



The Politics of Hope Newsletter

*“Helping Ordinary Citizens Become
Extraordinary Public Leaders”*



Force or Power—Which Way do You Lead?

By Donna Zajonc
November 2008

Power has become a dirty word for many leaders. Most of us cringe at what could go wrong if power is misused---corruption, abuse, domination, exploitation or control. Consequently, we may under-develop our personal power and fall back on utilizing “position” power that comes from our title or office.

In public life, especially elected or high level public positions, significant power accompanies your title or the position you may hold. Our relationship with power in public life is a complex dance of wanting power and pushing it away at the same time.

If we are unclear about our personal power---how to use it or develop it---we may settle for utilizing the *force* that accompanies our position or title. **Force may get things done in the short run while undermining the development of our personal power and success as a leader in the long run.**

Force is generally defined as “to pressure or cause against resistance or an unwilling effort.” Because force automatically creates counter-force, its effect is limited. Force always moves against something and will create an opposite and equal reaction.

Dr. David Hawkins in his book *Power vs Force: The Hidden Determinants of Human Behavior* states it this way:

“Force creates counterforce; its effect is to polarize rather than to unify. Polarization always implies conflict; its cost therefore, is always high. Because force incites polarization, it inevitably produces a win/lose dichotomy and because somebody always loses, enemies are created.”

Force makes demands and requires loyalty while zapping the energy out of individuals and the organization. Leaders don’t often see the counter force. After we have exerted force to get what we want, co-workers or citizens may go away mad and we may learn about it from a conversation in the hallway or parking lot with fellow workers. This “silent” counter-force can be a very destructive resistance. What we can’t see or feel we won’t be able to work with.

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Power is defined in a similar way as force: “the ability to act or produce an effect.” However, *personal and mature power* takes on an entirely new dimension. This type of power is about creating meaning and standing still, rather than moving against.

We all know of leaders who display a strong sense of personal power. They are the wise ones whom others seek out for their advice or perspective. Those with a strong sense of personal power do not need to force others to act. They inspire and draw others toward their vision. The clarity of who they are and what they believe stands sturdy and tall.

In a March, 2004 interview with a reporter from the *Chicago Sun-Times*, then State Senator Barack Obama shared his perspective on personal power. This interview was before his legendary speech to the 2004 Democratic Convention and sudden fame.

“The biggest challenge, I think, is always maintaining your moral compass. Those are the conversations I'm having internally. I'm measuring my actions against that inner voice that for me at least is audible, is active, it tells me where I think I'm on track and where I think I'm off track. The most powerful political moments for me come when I feel like my actions are aligned with a certain truth. I can feel it. When I'm talking to a group and I'm saying something truthful, I can feel a power that comes out of those statements that is different than when I'm just being glib or clever.”

I know of no other statement that better describes the sense of highly developed personal power. As President-Elect Obama states in this quote, he is energized by his innate sense of personal power that arises from being in alignment with a deeper truth. He has very successfully transferred his strong sense of personal power into words and speeches that inspire millions.

Developing our personal power is essential in today's complex world, a multitude of interest groups and limited resources. **How do we learn to develop our personal power? My best recommendation is trial and error, a strong desire to cultivate your personal power and learn from your missteps.**

This charming story illustrates the point:

After a long, hard climb up the mountain, the spiritual seekers finally found themselves in front of the great teacher. Bowing deeply, they asked the question that had been burning inside them for so long: “How do we become wise?”

There was a long pause until the teacher emerged from meditation. Finally the reply came:

“Good choices.”

“But teacher, how do we make good choices?”



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“From experience,” responded the wise one.

“And how do we get experience?”

“Bad choices,” smiled the teacher.

Consider these steps to help you learn from your “bad choices” and thus develop your personal power.

1. Recall the last time you “forced” an answer or action. How did you feel afterwards?
2. What was the situation or context that created this “forced” action?
3. What consequences of “counter-forces” occurred?
4. Next time a similar situation arises, prepare ahead of time to make a different choice.
5. For example, experiment with saying “I don’t know” or asking others for their input before you jump in with a forced response.
6. The next step is to genuinely listen and feel your personal power grow, knowing you have a choice about how you respond.

Force derived from your position power can be an easier way to exert influence on others rather than developing your own sense of personal power. You may get tasks done quickly because others will follow your orders. Developing your personal power may take longer to nurture and often follows a bumpy road of bad choices. Learning to become a leader with a strong sense of personal power is worth the effort and wait!

Comments?

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