

**GLOBAL POWER: THE PRIVILEGE TO INFLUENCE**

**PAINTING POWER  
A GLOBAL LEADERSHIP MODULE**

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# GLOBAL POWER: THE PRIVILEGE TO INFLUENCE

## Painting Power

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To lead comes from the Latin verb “agere” meaning to set into motion.<sup>2</sup> The Anglo-Saxon origins of the word to lead come from “laedere,” meaning people on a journey.<sup>3</sup> “Leading” therefore connotes someone who sets ideas, people, organizations, and societies in motion. To lead such a journey requires vision, courage, and a deeply owned understanding of power.<sup>4</sup>

Power is the privilege to influence. It is impossible to discuss leadership without addressing the issue of power—how leaders gain it and how they use it. Most conceptualizations of power, however, have been strongly influenced by 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western conceptualizations, many with a subtext of hierarchical “power over” that no longer fits either the context of flattened, networked organizations or the more inclusive values of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For many people, including the increasing numbers of women and leaders from non-Western cultures, traditional 20<sup>th</sup>-century notions of power are antithetical to the leaders they most admire and the styles of leadership they most want to emulate. The following session invited participants from around the world to identify their own definitions, meanings, and approaches to power. Using an inductive approach, participants increasingly understood the types of contexts that facilitate and hinder their influence strategies. The outcome of the session was a robust, richly textured, non-culture specific, owned conceptualization of power that is relevant to 21<sup>st</sup>-century global leadership.

### THE SESSION

***Demosophia: Wisdom of the People***  
***Democracy: Power of the People***<sup>5</sup>

Power is the ability to influence the thoughts and actions of others. Traditional conceptualizations of power rely heavily on images of “power over.” French and Raven<sup>6</sup> state that “power resides not so much inherently in the person who has it as it does in

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<sup>2</sup> Jennings, E. (1960) *The Anatomy of Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row.

<sup>3</sup> Bolman, L. and Deal, T. (1995) *Leading With Soul*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>4</sup> Introductory paragraph based on Nancy J. Adler’s (1997) “Global Leadership: Women Leaders,” *Management International Review*, vol. 37 (no. 1), pp. 171-196.

<sup>5</sup> From Bela H. Banathy in *What Does It Mean To Be Human?* edited by Frederick Franck, Janis Roze, and Richard Connolly. Nyack, New York: Circumstantial Press, 1998, p. 294.

<sup>6</sup> J. R. P. French, Jr. and B. Raven (1959) “The bases of social power.” In D. Cartwright (ed.), *Studies in Social Power*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan. French & Raven’s 5 classic attributes of power include: reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power.

the minds of those who perceive and respond to it.” Thus, I have power if you perceive that I have power and if you allow yourself to be influenced by me. Today, many leaders have moved beyond the traditional hierarchical conceptualization of power as “power over” to include “power to” (vision power), “power with” (collegial collaborative power), and “power within” (reflective, intuitive, spiritual power).

After briefly introducing the notion of power, we invited the group to brainstorm associations with the word “power.” To many people’s surprise, most of the associations were negative and external; power was mostly seen as something someone else did that did not contribute to overall well-being. We didn’t comment on the associations, we simply posted them in full view of the group.

Then, to begin the process of redefining power, we used selected quotes to introduce the idea of using a visual vocabulary—a vocabulary that could transcend our everyday sets of words:

- Aristotle: “The soul...never thinks without a picture.”
- Ionesco: “Not everything is unsayable in words, only the living truth.”
- An aphorism by Goethe: “Every day one should read a poem, look at a work of art and listen to some music.” Arthur Frank, “I’ve carried that aphorism with me as an aesthetic credo that the mundane deserves to be informed by the artistic.”<sup>7</sup>
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “We are created “like God” to be creative in our relationships, in our work, in music, in the arts, in drama, in literatures, even as gardeners. We can be creative in bringing beauty out of ugliness, peace out of war, harmony out of disharmony, order out of disorder, health out of disease. And we should not look to do what is spectacular and headline grabbing. The mundane and unobtrusive can be equally wonderful opportunities for exercising our creativity.”<sup>8</sup>
- Picasso, “By the age of nine, I could paint like Raphael. But it took me the rest of my life to learn to paint like a child.”

We then gave the group 20 minutes for each participant to create his or her own visual image of power. The exercise was silent; no words allowed. As each participant completed their image, they were asked to sign it (so it would be “owned”) and post it. We then had a *vernissage*<sup>9</sup> to view everyone’s power-art.

To begin to understand people’s implicit notions of power, the art was discussed in small groups, one painting at a time. The “artist” was asked to remain silent while the group described what they saw in the painting as the artist’s conception of power. I asked the group what they thought the use of certain colors meant, or the absence or presence of a particular type of background, or the relationship of particular symbols to each other. I continually asked questions that tied the artwork into the participants’

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<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit. *What Does It Mean To Be Human?* (p. 275)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> French term for a traditional first night art opening at a gallery

conception of power (such as, “How do you think the artist sees power?”) My intent was to elicit as much meaning from the artwork as possible. The “artist” then shared the conception of power that he or she was trying to convey. The participants very much enjoyed the process and expressed surprise at how accurate the group was in guessing their deeper associations and meanings of power.

After viewing the individual works of art, the group created a collective image of power. This final exercise encouraged the group to consolidate their notions of power. It allowed participants to frame and reconcile such paradoxical issues as: How can power be both a process and a role? How can power be both good and evil? How can power reside primarily in the context and simultaneously in the individual or group? How can power be both earned (achieved) and ascribed? Reconciling these opposites did not mean choosing one side or the other, but rather, finding a visual way to include all important aspects of the group’s understanding of power in its collective representation. The outcome was a dynamic, memorable session that gave each participant a robust, owned definition of power that they could use individually or as a group.<sup>10</sup>

Following the art-based session, we were able to use the richer definitions power to further explore appropriate and effective uses of influence. In one session, again working inductively, we focused on the causes of personal leadership success and failure. Prior to the session, each person wrote two personal leadership stories, one of success and the other of failure, analyzing each for perceived causes of success and failure. As the professor, I opened the session with a mini-lecture on external and internal attribution, using the example a participant’s success story. The groups then analyzed each story in their group, noting in particular:

- Which factors in the context allowed the person to exercise power; or hindered the person in exercising power? (external attribution)
- Which factors within the person facilitated his or her exercise of power? Which factors hindered his or her exercise of power? (internal attribution)
- How would these patterns change depending on the cultural mix of the people involved?

We integrated the learnings from the small groups with a closing discussion addressing such issues as: What do we perceive ourselves to have influence over, internally and externally? What patterns do we see among global leaders in what they perceive to be changeable (what they can possibly influence) and what they cannot influence? As became rapidly evident to the group, personal power comes from being a good observer of both internal and external forces that are influencing particular situations.

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<sup>10</sup> As an accompanying reading, see Nancy J. Adler’s (2002) *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Cincinnati, Ohio: South Western Press, Chapter 6 on global leadership and power.

As global citizens, this discussion is particularly important. As Canadian designer Bruce Mau challenges us, the central leadership question today is, “Now that we can do anything, what will we do?”<sup>11</sup> The 21<sup>st</sup> century “will be chiefly remembered by future generations not as an era of political conflicts or technical inventions, but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mau, Bruce & the Institute without Boundaries (2004) *Massive Change*. London, England: Phaidon Press, p. 15

<sup>12</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, English historian (1889-1975) as cited in Mau, 2005, loc. cit.. Note that in the original Toynbee quote, he refers to the 20<sup>th</sup>, not the 21<sup>st</sup> century.