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Leadership & Motivation: Lessons from Prison – Part III / Power Motivation

By: Frank Petrock, Ph.D.

The first article in this series on understanding motivation established that the four intrinsic motivational goals of affiliation, power, achievement and security energize and direct our behavior in all the things we do at home and at work. The second article explored in more depth the Affiliation motivational goal, which is the need to be appreciated and drives our behavior.

In this edition of the Insight Newsletter we'll examine the motivational goal of Power and how it energizes our behavior. [Click here to read Part One — Motivation](#) or here to read [Part Two — Affiliation Motivation](#)

As I mentioned in a previous article, I was at one time a warden of a maximum-security prison Readjustment Unit in the early days of my career. Our job was to take those inmates from the main prison that were difficult to manage and return them back to the prison's main population better adjusted — so-to-speak. It was a rare opportunity to learn some fundamental lessons about human motivation, especially power.

An inmate named Jim was an example of the type of characters we worked day-to-day, 365 days a year. He was admitted to the Unit because he had cut another inmates throat with a razor blade. I asked him why he did this. He said, "Because he stole my cookies!" I said, "Jim, what the heck would you had done if he had done something really wrong?" Jim replied, "Ah man, you don't get it. When someone wrongs you in a little way you got to do something bodacious in return. No one don't bother you no more after that."

As with Jim, asserting and maintaining one's dominance, one's position of power, was an all-consuming endeavor for inmates and, I must say for my staff and me.

Power Motivational Goals

For people in a more normal environment strong power goals motivate the need for empowerment, control of others, authority, status, freedom and independence. Power-oriented people are concerned about having influence and making an impact on others and the world around them. They have an urge to change things and to be seen as significant in the larger scheme of things.

Power-oriented people, when operating in a positive mode, want to believe that if they perform well the need for control, significance and influence will be satisfied. They want their good performance to result in less micro managing from their bosses, having the freedom to set their own priorities, and determine their own way of doing things. And, if they believe outstanding performance results in being promoted to higher levels of influence and authority in

management, they'll become diligent, hard working employees with outstanding track records of success.

People motivated by power disdain the status quo. They promote change, take risks and tend to be entrepreneurial. High power oriented people have what is called a "high impact belief system", which means that no matter how impossible the situation or difficult the problem seems, they believe they will have an impact and prevail. The higher the power motivation is, the higher the impact belief.

My favorite anecdote about power motivation and high impact belief is about Lee Iacocca and the once failing Chrysler Corporation. As far as everyone was concerned in 1977, Chrysler was doomed. As a result, the company could not find a willing and able person to take over as CEO. Everyone believed that the company could not be saved.

Lucky for Chrysler and for Iacocca, Henry Ford II had recently removed Iacocca as heir apparent to running the Ford Motor Company. Iacocca took the job at Chrysler where everyone shunned it.

Now, being removed as heir apparent at Ford did not mean he lost his salary, benefits and other financial perks. These were all still in place. But, as a power oriented person having lost his position of high influence, he must have felt he had lost the most important thing in his life. It would be as devastating as a high affiliation oriented person losing all his or her friends.

Taking over the reins of the supposedly ruined Chrysler Corporation was just the type of high risk, bet it all type of challenge that a high power oriented person relishes. Mr. Iacocca possessed both the automotive related experience and the high impact belief needed to take on the daunting task of turning Chrysler around, which he succeeded in doing with much panache and becoming a legend in his own time.

In general, high power goals in people might be expressed through the following behaviors:

- Being more results oriented than people oriented
- Being decisive and acting quickly
- Seeking positions of leadership or influence
- Influencing others to perform tasks
- Training or instructing others
- Collecting prestige objects as marks of status
- Being high-risk takers
- Using information as a source of control
- Giving advice, even if it is unsolicited
- Being highly competitive and driving themselves and others hard
- Advocating practical or pragmatic solutions to problems
- Challenging the status quo

When power is the dominant motive, you can bring out the person's best efforts by:

- Inviting him or her to share in establishing the goals, tasks, and strategies for change
- Assigning project leadership decision-making authority
- Increasing their decision-making authority
- Granting additional visibility through symbols of power: title, office, car, insignia, privileges, money, or another form of organization-wide recognition
- Allowing identification with others of high status
- Decreasing the degree of close supervision as performance effectiveness increases
- Increasing degree of close supervision when performance effectiveness decreases
- Allowing the person to take on a leadership position outside the organization

- Inspiring the person by providing work on a great cause, important product, or projects highly valued by the organization
- Allowing them to champion major organizational change

The Negative Side of Power

There is, as there are for the goals of affiliation, achievement and security, a negative side to power motivation. People strongly motivated by power may be perceived as unimaginative, insensitive and overbearing. They can become so results oriented that they show little concern for the welfare of other people. They may also take excessive risks, charging head long into action without adequate preparation and assessment of potential negative consequences.

The most devastating negative aspect of power motivation can be summed up in the age old phrase of power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. When power motivation turns people to the dark side, so to speak, they move from positive socialized use of power, which is using power to benefit others, to the negative personalized use of power. These people become so enamored with their own self-importance and sense of invulnerability. As a result, they use the power of their personality and/or the power of their position in the company for their own personal advantage and self-aggrandizement, at the expense of others and the company.

In recent years there have been many examples of the dark side of power motivation causing some very unacceptable behavior on the part of people in positions of trust in government and corporations. The negative impact of these people ranges from what might be seen as petty selling of influence to wrecking entire companies and devastating the lives of thousands of people. Hearing about these events should cause you to wonder how many lives, kingdoms, governments, countries, and companies have been ruined in the course of human history because of the potential corrupting nature of power motivation.

In summary, the goal of power can be a tremendous energizer or motivator of our behavior. It is often called the great motivator. Therefore, power and its use is an essential part of our human experience. Despite the selective headlines about corrupt executives and elected officials, I'd like to think that power and the desire to have an impact more often than not motivates behavior that leads to the greater good of self and others. Most importantly, power seems to be the core motivator for people aspiring to positions of leadership and eventually becoming effective leaders. Click here [Power Article II](#) to read more about leadership and power.

The next Insight Newsletter will focus on Achievement Motivation.

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