

## HOW TO ENSURE THAT POWER IS NOT ABUSED

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***Abstract.** People who have power over others abuse it only because the latter are not aware of the nature of power and the ways in which it can be exercised. Understanding the sources and uses of power would help prevent one from being at the receiving end of power abuse. This would also result in a win-win situation by ensuring effective use of power.*

James MacGregor Burns (1978, "Leadership," New York: Harper & Row) defined power as a relationship in which power holders, possessing certain motives and goals, have the capacity to secure changes in the behavior of a respondent, by utilizing resources in their power base relative to the target of their power-wielding. The resources in the power base must be relevant to the motivations of the respondent. Even the strongest of power devices like imprisonment or denial of food may not affect the behavior of a martyr.

Power is exercised in order to realize the purposes of the power-wielders, whether or not the goals of the respondents are satisfied thereby. Power-wielders simply use resources to achieve their own goals. The resources, however, should be relevant to the respondent's needs or values, but only as necessary to exploit them. Abuse or unethical use of power takes place when power is exercised to achieve power-wielders' goals at the expense of the respondents (Daniel Sankowsky, 1995, "The charismatic leader as narcissist: Understanding the abuse of power," *Organizational Dynamics* 23(4): 57-71). The respondents are then treated as things, and not as human beings. They are merely used as instruments to be manipulated for achieving the goals of the power-wielders. The boss who creates an excessively demanding workload, pushes subordinates to the point of burnout, and sacrifices them at the altar of his or her personal mission is abusing power.

Abuse of power needs to be distinguished from force. Force is a form of induced change in a target that occurs without the target's volition (Bertram H. Raven, 1993, "The bases of power: Origins and recent developments," *Journal of Social Issues* 49(4): 227-251). Threat of force may be used to exercise power, but volition is the crucial variable. The target has no choice in the case of force, while abuse of power gives some choice to respondents. The subordinates of the excessively demanding boss could choose to quit their job, or do much less than what is demanded and face the consequences. Force, on the other hand, is seen in the case

of a psychiatric patient who does not respond to anything else and is physically strapped to his or her bed.

Every human being can always find some relevant resources that form part of his or her power base. Abuse of power arises because of the fundamental assumption that respondents do not have any power and are also unable to perceive the goals of power-wielders and the means they adopt to achieve those goals. Abuse of power on the part of power-wielder is a direct consequence of the respondent being ignorant of power dynamics. Understanding the strategies and tactics through which power is developed and used in organizations will help one become an astute observer of the behavior of others (Jeffrey Pfeffer, 1992, "Managing with power: Politics and influence in organizations," Boston: Harvard Business School Press). Understanding power would help people consider the range of approaches available to them and use what is likely to be effective in order to achieve their goals. Those who are aware of the means to achieve their goals would not allow someone else to achieve his or her goal at their expense. Knowledge of power and its manifestations would help prevent abuse of power by others. This would result in power being exercised for mutual benefit by achieving the goals of both sides, leading to a win-win solution.