THE POWER CIRCLE EXERCISE

Schultz, Marian
The University of West Florida
mschultz@uwf.edu

ABSTRACT

The focus of this exercise is the situational impact of power and how individuals in an organization interpret it. The 'Power Circle' concept is utilized to interpret an individual's power configuration in a given situation. To be totally cognizant of one's ability to act in a contingency, individuals must be aware of and utilize those particular power bases in which they are perceived as powerful. Power base may change according to the needs of the situation. Individuals must constantly be aware that changes can and will occur. Since the ability to achieve power effectiveness in a particular situation enhances one's leadership effectiveness in that given situation, possessing the knowledge of one's perceived power base would prove to be beneficial. This exercise allows one to evaluate one's own perception of his or her power base and how it relates to the perceptions of others.

The concept of power is defined as the ability to influence individuals to behave in a preferred manner.

Power is a constantly changing, situational entity, which is tridimensional in perspective. The essence of leadership must integrate the concept of power and its subsequent implementation. As indicated in a previous discussion (Schultz, 1992), leadership is a non-entity without power, that is, power alone is a generic term that acquires significance only when someone assumes a leadership role to manipulate, change or provide a sense of direction for the behavior of others. Power, therefore, becomes actualized when it functions in a collective environment (Schultz, 1992). Peters and Waterman (1982) suggested that effective leadership is a purposeful activity where leaders adapt their priorities to match constantly changing demands within the organization. Mueller (1980) stated that determination of leader characteristics and their subsequent interaction with followers as well as with the environment requires an understanding of the leader and follower values, judgments, behavioral patterns, personality and vision. If effective leadership results from a conscious well-thought-out effort, it follows that the use of power must also be intentional.
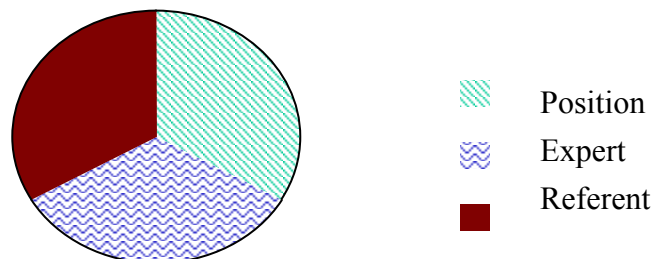
Figure 1. **The Power Circle Depicting Equal Degrees of Position, Referent and Expert Power.**
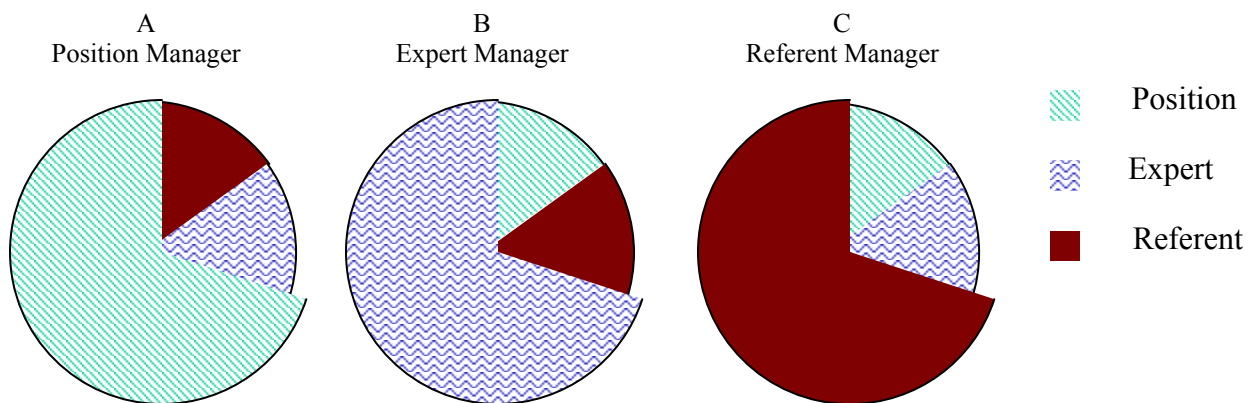
Figure 2. **The Power Circles Representing the Situational Approach to Power Cycles.**

The Power Circle

The 'Power Circle' concept depicts an individual's power configuration in a given situation. To be totally cognizant of one's ability to act in a contingency, an individual must be aware of and utilize those particular power bases in which he or she is situationally strong. Since a power base may change according to the situation, one must be constantly aware that such changes can and will occur. Additionally, the ability to achieve power effectiveness in a given situation enhances one's future power potential in similar situations (Schultz, 1985, 1988, 1992).

The Power Circle concept allows one to comprehend the power application within the situational dimension. The Power Circle represents the three basic forms of power utilized by managers within the organizational setting. It utilized three quadrants, which are identified as Referent, Position, and Expert. Each individual's overall Power Circle (Figure 1) is representative of the power base in which he or she would be most effective in a given situation. The size of each quadrant is altered according to the individual's power strength at a particular time. While the circumstances surrounding the individual would dictate and appropriate power base, only the individual would be capable of responding by adjusting the emphasis placed on each of the three power bases in his or her Power Circle (Schultz, 1992).

The diagrams in Figure 2 represent basic situations in which a single type of power is clearly dominant, and how the Power Circle would be configured to describe each. Power Circle A indicates a situation in which the manager must rely almost totally on position power to obtain results; therefore, requests are emphasized by relying upon the authority of the position. The underlying message in this interaction with subordinates is one of 'Do it my way, I'm in charge'. Circle B, on the other hand, describes a manager who is currently recognized for his or her expertise and can therefore influence behavior through expert power, minimizing the need to utilize position power. The intended message conveyed to subordinates at this stage is, 'According to my assessment…it should be done this way'. Finally, Circle C represents a manager whose ability to encourage action is accomplished under the auspices of charisma. In essence, referent power is synonymous with personal power that is acknowledgement by subordinates through compliance with his or her requests, of their admiration and respect for the 'person', e.g. 'Let's win one for the gipper' (Schultz, 1992).

Power and the Situational Dimension

To be effective one must realize that his or her Power Circle may change even while functioning within the same position. For example, a manager who is acknowledged and accepted as an expert in one area may direct subordinates from an expert base. However, when required to make decisions in another area under his jurisdiction, his power base may change. For example, the Dean of a Business School, with the primary qualifications in Accounting and who is perceived as an authority in this specialty will probably make textbook selections for the Accounting faculty from an expert power base. But when he chooses textbooks for the Computer Science Department, he would be functioning from a position power base. In this example, the individual, from his singular position as Dean, can perform a similar task (textbook selection), but function under separate power bases (Schultz, 1992).

Building on the previous example, let's hypothesize that the textbook selected for the Accounting department is subsequently determined to be totally inadequate by the majority of faculty within the department. In this case, the expert quadrant of the Dean's Power Circle would most likely decrease for future situations of similar nature. At the same time, an acceptable textbook selection for the Computer Science faculty would most likely increase his expert quadrant for future like situations (Schultz, 1992).

It is important to realize that on a daily basis, events interact with the structure of one's Power Circle. Situational studies by Fiedler (1965) and House (1971) support the concept that leaders must function within situational restrictions, and that the effective leader responds to the complexities of the total situation. Therefore, the effectiveness of a leader is a process, rather than a final product, in which one continues to be aware of the situational changes affecting his power base and respond accordingly. Effective leadership is not accidental; it is purposeful and premeditated action. Leaders adapt and adjust their priorities to match the constantly changing demands within the organization (Schultz, 1992). While the management of any organization utilizes power in some form, it is equally important that it assume responsibility for its effects. Although we consider ourselves somewhat more enlightened than earlier researchers, our opinion of power is not much different today as it has been in the past. It still remains one of the least understood variables within the leadership concept.

In the organizational context, power and leadership are intermeshed variables of the management process. The basic issue to resolve is not 'whether' power exists; or 'who' is considered effective with its use; or even how many types of power exist. Rather, the concern should be what type of power does the situation require to be productive? An awareness of both the situational characteristics and the situational dimension on which an individual's power is predicated is evidence of an effective leader. Thus, an effective leader functions primarily from one basic need – the need for survival in a changing environment.

The collective ideas of past research have helped to reinforce the concept of the Power Circle. While French and Raven (1959) utilized five bases of power, this researcher relies on 3 basic power needs: position, expert

and referent; which continuously build upon one another and dynamically intermesh. For example, the primary use of position power may be effective during the early stage. The individual at entry level who is not renowned for his expertise in the field and had not acquired a following in response to his charisma should realize that his effectiveness at this point in time would depend on his ability to apply his authority of position. It would appear senseless to plan any strategy so that the goal is failure, therefore, it would seem to follow that our power application should also be based upon one's strengths (Schultz, 1992).

Historical Perspective

The battlefield provides another example of situational impact on leadership effectiveness. The military leader in the battle zone has a great deal of position power, however, due to the circumstances, he must be cognizant of the unique characteristics of the situation and therefore develop both his referent and expert power to lend support and credibility to his position power in order to command effectively. General George Patton would be an example of an individual in this category. Due to the nature of the task involved Patton utilized the power of his position to effectively command his troops. However, he knew that his orders would be followed not only due to the power of his position but because of the respect his soldiers had for him as an expert military tactician. In a live or death situation, the soldiers must believe in the person, not just the position he occupies (Schultz, 1992).

Lee Iacocca would be an example of someone fitting the design of Circle B. While he may have access to substantial position power, Iacocca's expertise is well established and highly regarded and he therefore does not need to invoke his other power bases to obtain results. Rather than needlessly accenting either referent or legitimate power, he is conscious of the situational conditions, which enable him to influence behavior through his expertise in these areas for which he is currently held in high esteem. The essential element of his leader effectiveness is the early recognition of the appropriate power strategy in a given situation. The leader intentionally chooses the power strategy that is most beneficial at a given time.   John Kennedy was another leader who had substantial position power as President, however, he did not sacrifice his followership by the American people after the Bay of Pigs incident because he had developed and utilized his referent power, even prior to assuming the position as President of the United States. That is why, regardless of the managers basic power preferences, it is essentially to first relate to the situation, and then respond to its needs, thereby enhancing the potential effectiveness of future power styles (Schultz, 1992).

Hypothetical Perspective

To believe for the most part, that behavior responses tend to be selected solely from an individual's inclination toward achievement, affiliation or power satisfaction overlooks the initial impact of situational factors.   McClelland and Burnham (1976) go on to suggest that the strong power need in leaders must be disciplined in the best interest of the situation. Would the affiliation-oriented individual respond differently if he were confronted with a crisis situation in the early stages of the job where items such as job security, reputation or promotion could be jeopardized? Possibly, there is a point at which the individual forces himself to restructure his priorities and function from an appropriate situational level and temporarily suspend personal needs.

Regardless of personal preference for need satisfaction, the suitability of a particular type of power, no matter how well received in the past, may be questionable in lieu of current circumstances.   A new employee occupying a relatively high position within the organization and whose reliance on expert and referent power has been more than sufficient in the past, may find himself ineffective with a 'new employer' who has a managerial philosophy which strongly emphasizes position power. Until the new employee is able to acclimate himself to the emphasis of the organizationally accepted position power, he may not achieve effectiveness as a leader, especially if he continues to rely on referent and/or expert power.   Again, he may find it more appropriate, satisfying, and self-actualizing to temporarily pursue gratification through the use of a situationally appropriate power until he finds himself in a position which will allow him to incorporate alternate personal need satisfaction.

Power Exercise Conclusion

Power usage may be dictated by situational factors, rather than by the individual's long-term drive to utilize a more preferred style.   The survival need takes precedence and forces the individual to pursue a more situationally appropriate and timely need gratification.   Situational demands, human resources, job requirements, job stage, expertise and many other factors address different aspects of one's personality, and therefore demand early recognition of the impact of situational variables. Etzioni (1961) indicated that factors such as rank, control range and visibility of disciplinary action are only a few of the factors that will influence the priorities leading to the appropriate power determination.

In summary, individuals should develop an awareness of their Power Circle configuration in a given situation so that their effectiveness can be maximized. Power is a relative term that is given meaning only through recognition and understanding which then allows the individual to achieve leadership effectiveness.

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Author Note

Much of the descriptive and historical information in this paper was extracted from the journal article "Leadership and the Power Circle" published in Human Systems Management. This information was utilized in order to establish the basis for the Power Circle exercise. The information helps to validate the Power Circle Exercise, which is the focus of this paper.

Power Circle Exercise

First, evaluate yourself on how you perceive you influence individuals who work for you from a power perspective. Use the Power Circle in Figure 1 to assign a percentage to three areas: Position, Expert, and Referent, to reflect your perception of how you are viewed by your employees (See examples in Figure 1).
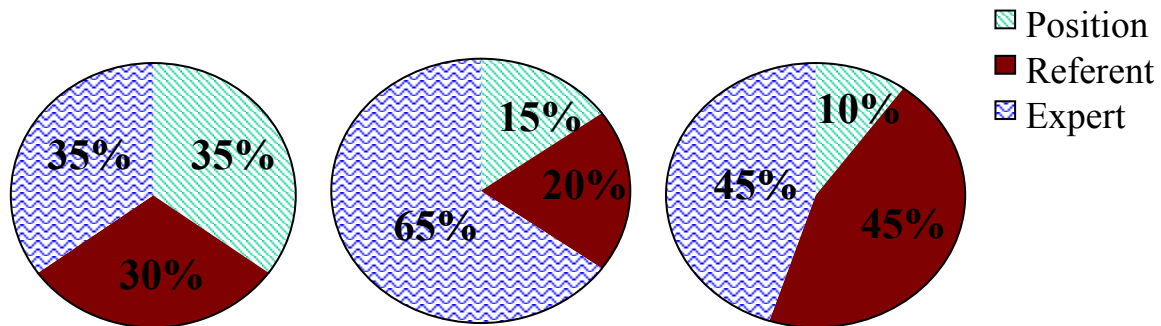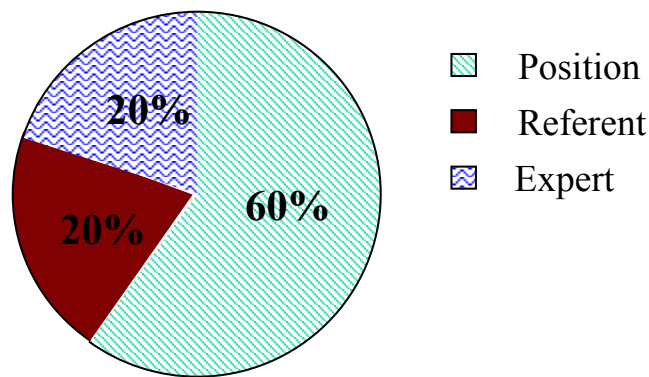

Figure 1. **Power Circle Examples.**

After you have completed this task, distribute the Power Circle Exercise forms (attached) to the individuals in the survey group. Ask them to anonymously complete the form and return it to you. Collect the forms, ensuring anonymity. Once you have all the forms, calculate the mean percentage for the Position, Expert, and Referent areas from the survey group, and compare them with yours.

- If all of the three areas are within 10% of your projected, then your perception of your power base for the group you surveyed is accurate
- If all three areas are within 20% of what you projected, you should evaluate the differences, while keeping in mind that as with any statistical measurement, the use of a limited number of responses may skew the mean.
- If there is more than a 20% difference in an area, then the assumption can be made that your perception, and that of the group, significantly differ on the perception of your power base.

Power Circle Exercise

The following exercise is being conducted to provide me with an understanding of how you perceive my power base. For this exercise, Power is defined as coming from one of three areas: the authority I have which comes from the position I hold (Position Power); my knowledge skill and expertise in an area (Expert Power), and how you perceive me (like or dislike) personally (Referent Power).

This exercise requires that you evaluate me on why you perform the tasks I direct you to accomplish. Is it because of my position, that is, you see me as an expert in the area, or because of the way you regard me personally. The exercise uses the Power Circle concept to portray this information. Here are some examples. If an individual felt that a supervisor ruled predominantly from a Position power base, a Power Circle might resemble the one shown in Figure 2.


Figure 1. **Position-Based Power Circle Example.**

If, however, the individual was perceived as coming from the Expert and Referent Power bases, it might resemble Figure 2.
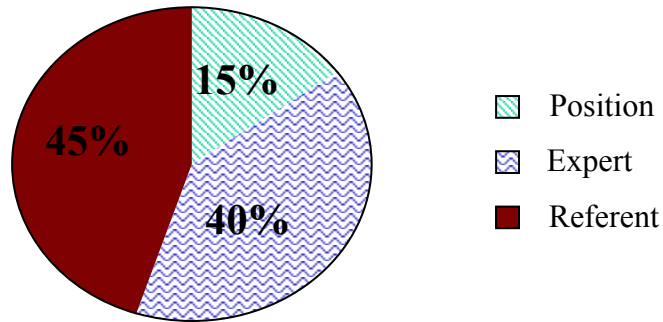
Figure 2. **Expert/Referent Power Base Example.**

Please take a moment to assess how you perceive my power base and indicate it in Figure 3. Although not necessary, any comments or discussion regarding your perceptions may be added on the reverse of this form. All information is anonymous and confidential, and is only to be used as a personal indicator to evaluate how my power is perceived.
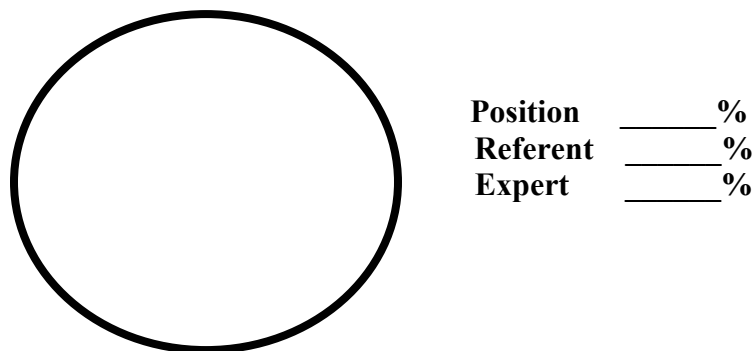
Figure 3. **Power Circle Assessment.**

Thanks very much for your assistance!