



THE CHALLENGE OF POWER

Jeffrey Pfeffer

If you want power to be used for good, more good people need to have power.

—A quote attributed to me.

I regularly suffer a form of what might be called intellectual whiplash. On the one hand, people—even a good friend and insightful editor—tell me my ideas about power don't fit the prevailing zeitgeist with its emphasis on collaboration, being nice, and enacting politically correct behavior. On the other hand, I get emails like the one from an individual enrolled in my online class on power. That person told me and his classmates that he learned that performance is not enough. Rather, he now knew he had to ask people in power in his company for what he wanted and needed to advance his career and achieve his job objectives and to flatter higher-ups; to believe in himself and act and speak with power; to build a network and support system; and, when confronting opposition and conflict, to be smart in how and when to fight his battles. And oh, by the way, he would miss my final live session because his network-building and "get noticed" efforts had resulted in his being on the corporate plane with two C-level officers to make an international market visit at the same time as the session.

So, what to believe about power? How to act—what to do?

I have written three books on power, four if you count a prequel that confronts leadership aphorisms that are mostly untrue and unhelpful, like recommendations to be modest, authentic, and truthful. My last two books on power have done reasonably well, being used in classes literally worldwide. I never thought I'd write another, but I recently decided it was time to write a fourth. Why now?

People—even a good friend and insightful editor—tell me my ideas about power don't fit the prevailing zeitgeist with its emphasis on collaboration, being nice, and enacting politically correct behavior.

First, I have continued my efforts to convey material on organizational power and politics ever more effectively. I have the privilege of doing so for some of the most talented people in the world, both online and in person. This activity has deepened my insights about how to simplify, clarify, and articulate more clearly the ideas behind rules of power—how and why people can take actions that, very practically and often quickly, will alter their career trajectories and their lives. Students have shown me how learning the rules of power and their application can have profoundly positive and immediate effects.

None of this is rocket science, although all of it is consistent with social science evidence—and all too infrequently implemented. The research evidence also suggests the rules of power are quite general and hold across cultures. Because of the positive effects of this material, I thought I should share my expanding capability to teach about organizational power and, more broadly, my most recent insights about helping people on their path to power.

THE MAGIC NUMBER SEVEN

After observing my former students as well as political and business leaders (particularly successful ones), and reviewing the relevant social science, I concluded that there were basically seven rules of power. Organizing lessons about power into these seven fundamental rules is an effective way to teach people what they need to do to have more influence and success. Seven turns out to be a good number of rules. In 1956, George Miller wrote an influential article arguing that “the unaided observer is severely limited in the amount of information he can receive, process, and remember,” with seven elements or ideas, plus or minus two, constituting most people’s capacity. A more recent analysis of Miller’s argument noted that “the number 7 occurs in many aspects of life, from the seven wonders of the world to the seven seas and seven deadly sins.” Further research has consistently confirmed the validity and robustness of Miller’s original insight about cognitive limitations once one gets much beyond seven items.

Fortunately, my ideas about the building and use of power can be effectively captured in seven rules.

The seven rules are:

1. Get out of your own way.
2. Break the rules.
3. Appear powerful.
4. Build a powerful brand.
5. Network relentlessly.
6. Use your power.
7. Success excuses almost everything you may have done to acquire power.

I believe the seventh rule to be one of the more important, as it can cause people to act rather than worry needlessly about consequences.

EXPLAINING THE CURRENT LEADERSHIP LANDSCAPE

The second factor that changed my mind was the observable reality of contemporary political and business leaders, including but certainly not limited to people like Donald Trump, Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Meg Whitman, Carly Fiorina, and Elon Musk, that I find people do not understand. Many people consider these individuals and their

behaviors anomalies, but fail to recognize that as they exemplify the rules of power, these leaders offer important lessons about contemporary—yes, contemporary, not ancient—successful leadership behavior.

Trump surely follows the seven rules of power I outline in the book. In fact I originally intended to write about the leadership lessons of Trump. I decided against it because he is such a polarizing figure that people find it hard to objectively watch what he does and evaluate it outside the context of Trump himself. However, in thinking about why Trump has been so unexpectedly successful in politics and other domains, I developed insights into not only the social science foundations that help explain his success, but also the behavior and outcomes achieved by many other corporate leaders and politicians in the United States and elsewhere.

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Because people do not understand the behavioral realities of power, they are continually surprised by both what happens and the effectiveness of actions that seemingly violate conventional wisdom about leadership—mostly because much of this wisdom is largely untethered from research on the social psychology of human behavior. Sometimes the surprise is accompanied by unanticipated career setbacks that arise because people are unprepared for the realities of social life.

My hope is that the new book will help people better understand the everyday dynamics and political truths of organizations of all types, public and private. My explicit goal, stated in my Paths to Power course outline, is to provide people with the knowledge that, if implemented, can help them never have to leave a job involuntarily. Although I have not achieved that goal, as I still see too many people being ousted, the goal remains relevant and important. Teaching people how to put the seven rules of power into practice can help them achieve that objective.

POWER IS NOT A “DARK” ART; IT’S THE KEY TO SUCCESS

My third motivation for writing the book: all too frequently I encounter people, either by email or in my courses, who initially express resistance, skepticism, discomfort, challenges, and similar feelings with the ideas I teach. Not because they doubt the ideas’ existence in the world or maybe even their validity founded on social science research or what they observe. To use the word of one recent email correspondent, they find the principles and research findings “depressing”—or, quoting my friend and colleague Bob Sutton, “dark.” Consequently, people eschew opportunities to make things happen and accelerate their careers as effectively as they might.

I figured that one way to fight these perceptions was to provide people seven rules that, if they used them, would make them more powerful. Once people had more power, they would be much less depressed and experience the world as less dark, because they would be considerably more effective at getting things done as they navigated that world. They would also be physically and mentally healthier, because research shows that health is related to job control and one's position in the social hierarchy, and happier, because power is associated with increased happiness.

HAVE THE PRINCIPLES—THE RULES—OF POWER CHANGED?

Fourth, I wanted to address directly the frequent narrative that today everything is different—fundamentally changed by new values, new generations (and their own new values), and new technologies, particularly social media—and therefore old ideas about power and influence are no longer relevant. That argument is why it is not surprising that people feel ambivalent about my class and writings, given the current attitude in business schools and other programs in leadership and administration. Power—and possibly even more so, organizational (or maybe all) politics—is on the outs.

Many books and research studies that are ostensibly about power are fundamentally ambivalent about embracing techniques to make people more powerful. Many commentaries on power, while optimistic and uplifting and often quite popular, are, in their Panglossian views of human behavior and the social world, remarkably untethered from the empirical realities of social life. By neglecting or actively rejecting the fundamental, enduring realities of power and human behavior, such commentators' earnest and well-meaning attempts to make things better—and different—are almost certainly doomed to

fail, just as attempting to build a rocket without adhering to the laws of physics and thermodynamics is unlikely to succeed. Here are a few of the many examples of writings on power that I find disconnected from the data about actual power in the world.

Moses Naim wrote *The End of Power* about how powerful people in powerful roles are experiencing greater limits on their power. Naim notes how many people with fancy titles had confided in him about the perceived (or claimed) gaps between the power others attributed to them and both what they could get done and their own self-expressed perceptions of their power. When Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook fame launched a book club, he named this book his first selection.

I trust you appreciate the irony. As I write this, Zuckerberg is recentralizing his control over Facebook, and of course Facebook, like many of its Silicon Valley peers, has a supermajority voting structure that assures, as New York Times technology columnist Kara Swisher has aptly noted, that Zuckerberg cannot be fired regardless of what he does. Some people may face the end of power or limits on their power, but certainly not Zuckerberg; a lot fewer people have tenuous power than claim to.

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In this same book, which I often hear about as an example of how theories and realities of power have fundamentally changed, Naim asks what globalization was doing to economic concentration. The presumption was that the globalization of business—and therefore, competition—would disperse economic power. He asked that question in 2013. By now the answer is clear, and it is not what many expected. Not only in the US but around the world, antitrust authorities are girding for battle because globalization has increased the concentration of power and wealth, particularly in technology multinationals but in other industries as well, such as telecommunications and even retail (perhaps you have heard of Amazon?). Following the 2008–2009 financial crisis, banks that were criticized as being too big to fail got—bigger. The story of nonexistent antitrust enforcement and increasing concentration of economic power is one often empirically told.

Then there are Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms, authors of *New Power*. Their thesis is that power wasn't ending, but that power and its bases and use were being fundamentally transformed by things like the internet, social media, and new communication modalities. The result of this social and technological change was to be greater democratization, a word they use often, as the ideas of new power would make power less concentrated and available to more people. Their basic argument, expressed by numerous others, was that the ability of many individuals to readily acquire a communications platform (think blogs and accounts on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) and to easily access the world's information (think Google) would lead to a proliferation of innovation and social movements. Much like the oft-discussed but ultimately unsuccessful Arab Spring, there would be, to take a phrase from the 1960s, more power to the people, including those lacking formal positions of power.

Unfortunately, reality intruded, and the most successful users of the new communication methods and social media platforms turned out to be those who already held political and economic power. According to one Philippines-based observer of the media scene, “Power is consolidating power” almost everywhere in the world, as independent news groups are eliminated, enabling the voice “with the loudest megaphone” to shape reality. *The Economist* Intelligence Unit, which since 2006 has compiled a democracy index, noted that “democracy is in retreat . . . The global score of 5.44 out of ten is the lowest recorded since the index began.” Or maybe you prefer the Human Freedom Index, published by the conservative Cato Institute since 2008. Since that time, overall freedom in the world has decreased, with 61 countries increasing their ratings and 79 decreasing.

To take some examples of the consolidation of power from the political realm, in China, Xi Jinping has officially made himself ruler for life, as, in effect, has Russia’s Vladimir Putin. Authoritarian rule is on the rise in numerous other European and Asian countries, including Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and the Philippines. Hong Kong’s special status has mostly eroded with China increasingly circumscribing its rights. In the United States, Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016 first by effectively harnessing “new power communication modalities” such as Facebook, then—according to the fact checkers at the Washington Post—by telling numerous falsehoods, with the Republican Party ultimately falling in line behind him. Although he (barely) lost reelection in 2020, Trump received the second most votes in the history of presidential elections, exceeding his 2016 tally.

In short, power is not ending, nor are many of its manifestations new. To effectively lead in a world that has not changed as much as many think or expect, people need to understand the basic principles—the rules—of power.

USING ANALYSIS AND DATA TO CREATE A MORE POWERFUL YOU

Maybe these facts and many like them are “depressing” or “dark.” But to reprise the quote with which I opened this chapter, if power is to be used for good, more good people need power. And if they are going to get that power, they need to understand the well-established social science verities that will permit them to succeed in a world where power has neither disappeared, nor become less concentrated, nor changed in its determinants and strategies. Simply put, people need to embrace the rules of power, not run from them. My job is not to make you happy or tell you stories that uplift your spirits. All the same, I consider myself not a cynic but a pragmatist and a realist.

Since 1979, I have taught as a full professor at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Business. My course on power in organizations is one of the most popular electives, not because of my charm or charisma and certainly not because the material fits the prevailing ethos. It has succeeded because, as one student put it, “your class actually helps us understand the world we continually encounter,” and does so in a way that makes many people demonstrably more effective and successful. The school’s motto is “Change lives, change organizations, change the world.” Change requires power. If change were going to happen without power and influence, it would have already.

If power is to be used for good, more good people need power.

The first step to making change is to get yourself (and your allies) into positions of leverage so that your efforts have disproportionate effects in accomplishing things. If you want happy talk, this is not the place for you.

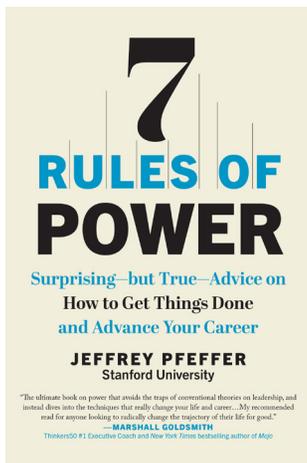
My reading material reflects this mindset. Among the books sitting on my desk are one titled *How to Be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*, which won the Samuel Johnson Prize; *Cheaters Always Win: The Story of America*, and *Cheating*, by my late Stanford law school colleague Deborah Rhode. All of them are worth reading for their deep understanding of the realities of history and human behavior. Their message: life is not always fair, even though people “cling to the idea that people generally get what they deserve.” People are seduced by and attracted to narcissists and despots and wind up voting for or working for them, frequently with bad outcomes. Honesty is not automatic or inevitable, but needs institutional structures and sanctions—unfortunately, often missing—to organize social life and reduce cheating and deception. You get the point.

Sociologist Murray Edelman wrote several books on political language. One has a line that I particularly appreciate. Paraphrased, it goes: it is often the case in politics that one side gets the rhetoric, the other the reality. Despite all the talk about the changes in power dynamics, new power, the end of power, and so forth, much as magicians wave their hands so you aren't as likely to see their tricks, people are diverted from the fundamental understandings that can make them more successful and effective. If you read my new book and follow its advice, you will not be one of those people.

I offer one other recommendation. When you hear people—leaders, academics, “gurus” (a term I detest)—provide advice and tell their stories, do a modicum of due diligence. You possess access, through online databases and other sources, to a wealth of information. Go online and see how many lawsuits have been filed against these people, what various websites say about their leadership styles. Better yet, track down those who have worked with and for these wonderful leaders and teachers, and talk to them about the realities of their organizations and behavior. Or seek out stories journalists have written about them. Simply put, engage in some critical thinking and investigate. You will soon see that, to paraphrase Shakespeare with the line “Methinks the lady doth protest too much” from Hamlet, often the people who most forcefully advocate authenticity and transparency are the least likely to possess those qualities. No, you don’t need to believe me and the welter of social science evidence I will provide about the rules of power. **You can believe your own eyes—as long as you bother to keep your eyes open.** 📖



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey Pfeffer is the Thomas D. Dee II Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Graduate School of Business, Stanford University. Dr. Pfeffer received his BS and MS degrees from Carnegie-Mellon University and his PhD from Stanford. He began his career at the business school at the University of Illinois and then taught for six years at the University of California, Berkeley. Pfeffer has been a visiting professor at the Harvard Business School, Singapore Management University, London Business School, Copenhagen Business School, and for the past 14 years a visitor at IESE in Barcelona. , Dr. Pfeffer has won the Richard D. Irwin Award presented by the Academy of Management for scholarly contributions to management and numerous awards for his articles and books. He is in the Thinkers 50 Hall of Fame and has been listed as one of the “Most Influential HR International Thinkers” by HR Magazine. In November, 2011, he was presented with an honorary doctorate degree from Tilburg University in The Netherlands.

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