



Pesktador

# THE *POWER PARADOX*

True power requires modesty and empathy, not force and coercion, argues **Dacher Keltner**. But what people want from leaders—social intelligence—is what is damaged by the experience of power.

“IT IS MUCH SAFER TO BE FEARED than loved,” writes Niccolò Machiavelli in *The Prince*, his classic 16th-century treatise advocating manipulation and occasional cruelty as the best means to power. Almost 500 years later, Robert Greene’s national bestseller, *The 48 Laws of Power*, would have made Machiavelli’s chest swell with pride. Greene’s book, bedside reading of foreign policy analysts and hip-hop stars alike, is pure Machiavelli. Here are a few of his 48 laws:

Law 3, Conceal Your Intentions.

Law 6, Court Attention at All Costs.

Law 12, Use Selective Honesty and Generosity to Disarm Your Victims.

Law 15, Crush Your Enemy Totally.

Law 18, Keep Others in Suspended Terror.

You get the picture.

Guided by centuries of advice like Machiavelli’s and Greene’s, we tend to believe that attaining power requires force, deception, manipulation, and coercion. Indeed, we might even assume that positions of power demand this kind of conduct—that to run smoothly, society needs leaders who are willing and able to use power this way.

As seductive as these notions are, they are dead wrong. Instead, a new science of power has revealed that power is wielded most effectively when it’s used responsibly, by people who are attuned to and engaged with the needs and interests of others. Years of research suggests that empathy and social intelligence are vastly more important to acquiring and exercising power than are force, deception, or terror.

This research debunks longstanding myths about what constitutes true power, how people obtain it, and how they should use it. But studies also show that once people assume positions of power, they’re likely to act more selfishly, impulsively, and aggressively, and they have a harder time seeing the world from other people’s points of view. This presents us with the paradox of power: The skills most important to obtaining power and leading effectively are the very skills that deteriorate once we have power.

The power paradox requires that we be ever vigilant against the corruptive influences of power and its ability to distort the way we see ourselves and treat others. But this paradox also makes clear how important it is to challenge myths about power, which persuade us to choose the wrong kinds of leaders and to tolerate gross abuses of power. Instead of succumbing to the Machiavellian worldview—which unfortunately leads us to select Machiavellian leaders—we must

promote a different model of power, one rooted in social intelligence, responsibility, and cooperation.

## Myth number one: Power equals cash, votes, and muscle

The term “power” often evokes images of force and coercion. Many people assume that power is most evident on the floor of the United States Congress or in corporate boardrooms. Treatments of power in the social sciences have followed suit, zeroing in on clashes over cash (financial wealth), votes (participation in the political decision making process), and muscle (military might).

## When we seek equality, we are seeking an effective balance of power, not the absence of power.

But there are innumerable exceptions to this definition of power: a penniless two year old pleading for (and getting) candy in the check-out line at the grocery store, one spouse manipulating another for sex, or the success of nonviolent political movements in places like India or South Africa. Viewing power as cash, votes, and muscle blinds us to the ways power pervades our daily lives.

New psychological research has redefined power, and this definition makes clear just how prevalent and integral power is in all of our lives. In psychological science, power is defined as one’s capacity to alter another person’s condition or state of mind by providing or withholding resources—such as food, money, knowledge, and affection—or administering punishments, such as physical harm, job termination, or social ostracism. This definition de-emphasizes how a person actually acts, and instead stresses the individual’s *capacity* to affect others. Perhaps most importantly, this definition applies across relationships, contexts, and cultures. It helps us understand how children can wield power over their parents from the time they’re born, or how someone—say, a religious leader—can be powerful in one context (on the pulpit during a Sunday sermon) but not another (on a mind numbingly

slow line at the DMV come Monday morning). By this definition, one can be powerful without needing to try to control, coerce, or dominate. Indeed, when people resort to trying to control others, it’s often a sign that their power is slipping.

This definition complicates our understanding of power. Power is not something limited to power-hungry individuals or organizations; it is part of every social interaction where people have the capacity to influence one another’s states, which is really every moment of life. Claims that power is simply a product of male biology miss the degree to which women have obtained and wielded power in many social situations. In fact, studies I’ve conducted find that people grant power to women as readily as men, and in informal social hierarchies, women achieve similar levels of power as men.

So power is not something we should (or can) avoid, nor is it something that necessarily involves domination and submission. We are negotiating power every waking instant of our social lives (and in our dreams as well, Freud argued). When we seek equality, we are seeking an effective balance of power, not the absence of power. We use it to win consent and social cohesion, not just compliance. To be human is to be immersed in power dynamics.

## Myth number two: Machiavellians win in the game of power

One of the central questions concerning power is who gets it. Researchers have confronted this question for years, and their results offer a sharp rebuke to the Machiavellian view of power. It is not the manipulative, strategic Machiavellian who rises in power. Instead, social science reveals that one’s ability to get or maintain power, even in small group situations, depends on one’s ability to understand and advance the goals of other group members. When it comes to power, social intelligence—reconciling conflicts, negotiating, smoothing over group tensions—prevails over social Darwinism.

For instance, highly detailed studies of “chimpanzee politics” have found that social power among nonhuman primates is based less on sheer strength, coercion, and the unbridled assertion of self-interest, and more on the ability to negotiate conflicts, to enforce group norms, and to allocate resources fairly. More often than not, this research shows, primates who try to wield their power by dominating others and prioritizing their own interests will find

themselves challenged and, in time, deposed by subordinates. (Christopher Boehm describes this research in greater length in his essay on page 24.)

In my own research on human social hierarchies, I have consistently found that it is the more dynamic, playful, engaging members of the group who quickly garner and maintain the respect of their peers. Such outgoing, energetic, socially engaged individuals quickly rise through the ranks of emerging hierarchies.

Why social intelligence? Because of our ultrasociability. We accomplish most tasks related to survival and reproduction socially, from caring for our children to producing food and shelter. We give power to those who can best serve the interests of the group. Time and time again, empirical studies find that leaders who treat their subordinates with respect, share power, and generate a sense of camaraderie and trust are considered more just and fair.

Social intelligence is essential not only to rising to power, but to keeping it. My colleague Cameron Anderson and I have studied the structure of social hierarchies within college dormitories over the course of a year, examining who is at the top and remains there, who falls in status, and who is less well-respected by their peers. We've consistently found that it is the socially engaged individuals who keep their power over time. In more recent work, Cameron has made the remarkable discovery that modesty may be critical to maintaining power. Individuals who are modest about their own power actually rise in hierarchies and maintain the status and respect of their peers, while individuals with an inflated, grandiose sense of power quickly fall to the bottom rungs.

So what is the fate of Machiavellian group members, avid practitioners of Greene's 48 laws, who are willing to deceive, backstab, intimidate, and undermine others in their pursuit of power? We've found that these individuals do not actually rise to positions of power. Instead, their peers quickly recognize that they will harm others in the pursuit of their own self-interest, and tag them with a reputation of being harmful to the group and not worthy of leadership.

Cooperation and modesty aren't just ethical ways to use power, and they don't only

serve the interests of a group; they're also valuable skills for people who seek positions of power and want to hold onto them.

### Myth number three: Power is strategically acquired, not given

A major reason why Machiavellians fail is that they fall victim to a third myth about power. They mistakenly believe that power is acquired strategically in deceptive gamesmanship and by pitting others against one another. Here Machiavelli failed to appreciate an important fact in the evolution of human hierarchies: that with increasing social intelligence, subordinates can form powerful alliances and constrain the actions of those in power. Power increasingly has come to rest on the actions and judgments of other group members. A person's power is only as strong as the status given to that person by others.

The sociologist Erving Goffman wrote with brilliant insight about deference—the manner in which we afford power to others with honorifics, formal prose, indirectness, and modest nonverbal displays of embarrassment. We can give power to others simply by being respectfully polite.

My own research has found that people instinctively identify individuals who might undermine the interests of the group, and prevent those people from rising in power, through what we call “reputational discourse.” In our research on different groups, we have asked group members to talk openly about other members' reputations and to engage in gossip. We've found that Machiavellians quickly acquire reputations as individuals who act in ways that are inimical to

the interests of others, and these reputations act like a glass ceiling, preventing their rise in power. In fact, this aspect of their behavior affected their reputations even more than their sexual morality, recreational habits, or their willingness to abide by group social conventions.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli observes,

Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not good. Hence a prince who wants to keep

his authority must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires.

He adds, “A prince ought, above all things, always to endeavor in every action to gain for himself the reputation of being a great and remarkable man.” By contrast, several Eastern traditions, such as Taoism and Confucianism, exalt the modest leader, one who engages with the followers and practices social intelligence. In the words of the Taoist philosopher Lao-tzu, “To lead the people, walk behind them.” Compare this advice to Machiavelli's, and judge them both against years of scientific research. Science gives the nod to Lao-tzu.

### The power paradox

“Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely,” said the British historian Lord Acton. Unfortunately, this is not entirely a myth, as the actions of Europe's monarchs, Enron's executives, and out-of-control pop stars reveal. A great deal of research—especially from social psychology—lends support to Acton's claim, albeit with a twist: Power leads people to act in impulsive fashion, both good and bad, and to fail to understand other people's feelings and desires.

For instance, studies have found that people given power in experiments are more likely to rely on stereotypes when judging others, and they pay less attention to the characteristics that define those other people as individuals. Predisposed to stereotype, they also judge others' attitudes, interests, and needs less accurately. One survey found that high-power professors made less accurate judgments about the attitudes of low-power professors than those low-power professors made about the attitudes of their more powerful colleagues. Power imbalances may even help explain the finding that older siblings don't perform as well as their younger siblings on theory-of-mind tasks, which assess one's ability to construe the intentions and beliefs of others.

Power even prompts less complex legal reasoning in Supreme Court justices. A study led by Stanford psychologist Deborah Gruenfeld compared the decisions of U.S. Supreme Court justices when they wrote opinions endorsing either the position of a majority of justices on the bench—a position of power—or the position of the vanquished, less powerful minority. Sure enough, when Gruenfeld analyzed the complexity of justices' opinions on a vast array of cases, she



found that justices writing from a position of power crafted less complex arguments than those writing from a low-power position.

A great deal of research has also found that power encourages individuals to act on their own whims, desires, and impulses. When researchers give people power in scientific experiments, those people are more likely to physically touch others in potentially inappropriate ways, to flirt in more direct fashion, to make risky choices and gambles, to make first offers in negotiations, to speak their mind, and to eat cookies like the Cookie Monster, with crumbs all over their chins and chests.

Perhaps more unsettling is the wealth of evidence that having power makes people more likely to act like sociopaths. High-power individuals are more likely to interrupt others, to speak out of turn, and to fail to look at others who are speaking. They are also more likely to tease friends and colleagues in hostile, humiliating fashion. Surveys of organizations find that most rude behaviors—shouting, profanities, bald critiques—emanate from the offices and cubicles of individuals in positions of power.

My own research has found that people with power tend to behave like patients who have damaged their brain's orbitofrontal lobes (the region of the frontal lobes right behind the eye sockets), a condition that seems to cause overly impulsive and insensitive behavior. Thus the experience of power might be thought of as having someone open up your skull and take out that part of your brain so critical to empathy and socially-appropriate behavior.

Power may induce more harmful forms of aggression as well. In the famed Stanford Prison Experiment, psychologist Philip Zimbardo randomly assigned Stanford undergraduates to act as prison guards or prisoners—an extreme kind of power relation. The prison guards quickly descended into the purest forms of power abuse, psychologically torturing their peers, the prisoners. Similarly, anthropologists have found that cultures where rape is prevalent and accepted tend to be cultures with deeply entrenched beliefs in the supremacy of men over women.

This leaves us with a power paradox. Power is given to those individuals, groups, or nations who advance the interests of the greater good in socially-intelligent fashion. Yet unfortunately, having power renders many individuals as impulsive and poorly attuned to others as your garden variety frontal lobe patient, making them prone to

act abusively and lose the esteem of their peers. What people want from leaders—social intelligence—is what is damaged by the experience of power.

When we recognize this paradox and all the destructive behaviors that flow from it, we can appreciate the importance of promoting a more socially-intelligent model of power. Social behaviors are dictated by social expectations. As we debunk longstanding myths and misconceptions about power, we can better identify the qualities powerful people should have, and better understand how they should wield their power. As a result, we'll have much less tolerance for people who lead by deception, coercion, or undue force. No longer will we

expect these kinds of antisocial behaviors from our leaders and silently accept them when they come to pass.

We'll also start to demand something more from our colleagues, our neighbors, and ourselves. When we appreciate the distinctions between responsible and irresponsible uses of power—and the importance of practicing the responsible, socially-intelligent form of it—we take a vital step toward promoting healthy marriages, peaceful playgrounds, and societies built on cooperation and trust.

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