Power and Status: The Building Blocks of Effective Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Experimental social science research tests theories about basic elements of social processes. This research offers valuable insights for leader development and indicates that structural power and status are the building blocks of effective leadership. Power, defined as the ability to get what one wants despite resistance, and status, defined as a position in a group based on respect or esteem, both lead to influence. Status overcomes the resentment that is typically produced by the use of power. We identify approaches to gaining status and power and discuss their use by leaders. Sixty years of cumulative research on power and status in groups indicates that developing effective leadership requires the sparing use of power. To be most effective, leaders should rely on status.

Bridging the Gap: Leadership Research and its Application

Several recent statements note the divide between academic research on leadership and leadership practices (Latham, 2007). Human resource managers report being unaware or skeptical of findings from academic research on job performance (Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002). Latham (2007) points out the problematic divide of differing goals and language separating social sciences researchers and consumers of research. Nowhere is the research-practice gap wider than in the dissemination of experimental research on fundamental social processes. In this article we summarize the body of research on the elements of status and structural power, the two most widely studied concepts in group processes, and draw links between those literatures and the practice of leadership. This research provides insights for leader development in work organizations.

At its most basic level, leadership—in the military or anywhere else—is about getting people to do things. If people are doing things they would otherwise do, there is no need for a leader. We thus define *leadership* as changing what people do in order to achieve an objective.

There are many ways to change people's behavior. All of these can be classified as either coercive means, or non-coercive influence. Influence is a willing change of attitudes or behavior to meet those of another. In order to test the social processes in groups we begin by narrowly defining fundamental concepts. This facilitates research efforts to understand the nature of those concepts irrespective of any particular context. Group processes research provides theories and standardized methods to study processes affecting influence. It does this by testing the relationships between these narrowly defining concepts in carful designed studies and experiments. These findings build cumulative knowledge. When studying power, researchers make a distinction between structural power governed by network relations, and the use of power. In a classical research on power French and Raven (1959) develop typologies of "power" based on the experiences of those against who power is used. Many of their bases of power (i.e. expert power or legitimate power) would be classified by group processes researchers as status processes rather than power. This is an important distinction because status processes involve un-coerced changes in attitudes and behaviors and so produce much different reactions than coercive power processes. Status is the honor and prestige individuals hold relative to others in their groups. Status is based on esteem or respect. Status and power both command respect however, status and power used to change others behavior produces markedly different effects on follower's perceptions. It is useful to distinguish the two when examining processes leading to influence. Group processes researchers ask how

these processes operate at their basic level across settings, as well as in conjunction with each other.

This approach to status and power differs from that of researchers attempting to capture the full complexities of concepts in all instantiations (Kelley, 1994). Power is a concept that spans multiple disciplines and countless treatments. Philosopher Bertrand Russell called power the fundamental concept of all social sciences (Russell, 1938). Group processes researchers choose narrow definitions to study concepts in settings removed from complexities that accompany concepts in natural environments. The result of this research then informs further investigation in more complex settings.

We do not suggest that other definitions of power and status are wrong. Rather, by defining them narrowly and precisely, we may carry out research on their basic natures.

In the case of changing what people do, group processes research leads to the conclusion that power and status are basic building blocks of leadership (Lovaglia & Lucas, 2005). There are many ways to get people to do things, but power and status are two major sources behavior change. Both generate influence. We define *power* as the ability to get what one wants even when others resist. *Status* is defined as a position in a group based on esteem or respect. The primary outcome of status is *influence*, a change in the attitudes or behaviors of others without threat of punishment or promise of reward. A politician leads with influence if volunteers hold her in high regard and campaign for her without clear expectations of personal reward. Some of the ways that power translates into influence are through perceptions of increased competence associated with favorable outcomes in resource accumulation (Williams, Troyer, & Lovaglia, 2005), or the ability to reward or punish individuals. According to Ridgeway (1982) status leads to influence through the perception by group members that high status people have the group's interests at heart (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). Recent group processes research on power and status in networks has also shown that status can alter the power of positions in groups (Thye, 2000).

We do not suggest that other definitions of power and status are wrong. Rather, by defining them narrowly and precisely, we may carry out research on their basic natures. This strategy has produced knowledge growth and insight into how people gain power and status as well as outcomes of their use. Power and status are fundamental ways to change behavior; understanding how to get and how to use them is essential for developing effective leadership.

How to Gain Power

For sociologists, power results from a position in social structure. Although skill, talent, and charisma usually play a role in attaining power, the power itself rests in a structural position. After decades of research on power in networks, social psychologists now identify that power primarily stems from the ability to control resources and exclude others from resources they desire (Lovaglia, 1999). Teachers control grades that matter to students, judges control outcomes for parties in legal cases, and in the military, commanders have tremendous authority over their subordinates. Power in this sense is relational, based on connections between people. People may deny others their expertise or knowledge. However, these individuals risk losing out on future interactions, especially if the actor they deny resources has alternatives. When we think of expertise and knowledge as aspects of status, we can predict that acting in this manner will decrease influence by building resentment.

In each of the examples above power rests in the position, not the person. If a supervisor leaves his job and is replaced by someone new, the replacement has the same positional power. Power stays with the position rather than being attached to the person. It is only an aspect of a position an organization or networks. This is what we mean when we say that power results from a position in a social structure.

People comply with powerful people because they fear the consequences of non compliance or value the rewards available from the power holder. How does one get power? Research on power in networks shows how it can be done. The key is to control resources that others value. Thus, a first step in attaining power is to identify important resources. The next step is to control their distribution. If you can exclude others from desired resources, you will have power. The power of controlling valued resources can be seen in human resources departments that exert control beyond what their positions in corporate hierarchies would indicate. They control resources that are important to people.

Power comes with many advantages, so competition for power within the branches of service is typically intense. Identifying resources and seeking their control is easier said than done. There are, however, effective approaches to gaining power beyond directly going after positions in the military hierarchy that control resources.

One way to sidestep the intense competition for power is to create a new resource that people don't yet know they want (Pfeffer, 1992). Engineers, for example, can design improvements in processes, the nuanced workings of which only they understand. The engineers' knowledge of the improved process represents control of a valuable resource that they can use to gain power. This power gain results from a change in the preferences of actors within the social structure, much as French and Raven might have predicted. However, even given more highly valued resources, the power of a network position is still influenced by social structure. The explanatory power of group processes research has allowed sociologists to untangle power and status in order to understand how they work conjointly, and how status may lead to structural power.

We define power as the ability to get what one wants even when others resist. Status is defined as a position in a group based on esteem or respect.

How to Gain Status

Status is a position in a group based on respect. Research on groups shows that people quickly rank themselves and each other into status hierarchies (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). Early small groups research found that some people talk more in groups, are evaluated more highly, and have more influence over decisions. Further research found that distinguishing characteristics between actors predicted who would behave in these ways. Being a member of high status group in society results in greater influence within other groups. Research on status in groups demonstrates that status hierarchies emerge from often unconscious expectations people develop for the performances of themselves and others in groups or organizations (Berger & Webster, 2006). Those expected to perform at higher levels have higher status in groups. Note that *expectations* of superior performance, not performance itself, produce higher initial status.

Some characteristics act as status markers in society. Gender is one example. People in many societies tend to expect higher performances from men than from women, even on seemingly gender neutral tasks like leadership (Lucas, 2003). Other status characteristics include education, attractiveness, and race. Where people stand on these characteristics activates expectations producing status hierarchies in groups. Those expected to perform at a higher level are accorded higher positions in the group's status order.

Status hierarchies in groups will sometimes defy expectations based on the status characteristics of group members. If a white male consistently performs at a level lower than other members of the group, his status suffers. However, status hierarchies tend to be resistant to change for two reasons. First, the processes that produce status hierarchies are primarily non-conscious (Webster & Driskell, (1978). Second, status hierarchies once established tend to be self-reinforcing. As a result high-status group members are consistently afforded more positive performance evaluations. Low-status group members receive lower evaluations because expectations for their likely contributions are lower (Lucas, 2003). These forces make status hierarchies stable.

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Some status characteristics (such as gender and race) are out of our control; others can be changed. One way to gain status is to change your standing on status characteristics within your control. Education brings status; increasing your education credentials leads to influence beyond job-related benefits of the acquired knowledge (Bunderson, 2003). For example, the career value of an MBA degree over that of a bachelor's degree is enormous relative to the two-year investment required to complete it (Davies & Cline, 2005). Appearance is another important status characteristic. More attractive people are expected to be more competent than less attractive people (Umberson & Hughes, 1987). The burgeoning cosmetic surgery industry likely owes much of its success to the status implications of appearances. Similarly, the military uniform is a form of clothing with a particular symbolism and a long history and tradition that connotes a formal status rather than individuality. The uniform reflects order and discipline, and calls for subordination by displaying a variety of insignia, including badges that indicate rank and emphasize the hierarchical structure of the armed forces. It also calls for respect and symbolizes status in the eyes of comrades, civilians, and the enemy. The more rank a member of the armed forces has alters expectations for his or her performance in groups, ultimately affecting how much influence the wearer can wield (Fisek, Berger, & Norman, (1987).

One method toward gaining status, then, is to move to more valued categories of status characteristics. Other routes lay in self-presentation. Although status hierarchies tend to be stable, they do change. One way to gain status in groups is to perform competently. In the military many groups do not interact for long periods of time for group members to get a good sense of the relative competence levels of its members due to high personnel turnover. Moreover, even in organizational groups that meet over long periods of time, status hierarchies tend to reflect the status characteristics of group members (Cohen & Zhou, 1991). This is because of the self-fulfilling nature of status orders described above. Nevertheless, competence does matter, and performing more competently in groups will enhance your status.

Research has identified another effective strategy for increasing influence in groups (Ridgeway, 1982). People in groups typically assume that high-status group members are more oriented toward group interests than low-status group members. This is one reason why high-status persons tend to be leaders in groups—we assume that leaders have the interests of the group in mind. Research shows that a group-motivation self-presentation strategy increases status (Shackelford, Wood, & Worchel, 1996). You can increase your status in a group by making clear that your actions are carried out with the interests of the group in mind, focused on the group's objectives, and in the interest of group members. These behaviors will increase your influence in the group.

Using Power or Status to Gain the Other

Power and status usually vary together. Many jobs, such as senior military commanders, are high in power and status. Other jobs are high in one but not the other. Police officers have more power than status. High school teachers have more status than power (Rogalin, Soboroff, & Lovaglia, 2007). The strategic use of both power and status can be used to gain the other.

For sociologists, the use of power has two primary outcomes: (1) those with power tend to accumulate valued resources, and (2) those without power resent those who use power (Willer, Lovaglia, & Markovsky, 1997). Because power use creates resentment, and because status is a position based on esteem or respect, it is difficult to use power to gain status. But it can be done. There are at least three ways that power can translate to status, and they result from the fact that those with power accumulate resources.

1. The foundation of status differences are the expectations that people have for the competence of each group member. The resources that come with power result from a position in a structure rather than personal ability. Nevertheless, if we see one person accumulating more resources than others, we tend to assume that that person is more competent than those who don't accumulate as many resources. Thus, one way power translates to status is that people assume those using power are competent because they see the powerful person accumulating valued resources.

2. Another way that power can be used to gain status is to use the resources that come with power to essentially purchase status. Al Capone became the most powerful person in Chicago largely through ruthlessness. Once powerful, however, Capone was generous with the proceeds of his criminal activities, giving to schools and organizing one of Chicago's first soup kitchens. These activities led to Capone not only being the most feared person in Chicago, but also beloved in many Chicago neighborhoods. In the same way, Pablo Escobar, the notorious Columbian drug lord, gained status in his community despite being responsible for the deaths of scores of Columbian citizens. He purchased his status by using proceeds from his drug operation to do things such as build community soccer stadiums. Members of his community rewarded these actions with respect.

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3. A third way that power can translate to status is through strategic image control. Research shows that powerful people are presumed by others to be self-interested and greedy (Lovaglia, Willer, & Troyer, 2003). When powerful people practice strategic humility and philanthropy, they counter negative expectations and enhance their status with others who admire their perceived restraint and compassion Powerful people who exercise restraint are lauded as "having their feet on the ground." Bill Gates, for example, enhances his status by conspicuously applying resources to philanthropic causes. It may not be coincidence, however, that Gates's philanthropic activities increased dramatically at the same time as European anti-trust legislation against Microsoft.

Although power can be used to gain status, it is easier to accumulate power after you have status. Power is a natural outgrowth of status. The principle antecedent of status is expectations for competence. Status leads to power in part because selections to powerful positions are typically made based on perceptions of competence. Powerful leadership positions in organizations are filled with people who were

perceived as most competent by making those hiring decisions. In other words, those who are highest in status (who may or may not truly be most competent) are typically rewarded with powerful positions.

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Status may lead to power because we value resources held by high-status others (Thye, 2000). Those higher in status are held in higher esteem, and people will trade relatively more of their own resources for fewer of a high-status person's resources. Time is a resource we all value, and lower-status people will wait longer (i.e., trade more of their time) for high-status others. In the same way, people will trade money for the autograph of high-status celebrities; giving a resource they likely value a great deal for a resource relatively insignificant to the celebrity. Higher status people can trade on status to accumulate more resources with less effort. Power, then, naturally grows out of status.

Leading with Power and Status

Power use creates resentment. This is true whether people are threatened with punishment for undesirable behavior or promised rewards for desirable behavior. Using both rewards and punishments compel people to do things they wouldn't do if the rewards or punishments weren't in place. Using power to lead is also inefficient. It requires a great deal of energy on the part of the leader to always use rewards and punishments to compel behavior. If leaders only initiate action through the use of power, then followers will stop carrying out leader's desires when incentives are removed.

Leading with status has significant benefits. People do what a high-status leader wants because they hold her in respect. The influence of high-status leaders make people *want* to perform actions they would not otherwise perform. Moreover, influence (the principle outcome of status) can lead followers to carry out positive actions that the leader herself may not have imagined. This is because while power works at changing behavior, status changes behavior through attitudes. High-status leaders change the attitudes of followers who then carry out behaviors that the leader desires or that followers perceive will benefit the leader.

An appealing conclusion that one might draw from this discussion is that effective leaders don't use power. Or as Admiral William Crowe put it when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "You cannot run a unit just by giving orders and having a Uniform Code of Military Justice behind you" (Tsouras, 1992). However, leadership positions usually require leaders to use power—teachers grade students and judges decide legal matters. That leaders sometimes use their power is especially true for military leaders. A military commander may require a subordinate to conduct physical exercises as corrective training to the point of utter exhaustion. In combat, a commander may order a subordinate officer to assault a fortified enemy position in the face of heavy resistance. In either situation, the subordinate often has little choice but to accept his orders as a matter of position.

Research has found that the most effective leaders use power least (Rodriquez-Bailon, Moya, & Yzerbyt, 2000). Effective leaders use their power only when necessary, and actively manage the resentment produced by the use of power. Although leading with power can be easier in the short term, the benefits of leading with status multiply over time. This is because leading with status does not bring with it the resentment produced by the use of power (Willer, Lovaglia, & Markovsky, 1997). While those who use power risk losing it, those who lead with status usually gain more.

Effective leaders use their power only when necessary, and actively manage the resentment produced by the use of power.

An effective approach to leadership is to avoid the use of power when possible and instead lead with status. The result is that status, and in turn power, grows. After George Washington became the commander of the Continental Army, his troops won an important battle in Boston against the British. Washington might have led the troops into Boston as a signal of his newfound power. Instead, Washington had the generals in charge during the battle lead the troops into the city (McCullough, 2005). He quietly arrived in the city the following day. Such an approach required Washington to be confident he would get credit for the accomplishments of the army even if he didn't claim them. This confidence certainly grew out of his status. The strategy also required long-range thinking about his status among the troops. The result of his actions in Boston increased his status among the troops and ultimately his power.

Practical Implications

Effective leadership requires having power and status. It then requires their effective use. Good leaders use power sparingly, and only when necessary. They rely on the benefits of the high status that both accompanies and produces influence.

Research on small groups outlined above indicates a number of ways to gain power and status. Power rests in being able to exclude others from resources they desire, and acquiring power begins with the control of resources that others value. One way to circumvent the intense competition for powerful positions is to create a new resource that people will value. Status can be increased by moving to more valued categories of status characteristics such as education or by performing competently. A particularly effective way to gain status, and in turn to lead, is to present your behaviors as being carried out with the interests of the group in mind. Give credit to others and focus on the benefits to the group.

Thinking in terms of status requires leaders to think beyond power, but status together with power produces effective leadership, increasing the likelihood of access to future leadership positions. Conspicuously taking action for the benefit of the group, exercising power with discretion and restraint, and giving credit to others can be difficult. Such actions may present immediate threats to one's power. As in the case of President Washington, however, being willing to trade power for status enhances both power and status, the foundational building blocks of effective leadership.

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