cricket in India, but the story of Lalit Modi also illustrates the importance of chipping away on many fronts. The son of a wealthy Indian family, Modi studied marketing at Duke. After his return home, he signed a deal with Disney to sell licensed merchandise in India. Then he came up with the idea of holding an Indian cricket tournament that would feature foreign players – part of his dream of creating a new Indian league modelled along those lines. He even managed to persuade ESPN to give the tournament airtime. However, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the wealthiest and most powerful cricket organisation in the world, opposed his plan. Rather than pound away at that immovable body, Modi pursued his agenda through every other channel available to him, building relationships, including one with Sharad Pawar, an influential Indian politician who was himself intensely interested in cricket. After a decade, Modi was able to join forces with Pawar to seize power in the BCCI and form the Indian Premier League he had envisioned.

ANOTHER REASON TO LOVE POWER

Having power can help you live a longer, healthier life. When the epidemiologist Michael Marmot first examined the mortality from heart disease among British civil servants, he noticed an interesting fact: The lower the employee's civil-service grade, the higher the age-adjusted mortality risk. Of course, many covariates could affect this result. However Marmot and his colleagues found that only about a quarter of the observed variation in death rates could be accounted for by rank-related differences in such things as smoking cholesterol, and blood pressure. Follow up studies measuring the degree of control people had over their jobs found it to be a good predictor of the incidence of and mortality from heart disease five or more years later. In fact, job control and status accounted for more of the variation in mortality from heart disease than physiological factors.

These findings shouldn't really surprise you. Not being able to control your environment produces a feeling of helplessness and stress and study after study has demonstrated that stress can harm your health. So it follows that being in a position of low power and status is literally hazardous to your health, whereas having power and the control that comes with it could prolong your life.

Make the first move. The particular way that Pawar and Modi gained control of the BCCI illustrates another point: A surprise move can catch opponents off guard and secure victory before they even know what's happening. In 2005 the BCCI's president, Ranbir Sing Mahendra – a man backed by Jagmohan Dalmiya, the former BCCI president and the power behind the scenes – was up for re-election. Modi, coming out of nowhere as a leader of the Rajashan Cricket Association, hired numerous lawyers to pursue allegations of corruption and mismanagement against Dalmiya and ran an overtly political campaign to oust Mahendra. According to sportswriter Tom Rubython, "Dalmiya could not believe the effort being put in by his opponents. He was caught totally unawares." Pawar won the election; Modi became the new vice-president and quickly procured the television rights and merchandise sponsorships that would show people that siding with him was very much in their economic interest.

This kind of dynamic plays out all the time in struggles between boards of directors and CEOs. If a CEO moves first to rid the board of his opponents, he can usually save his job. If board members organise while he is distracted by other matters or on vacation, they can often muster the votes to unseat him before he can mount a counterattack. Don't wait if you see a power struggle coming. While you hesitate, others are mobilising the support to beat you.

Co-opt antagonists. Sometimes you can win over opponents by making them part of your team or giving them a stake in the system. You might be surprised at how thoroughly you can redirect their energies. Some years ago a group of women faculty members, staffers, and students at the University of Illinois began pressuring the school because women were paid less than men in comparable jobs and with similar skills. The administration's response was brilliant: It established a Committee on the Status of Women, gave the committee some stationery, a budget, and a modest amount of office space – legitimacy and a few resources – and told it to study the facts and offer recommendations. This effectively coopted the opposition, making its members feel they were part of the university, not outsiders. As their estrangement diminished, so did the stridency of their demands; soon they were almost as concerned about the committee's budget for the following year as they were about the status of female employees on campus.

Remove rivals – nicely, if possible. Another way to deal with opponents is to show them the door gracefully. All the better if you can achieve a “strategic outplacement,” getting a rival a more attractive job somewhere else. Not only will opponents handled this way no longer be underfoot – they will also be grateful to you. When Willie Brown became the speaker of the California Assembly, after a tough battle against his fellow Democrat Howard Berman, he used this tactic. Following a decennial redistricting, he helped Berman and his two rivals in the assembly, Mel Levine and Rick Lehman, win election to the US House of Representatives. Brown's biographer James Richardson describes how Brown helped other Democratic assembly rivals win seats in the state senate. By rewarding his opponents rather than exacting retribution, Brown helped solidify his power.

Helping adversaries move to another organisation where they'll be out of your way may not be the first thing you think about doing, but it ought to be high on the list. Remember, though: It's important to let people save face. That's why boards and bosses often say nice things about those being shown the door. Money, of course also makes an exit easier. At a large human-resources consulting company that chose its leader by a vote of the partners, one partner who had built a large practice and was quite visible in the business media backed the losing candidate. The winner called the partner into his office and told him he had to leave, his value to the firm notwithstanding. To ease the pain and ensure that he would go quietly, the new head gave him enough severance that he didn't have to work for a year. If you make it easy for your opponents to depart, they will do so without a battle. If you neglect this consideration, so opponents have nothing left to lose, they will fight you on their way out, with no inhibitions or constraints.

Don't draw unnecessary fire. As you think about how to implement your strategies, you need continually ask yourself, "What would victory look like? If I could win that battle, what would I want to win to encompass?" Otherwise it's easy to lose sight of your priorities and get diverted by other battles, which can cause unnecessary problems.

Laura Esserman was pushing a large agenda and needed all the support she could get. Yet she agreed to testify unfavourably about the UCSF administration at a hearing on the ill-advised merger, subsequently unwound, between the UCSF and Stanford hospitals. (The state senator chairing the hearing was a friend of hers.) As she entered the hearing room, Mike Bishop, then the chancellor of the UCSF campus, recognised her and commented on the fact that she was testifying. Esserman now says that appearing before the panel was not her smartest move. The hospital merger was not on her critical path to change breast cancer treatment, and testifying against her own administration was hardly likely to advance her strategic goals.

When Zia Yusuf, the SAP senior executive, could see that a decision in a meeting was going against him and his group, he typically did not dig in his heels and fight. Although that could be exasperating to his team, Yusef knew what he was doing. As he says, "It is important to live to fight another day." Because he did not push too hard against his bosses or peers, he reduced the emotional tenor of meetings; and by avoiding antagonism, he often got the decisions he wanted, even if they took some time.

Being careful not to create unnecessary opposition or turmoil requires an important skill: focus. You must have a clear understanding of where you are going and the critical steps along the way. When you encounter opposition on this path, you need to react. But you'll just waste your time, and possibly acquire gratuitous problems, if you get involved with issues or individuals who are connected only peripherally to you and your agenda.

Use the personal touch. The late Jack Valenti headed the Motion Picture Association of America generally considered one of the most effective lobbying groups – for more than three decades. During the struggle over the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, to take just one example, he out-manoeuvred the high-tech industry, which favoured fewer restrictions on sharing content than the association did. The key to his success is nicely summarised in the title of a 2001 *New Yorker* profile on him: "The Personal Tough." Valenti was unfailingly polite to congressional staffers, assistants, and secretaries – the gate-keepers for legislators and the aides who drafted legislation. Instead of communicating through e-mail, he made a point of meeting with people in person or, failing that, calling them up. He returned phone calls promptly, and he was a consummate flatterer. Valenti understood well the importance

of building personal ties with those who could help him advance the movie industry's agenda.

Persist. Laura Esserman likes to talk about scientists who refused to give up in the face of setbacks, and she attributes her own success to the same dogged persistence. Those who have seen her in action describe her as a force of nature. I heard as much from Richard Blum, who is an investment banker and money manager, the former chair of the University of California's Board of Regents, and the husband of California senator Dianne Feinstein – a powerful, influential man. Seeing him at the launch of the Athena project, Esserman's data collection initiative, I asked him why he'd chosen to turn up. "I have learned that when either my wife or Laura asks me to do something, the best answer is 'Yes, dear,' he told me. "Because even if you say no, sooner or later you are going to do it anyway. You might as well save yourself the time and aggravation and agree at the beginning.

Persistence is like water eroding a rock: It wears the opposition down. And if nothing else, staying in the game keeps open the possibility that the situation will shift to your advantage. Your opponents may eventually make mistakes or take new jobs or retire. When the environment changes, so can the balance of power.

Make important relationships work – no matter what. In 1998, when Gary Loveman left a position as an untenured associate professor at Harvard Business School to become the chief operating officer of the casino company Harrah's, many insiders resented his arrival, believing others were better qualified for the job. One of those potential difficult people was the chief financial officer. Knowing how critical the CFO's knowledge and support would be, not just politically but also for meeting the objectives that resulted in Loveman's becoming CEO in 2003, Loveman made his relationship with the CFO a priority. He stopped by his office frequently, kept him informed about what he was doing and why, and involved him in decisions and meetings – in short, did everything he could to create a productive relationship. Loveman gives this advice: Once you reach a certain point in your career, you simply have to make critical relationships work. Your feelings, or other's feelings about you, don't matter. Put aside resentments, jealousies, anger, and anything else that might hinder your from getting the job done.

Make the vision compelling. It's easier to exercise power when you are aligned with a compelling, socially valuable objective. Certainly this was true for Laura Esserman. Opposing her efforts could be construed as turning one's back on breast cancer victims and their families. Rudy Crew, who wielded power as the superintendent of schools in Sacramento, Tacoma, New York City, and Miami-Dade County, invariably talked about the hundreds of thousands of children left behind by current policies and how his initiatives

would help them. Robert Moses, who exercised vast power in New York for decades, began his career as a parks commissioner in the 1920s. He learned from early political battles that, as he put it, “as long as you’re on the side of the parks, you’re on the side of the angels.”

Similarly, power struggles inside companies seldom seem to revolve around blatant self-interest. At the moment of crisis and decision, clever combatants typically invoke shareholders’ interests, as in “It would be in the shareholders’ interests to have a new CEO.” Gary Loveman often notes that no one, including himself, owns his or her position; everyone works for the shareholders – who have the right to put the most effective person in the job. Loveman is sincere, and he has certainly delivered for Harrah’s shareholders – the company’s stock rose from about \$16 a share when he arrived to about 490 a share when the company went private in one of the last major buyouts before the debt market crash. But his talk about shareholder sovereignty is also a way to frame his power in a socially acceptable, even desirable, fashion. The lesson: Place your personal objectives in a broader context that compels others to support you.

So, Welcome to the real world. It may not be the world we want, but it’s the world we have. You won’t get far, and neither will your strategic plans, if you can’t build and use power. Notwithstanding all the talk about the death of the hierarchy and the strength of peer networks, job status is still often a zero-sum game. Most organisations have only one CEO, most professional-services firms only one managing partner, most school systems only one superintendent, most countries only one prime minister or president. With more and more well-qualified people competing for each step on the organisational ladder the rivalry is intense; and as the number of management positions shrinks, it will become also more so.

Some of the people competing for advancement or standing in the way of your organisation’s agenda will bend the rules of fair play or ignore them entirely. Don’t bother complaining about this or wishing things were different. Part of your job is to know how to prevail in the political battles you will face. You will triumph if you understand the principles of power – and if you are willing to use them.

THE EXERCISE OF POWER	
1	Mete out resources
2	Shape behaviour through rewards and punishments
3	Advance on multiple fronts
4	Make the first move
5	Co-opt antagonists
6	Remove rivals – nicely, if possible
7	Don't draw unnecessary fire
8	Use the personal touch
9	Persist
10	Make important relationships work – no matter what
11	Make the vision compelling

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