



A WEEK IN *Learning*

ARTICLE

WHAT'S POWER GOT TO DO WITH IT? A CALL TO ACTION FOR ALL LEADERS!

Anton Ray, Vice President, Leadership, Learning & Community Support

I recently had a chance to hear someone speak on the topic of power. It reminded me of the impact that power has on our daily lives. As the oldest sibling, I have a certain amount of power and have used it to sway the thinking of my parents, especially as they age. As a leader, I have a certain amount of power to make decisions; I balance it with my leader who has more power than I do. As a parent, I have power over our teenage son, even though he tests the limits of my power...and patience.



Why Power Matters

In today's environment we all wish we had more power to affect what is happening around us. Life is messy, confusing, difficult, and it can be frustrating. It can feel even more challenging when we do not have access to power. When that happens, we respond, as humans do, in a variety of ways. However, not all of them productive. As leaders, we are granted a certain amount of power by virtue of our title and our place in the organization.

"As leaders, you are uniquely situated with power and authority to help those around you."

- Anton Ray

Additionally, we have the opportunity to gain more power by sharing our knowledge and experiences with those around us which helps us build stronger relationships, and develop a loyal group of followers.

The Essential Question...

Here is the question I want you to think about in this article: What about the people we lead? What power do they have, and why does it matter?

Consider this: our Vision is built on the notion that we can someday, somehow, end poverty through the power of work. End poverty? This is a one heck of a goal! What does it even mean to end poverty? While this article won't attempt to answer that question, it will attempt to frame it in a simple way.

The Power of Work

One way of thinking about ending poverty through the power of work is to accept that the power of work means that you have the power to:

- Agree to provide your labor to another party in exchange for money
- Choose how you will spend that earned money
- Decide if the exchange agreement (labor for money) is worthwhile
- Take steps to find a better exchange agreement, if you choose to, in order to earn more money

This idea is at the heart of our Mission and it is one I strongly believe in. However, it gets more complicated when you recognize that you can have "power through work" and still feel powerless.

Powerlessness

Powerlessness is the absence of power and it can show up in many ways such as when:

- You are getting ready for work and your child is sick and cannot go to school
- You are driving to work and the car breaks down
- You get to work and you are sent home early because donations are down
- You get home from work and realize you don't have enough to eat
- You open the mail and see that your rent is going up
- Your babysitter tells you he can no longer watch your child
- You receive a written warning from your leader
- You want to find a better paying job but you don't have the skills for the jobs that you want

These examples of powerlessness are common and happen all too frequently. It can become a cycle that feels inescapable, and when your team member is experiencing these or other forms of powerlessness, here is what you might see...

What Powerlessness Looks Like

- Confusion/helpless behaviors
- Asking a lot of questions
- Sympathy searching
- Approval seeking through flattery or favor
- Anger, shouting, shows
- Claiming authority/demanding
- Physical violence
- Unusual/unpredictable or chaotic behaviors

As leaders, we cannot, nor should we, accept or overlook some of these behaviors. Additionally, we should not feel obligated to solve all the ways in which our team members experience powerlessness.

However, I challenge you to recognize that when your team members show up and are experiencing the effects of powerlessness, to put yourselves in their shoes.

I believe that people are inherently good. Life's challenges, circumstances and choices often cause us to feel powerless. When we don't have power, we experience and express the feeling of powerlessness in various ways. When you see this, recognize that the expression(s) you are seeing may be the result of some form of powerlessness and try on the following behaviors:

- Practice empathy – identify the emotion(s) that the team member is experiencing.
- Extend grace – be understanding, reasonable and consider giving a chance to the team member.
- Offer support – provide the tools, resources, and work environment that is empowering.
- Follow up – check in on your team member and show them you care.

In closing, I leave you with the following reminder that our Mission and Vision challenges us to empower the people around us. As leaders, you are uniquely situated with power and authority to help those around you. Use your power wisely.

Mission: Empowering Individuals, Strengthening Families, and Building Stronger Communities

Vision: Ending Poverty Through the Power of Work

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