
Why Sharing Power Is Critical to Build Future Leaders



By , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Marketing

A personal sense of power stems from accumulating short episodes of power, not from a magic wand.

Many studies on the psychology of hierarchy have shown that being in a state of high power – that is, feeling that one has control over resources such as time or money – can yield significant social advantages like greater optimism, persuasive abilities and, eventually, even land you a **job**.

While stable personal traits or characteristics – such as wealth – play a role in shaping feelings of power, a growing body of evidence suggests that power is also a state. As a result, momentary changes in social situations can help build feelings of power. This perspective raises the exciting possibility that people can actively strengthen their “power muscles” through active preparation.

For instance, a simple “power tool” that consists of thinking back to a time when one felt powerful is linked to better performances in job interviews, presentations or exams. Such episodic priming often involves thinking back at how we felt when we spoke out in an important meeting and got the boss to buy in to an idea right then. Others might look back to when they

delivered a knockout presentation and got a standing ovation or successfully led their soccer team. Or perhaps it was simply getting a commendation for a project at school.

Merely remembering a past episode of power was shown to significantly transform thinking, feeling and behaviours across social situations. In a [previous article](#), I explained my study in which prospective MBA students who wrote about a time they had power before a business school admission interview were significantly more likely to be accepted by judges than those who hadn't. Another group that had to write about a time they lacked power had an even lower chance of being accepted than those who hadn't been asked to recall anything.

Given the potential implications of such simple interventions, we next turned to understanding when and why they may indeed “build feelings of power”. Our latest work, [“Ease of retrieval moderates the effects of power: Implications for the replicability of power recall effects”](#), published in *Social Cognition*, with Joris Lammers, Derek Rucker and Adam Galinsky, reveals that an important moderator of the effect of recalling a power episode lies in people's ability to recall these memories.

Ease of recall and power building

A large body of work initiated by [Norbert Schwarz](#) and colleagues shows that people often use the perceived ease or difficulty with which something comes to mind as a cue guiding their thinking about their own or others' behaviour.

Given that episodes of power and powerlessness naturally vary across individuals, we assessed whether the ease with which power episodes come to mind affects the effectiveness of the power manipulation – and beyond, change people's behaviour. We tested this proposition across a series of experiments in which we systematically 1) asked people to remember an episode of power or powerlessness 2) manipulated or measured ease of recall and 3) measured people's response towards well-known consequences of power such as greater confidence or greater likelihood to disobey orders.

In a series of experiments in which participants were either given a high or low power position and then answered questions, we found that a sense of high power makes participants more confident and able to stand up for themselves, hold on to resources or even act selfishly, going against the

greater good for their own gain.

For instance, one experiment was a scenario in which the participants' landlords asked them to move out as soon as possible. This was a test of disobedience, demonstrating an independent mindset. Those who feel power are independent and freely demonstrate their abilities to raise concerns that may oppose a group. Many social psychology experiments find high-power individuals are much more likely to speak out when they disagree, and are more likely to take action in a situation where taking or not taking an action has the same outcome. There is an inherent momentum brought about by power. In our experiment, the participants in the high power condition were more likely to be disobedient and stay longer in the rental, when they could easily retrieve a memory of power.

Current power may influence ease of recall

A first consequence of our findings is that ease of recall seems a critical moderator when the exercise of asking to remember a time one felt powerful produces feelings of power. The difficulty in remembering an episode may either be chronic or situational. For instance, people from a low social-economic background may have chronic low power. Therefore recalling a memory of a powerful situation would be more difficult. Ease of power recall may also be based on situations. For example, students before an exam or job candidates are temporarily made to feel powerless. Thus, the effect of recalling an episode of power may depend on the chronic or situational ability of an individual to recover these episodes, with implications for both researchers and practitioners.

Leadership through power allocation

A second implication of the results is that if the ability to act powerful rests on the ease with which individuals retrieve power episodes, it may be important to design or engineer situations to encourage the frequency with which these feelings can emerge at all levels to encourage initiative and prepare future leaders. It is therefore important to dig beyond mere appearances to grant employees access to feelings of power, via knowledge, resources, autonomy and status. For the common welfare, HR specialists can build mini-power experiences throughout an organisation over time. Involving workers in participatory projects and activities, engagement and small power experiences can encourage employees to remember they are in control of their destiny and resources. Organisations need to understand that

incentives and opportunities are not only for the benefit of the firm, but also for the long-term good of employees, allowing them to build a history of their own power and fostering the emergence of new leaders.

Consider the psyche like a power battery; it needs some level of energy, some recollection of power. Without power it's very difficult to restart an engine, and it's up to organisations and their leaders to make sure the battery isn't running too low. At times, holding onto power too much may result in draining power batteries within the organisation, produce demotivation and ultimately lead to organisational failure.

Organisational instinct may be to establish authority, have a strict hierarchy and respect roles. But these can harm those who lack power. Power is a shared resource; it's like a ball tossed around – sometimes one person has power, sometimes another. Access to power is not a zero-sum game. A concentration of power doesn't always benefit the group. In fact, when many are made to feel powerless, they will bind together to gain power against the powerful.

The importance of power management

Overall, power is an extremely pervasive force that governs our behaviours and determines the difference between success and failure in a number of interpersonal contexts. As our research shows, it is not something that can simply be given or made to feel. The ability for people lower down in the organisation to feel powerful enough to carry out ambitious plans will depend on their ability to easily retrieve small but meaningful experiences of power they've accumulated throughout their journey, not through some magic wand.

David Dubois** is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at INSEAD and a Programme Director of **Leading Digital Marketing Strategy**, one of the school's executive development programmes. You can follow him on Twitter **@d1Dubois

*Follow INSEAD Knowledge on **Twitter** and **Facebook**.*

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/why-sharing-power-critical-build-future-leaders>