**EXPAND YOUR POWER: An invitation to reflection**

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*Power over*

Most of us, when we hear or use the word 'power', think about 'power over': the power that an individual or organisation has over others. That type of 'power' exists in a limited quantity: If you have most of it, I only have a bit; previously I had a lot but now you have taken most of it away from me.

'Power over' is emotionally charged: Some who have it get quite intoxicated by the thrill of it, while those who don't have it tend to resent the situation. Because 'power over' exists as a limited quantity, those who have it must exclude others, while those who want more of it enter into 'power struggles' to get a bigger share. In those power struggles, one may try to 'overpower' the other.

'Power over' can be visible, but also invisible and even hidden. We see it visibly manifested in who gives the orders and makes the decisions. But those who set the agenda of what can be talked about and what not, and who can be present at and be heard at the decision-table and who not, are not always only those with the formal authority.

'Power over' can also become internalised in the image we develop of ourselves and our place in the world: those who have 'power over' can develop quite an inflated idea of themselves, while those who don't have much of this type of power can live with an intrinsic sense of inferiority. When superiority and inferiority are well internalised, inequality does not get challenged so the cost of maintaining it is lower.

*Rank as power*

The issue of power is always present, within families, within and between larger social groups, between segments of society and between countries. And between any two individuals who meet. Sometimes we are conscious of the power we have, and how that affects our relationships. On other occasions, we may not be.

We can intentionally exercise rank to establish our dominance. Doctors, lawyers, priests, white men, wealthy people or organisations often do so, although a bit less easily today than in the past. Wealthy people still fire their lawyers more easily than less wealthy ones. Well-educated patients more easily change doctor than less educated ones.

But we may also be unconscious of our rank: Men in a male-dominated society may not fully realise how pervasively this affects all social interactions. People with a lighter skin colour in a mainstream culture that is attentive to skin colour, may not appreciate how attentive those with darker skin colour always are to signals about superiority and inferiority. Those who are self-confident tend to underestimate what it feels like to live with fragile self-confidence. Even if we want to treat people as

equals, our non-verbal communications may send signals that reveal our rank: a tone of voice, a choice of words, what we express surprise about, what anger from someone else we are willing to accept.

### Power is purpose-neutral

Power over is often misused and even abused, but it need not be so. Parents have power over their children (as do teachers, or at least they used to). They can exercise it purely transactionally as an alternation of punishments and rewards. But they can also use it transformationally, to teach children about necessary boundaries, instil values and healthy self-discipline. Power is purpose-neutral: it can be used to do good, broader good, or it can be used to serve only the interests of those who have it even if it harms many others.

### Soft power and hard power

'Hard power' we recognise easily. It is the ability to reward or punish, even with violence if required. The exercise of hard power requires a use of energy that is polluting and wasteful. New energy supply is needed on a daily basis. 'Soft power' is the ability to influence, through persuasion or attraction. We are swayed by someone's compelling argument, even though the person does not have hard power. We willingly follow the lead of a person, a group, a society, because we are attracted to their shine, because we see them as success models to aspire to or at least be associated with. Foreign policies of different countries use different mixes of soft and hard power. 'Soft power' can be another strategy used by those who also have 'hard power' to establish or maintain dominance and inequality at lesser cost. But it is also available to those who have less hard power, to achieve greater convergence around a shared purpose and  alignment around the pathway to get there.

### Sources of power

Power can come from might: the ability to threaten or use violence. It can come from a formal position of authority, that can punish or reward. But also from social status (status of the family you were born into, the school you went to, the colour of your skin, the titles you put on your business card etc.) wealth, connections, familiarity with the language spoken, familiarity with the discourse specific to a certain topic. We tend to be impressed by those who speak more eloquently than we do, irrespective of the accuracy, authenticity or wisdom of what they say. Being a good speaker can already earn a certain power. Power can also come from education and expertise or the (exclusive) possession of critical information. Confidence is another important source of power. It will be much boosted by access to one or more of the abovementioned sources of power. But can also be present in someone without access to any of those, drawing on deep inner self-esteem.

'Power over' is a reality. But there are other types of power, well worth doing more with.

### Power to

When we think about the power to do something it still feels like power is finite, but it is less intrinsically adversarial. I may not have the power to put this heavy object onto the top shelf of the cupboard, or to climb to the summit of that peak. But here the issue is the relationship between my current strength and a goal I may seek to achieve, not my competition with someone else. Of course, my power to achieve something can still be related to an unequal division of power: I don't have the power to make any significant changes in this organisation, only a few others do. That is an unequal division of power I can observe, but it doesn't necessarily mean I am in competition with those who have more of it.

*Power with*

Considering 'power with' creates a different atmosphere. From the friction and negative energy of 'power over', we now can feel the positive energy of our combined strengths, to achieve something that each of us individually could not. We may not bring equal amounts of power to the table, but that is less important than what becomes possible when we act together.

*Shifting or sharing power*

If we stop a moment to consider these views on power, then we realise that '*shifting power'* derives more from an assumption of power as a quality in limited supply, where the one who has more of it can decide (or be forced to) give some of it to the one who has less of it. It's like having two glasses, one three quarters full of water and the other containing only one quarter and pouring water from the full one into the empty one. '*Sharing power'* is more about combining or spreading power, with no loss for anyone or even overall gain. Here we take our two glasses and pour the contents together into a third glass that is now entirely full. By sharing or combining our power, we can put the heavy load onto the top shelf, or even effect some significant change in our organisation or society.

*Power within*

This power is a deep source of strength, within individuals and sometimes groups, not dependent on others and always with us, even if at times we have difficulty reaching it. It is grounded in a fundamental personal dignity, and healthy self-esteem and self-confidence. It is anchored in deeply held positive values, that remind us of what is really important in life and keep us authentic. It provides the nutrients that allow us to face and live through difficult situations and be 'resilient'. It is green energy, renewable. It can be shaken by 'power over' but is hard to destroy. Strongest when acquired in the course of our early upbringing, it can be developed and strengthened also later in life, with practice.

*Old power and new power?*

'Old power', it is said, relies on hoarding: you protect your control over resources, assets, technological innovations, information. It is all about power over. It was well suited to the industrial age of production with its hierarchical organisations and extreme division of labour. The only thing that mattered is what you achieve. But it is no longer suited to the digital economy, where secrets are hard to keep, and your innovation today is copied by someone else tomorrow. The information age with its connectivity doesn't reward silo behaviour and bypasses hierarchies. It encourages openness, collaboration, sharing, inclusion and participation: power with. Exercising influence has more impact than giving orders.

Many more people today want to exercise agency and participate. The once powerless now have access to much more information, new opportunities to express their views and to create new content that can become wildly popular. Someone with little hard power can now reveal information (or spread rumours) that undermines the reputation (and hence power) of those with a lot of it. Now as important as *what* you achieve, is *how* you achieve it.

That new power is also purpose-neutral: it too can be used for the greater good, or to serve the interests of a few at the expense of those of the many.

Old power, as we can see in the world today, is trying to control new power, channel it to serve its own interest. But as those stratagems are now more quickly revealed, they too get circumvented and contested.

***Invitation to reflection***

How is power present in your work environment?
How is power present in your family? In your wider social circle?
What power do you have, where does it come from?
What power of yours are you conscious of, which less so?
How do you use the power you have?
What purpose do you use it for?
What becomes possible, now that you are more conscious of power dynamics in yourself and your environment?

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