

7.10 Self-Empowerment, Awareness and Choice

Patricia D. Williams

Jean is resentful of people who she thinks take advantage of her. For example, at work her regional manager has twice presented Jean's ideas to senior management without giving her credit. At home she finds herself taking on household duties her partner has not done as agreed. Even in her T Group, she has noticed a tendency for others to interrupt her and divert the group's attention away from her concerns. She is convinced that if she confronts the individuals in the above situations she will be perceived as egocentric, a complainer, or worse.

"I wish I could . . ." "There's no way . . ." "Even if I were to . . ." "I can't win . . ."

How often do we say this either to others or to ourselves? How often do we feel relatively powerless to alter a particular situation? How often do we undermine ourselves by "giving away" our power to others, other groups, the status quo? The recently popularized term "self-empowerment!" stems from the notion that the one common element to all of the above is oneself. In any situation, we can recognize the power that we have or we can ignore it, deny it or give it away.

"Power" is a multifaceted word. The dictionary lists nine different definitions,¹ from physical might to political control to electricity. Power conjures up lightning strikes and nuclear energy, evil dictators and the sorcerer's apprentice. No wonder the word evokes positive and negative reactions. Yet the first definition listed is simply: *"The ability to act or produce an effect."* The action is neither good nor bad; it just is. Reading further, *to empower: to give power to, or authorize.* Therefore, self-empowerment can be defined as self-authorization—authorizing oneself to act or produce an effect.

If "power" is the ability to act or produce an effect, then we daily face situations in which we feel more or less powerful; more or less able to affect circumstances.

Feeling powerless is not pleasant. Fear, anger, self-doubt and panic accompany it. This flood of feelings significantly impacts on our ability to act, often paralyzing us. Our inability to deal effectively with the situation is further compounded by self-recrimination.

How can we break this vicious cycle and empower ourselves to act effectively? How can we be proactive in producing the results we desire when the situation appears hopeless? Returning to the example above, how can Jean get past her discouragement and take effective action on her own?

Awareness As a Beginning Point

Self-empowerment begins with self-awareness. We must first become aware of the many internal and external factors affecting our behavior and the difference between the two. Most of us find it relatively easy to identify forces "out there" that hold us back or down: laws, customs, others' expectations, discrimination, etc., but it is far more difficult to uncover the ways we undermine ourselves with self-limiting beliefs. Identifying self-limiting beliefs is not undertaken lightly or with naivete. The point is not to ignore, minimize or gloss over external forces that impact our ability to act. The point is to look at how our beliefs limit us unnecessarily and, based on a better understanding of what is within and beyond our control, to take well-considered risks and to choose those beliefs we wish to adopt for the future.

Common Self-Limiting Beliefs

There are three beliefs that commonly disempower us. The first is the belief that power is determined primarily by factors outside our influence or control. At best when we believe our effectiveness is primarily dependent on Fortune or the will and whim of others, we wait for an external authority to "empower" us to act. Sometimes we discover no such authority exists. How often do we hear or say: "I didn't know I could. . .," "They'll let me know if they want me to. . ."

Reading Book for Human Relations Training

or, "It's not my place to . . ." ? Such phrases are commonly used *not* because we lack authority to act but to avoid responsibility for the consequences of our choice. We imply that we are not "response-able" without someone else's okay, yet we do not actively seek that okay either. We avoid the possible negative consequences of choosing to act ("Do I trust my own judgment?" "Will I get in trouble if I . . . ?" "What if I'm wrong?"). Yet not acting is a choice as well.

At worst, ascribing our power or lack thereof to forces beyond our control results in overlooking those factors over which we do have control. In the above example Jean is focused on what she imagines would be negative reactions to her asserting her needs. She doesn't consider that others may simply be unaware of her needs. She doesn't consider that negative reactions she evoked in the past may have been due to her lack of skill in confronting others tactfully. She doesn't consider there may be altogether other ways of managing the above situations. In her T Group, for example, she could simply continue speaking when someone starts to interrupt.

A second, related way in which we unnecessarily undermine our power is believing our view of the world is the same thing as external reality. Examples of this kind of confusion abound in the form of "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts", "have to's" and "can'ts" : "If you want to get ahead you have to put in long hours . . . can't show emotions at work . . . should socialize only with certain people . . . shouldn't disagree with the boss . . . , etc." Having adopted such codes of behavior as givens—"that's just the way it is . . . that's reality"—rather than recognizing them as beliefs that are not universally held, confirms our view of reality and ignores any evidence to the contrary. Then, acting in accordance with what we "know," we collude in the continued external manifestation of our view of reality. In other words, we help to perpetuate the status quo.

Returning to Jean, she is convinced that, "I shouldn't ask people in the T Group not to interrupt me. I'll be perceived as overbearing. Besides, if they were really interested in what I have to say, they would listen." What Jean doesn't consider is that different people may interrupt her for a variety of reasons. Some may be stimulated by issues she raises, some may want to support her by mentioning issues they similarly face, some may want to help by offering solutions, some may simply be anxious at being in a new situation. By silencing herself, she misses the opportunity to check

out her assumptions. She also reinforces a group norm of "not rocking the boat."

Only through self-examination and challenging our perceptions can we discover how our construct of reality is rooted in our own beliefs. As elusive as self-awareness is to define, it is well worth the effort, for the one thing we can control is ourselves. Therein lies our inherent power, which is different from sources typically associated with power in organizations, e.g., formal authority, expertise, control of resources (information, technology, rules and regulations, rewards and punishments), personal goodwill, etc. While these all may impact one's ability to get things done, the effectiveness of each depends on the beliefs of those involved.

For example, no matter how impressive my formal title sounds to others, if it is one that I disparage I will likely not use or experience it as a source of power. By the same token, no matter how significant my position of formal authority is in my organization, I have only to step outside and try to wield my position power in another context to find out how fragile it is: "What do you mean you have no front row seats left? Do you know who I am?" Traditional sources of power do not, as is commonly held, emanate from some immutable external reality. Rather they are ephemeral and ultimately dependent on buy-in to the belief systems which give them meaning.

A third belief that undermines us is the belief that power is a fixed commodity, a limited resource for which we must compete. This belief stems from the definition of power as "a position of ascendancy over others." When we consciously or unconsciously subscribe to this definition we perceive—and perpetuate—a world populated by "ups" and "downs." "Ups" are those with *power over* others, "downs" are those without power. The more I have, the less you have, and vice-versa. If I want more power, I will spend considerable time and energy trying to increase mine and prevent you from increasing yours. If I feel undeserving, I may try to avoid using my power, pretend not to have it or give it away to others whom I believe to be more deserving. The terms "power-hungry," "power-monger," and "power play" are all based on this belief that power is in limited supply. When we operate from a win/lose, up/down mentality, we tend to behave in ways that limit the power potential of all, thus reinforcing the belief that there is not enough to go around.

Self-Empowerment, Awareness and Choice

If we believe the way to increase our power is to compete for it, then we will compete with others until we win or lose. No matter if others are potential allies and together we can achieve a win/win outcome. If presented with that possibility, we will mistrust it or discount it as a fluke. Thus, by operating from the belief that there are winners and losers, we create an outcome that confirms this.

If we view ourselves as relatively powerless, we won't act to improve our situation because we assume we will meet resistance. In hierarchical organizations, front-line employees frequently refuse to speak up or act on their behalf or on behalf of the organization if to do so would challenge those in power. The employees assume their efforts will be wasted: "Management never listens anyway . . . the people in control aren't interested in really making changes . . . nothing will ever change, etc. . . ." and therefore nothing ever does. Even worse, employees may assume their efforts will be seen as insubordination. Undervalued and under used, employees in such organizations represent tremendous untapped potential—potential that could raise a less hierarchical organization to new heights of quality, productivity and effectiveness.

At the same time, the belief that power is a finite resource limits the potential of those who have power over others as well. Those at the top of a rigidly hierarchical organization will hear from their employees only information the employees think they *want* to hear. Without relevant information, senior management cannot make informed decisions, thus undermining both their individual effectiveness and the success of any organizational endeavors.

Power as Unlimited Potential

In contrast, if we view power as energy or potential, unlimited and infinite in nature, then we create the possibility of enhancing our own power without taking away from anyone else's. Just as energy from the sun is essentially limitless over the span of our lifetimes, energy to act and produce an effect is available to each of us as long as we live. If we no longer see ourselves as "ups" or "downs," we are free to realize our potential without assuming others pay a price. No longer does becoming more powerful mean holding a position of ascendancy over others or fighting against those who hold power over us. On the contrary, we enhance our power by collaborating rather than competing with others.

Collaboration offers the possibility of *synergy*: *two or more parties working together to achieve an effect which neither alone is capable of producing*. By aligning goals and combining efforts, our power is directly proportional to the power of those with whom we collaborate. Moreover, by combining perspectives and resources we stand a better chance of achieving creative, high-quality results. In other words, the whole will be more than the sum of the parts. If we are convinced power is in limited supply, we experience collaboration as a loss of power because we must now attend to the needs of others. In contrast if we view power as infinite, then we experience the mutual strength that comes from looking out for one another.

In Jean's T Group situation, she fears that other participants will find her abrasive if she asserts her need for "air time." In reality, some might be pleased and relieved to have her raise this important issue. Moreover, both individual participants and the group as a whole might benefit from a discussion of how to listen effectively and meet each other's learning needs.

The Dynamics of Influence

This view of increasing power by joining with others explains a seeming paradox in the dynamics of influence. *Influence is the ability to affect the thoughts or actions of another*. Studies demonstrate that one's ability to influence is directly proportional to one's ability to be influenced. For example, the supervisors to whom employees listen most carefully are those who employees believe really listen to them. If we view power as an unlimited resource, then it makes sense that we are most likely to be influential if we are "influenceable." As with collaboration, by combining our efforts both parties stand to be more effective at influencing each other. Practically speaking, if I really listen to you, I am likely to learn something that will help me communicate more effectively with you. If I am your supervisor and want to motivate you, being a good listener is the single most important skill I can have.

From Awareness to Choosing an Effective Course of Action

By asking, "What are the ways I enhance or undermine my power?," we can uncover the subtle ways we limit our effectiveness. Do we tend to focus on external factors we cannot control while ignoring those we can? Do we mistake our beliefs *about* "reality" for "reality"? Have we bought into the idea that power is in limited

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supply, that there are always winners and losers, that we either have power over someone else or someone else has power over us? Once we become aware of how our self-limiting beliefs influence our experience of "reality," we can spend energy on things we can control and look for potential points of influence. We can authorize ourselves to speak and act with integrity. We can search out situations where power is used in a win/win proposition and join forces with others. Finally, we can choose whether to modify or discard those beliefs that do not serve us well, and act accordingly in the future.

One individual who as a child frequently heard the message, "If you can't do something well, then don't do it at all," found that in adulthood he avoided undertaking any challenge without assurance that he would succeed. He resisted acquiring new skills at work and rarely undertook new activities in either his personal or professional life. In the course of his T Group he realized that extreme perfectionism and fear of failure were blocking self-improvement and growth. He decided it was time to discard the message. During the remainder of the lab he consciously chose to try out new and unfamiliar ways of communicating. Upon returning home he decided to post the following message at his workplace and to repeat several times a day: "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Slowly but surely he changed his other behaviors as well.

So, by improving self-management, we also enhance management of those external forces we have little or no control over by keeping the focus on choice: "What do I choose to react or not react to? What options do I have and how can I increase them? What new skills and approaches can I develop for coping with external reality?" And if we choose to do or say nothing, then it is not that we are powerless, for we are aware of our own choosing.

Returning once more to Jean, she cannot control how other T Group participants will react to her request not to be interrupted. What she can control is whether, when and how she voices her request, or whether she chooses some other way of meeting her need to be heard. She alone determines how she will interpret their reactions and whether or how she will factor those reactions into the choices she makes for herself in the future.

Conclusion

Self-empowerment is maximizing our effectiveness in situations by recognizing our ability to act, and choosing whether, when and how to act. The essence of self-empowerment is captured in these words from the Serenity Prayer: *Grant me the courage to change the things I can change, the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Note

1. *Webster's Tenth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1993.