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Qualities For Success

Part 2: Power And Influence For Laboratory Managers

O KAY – “*Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*”-- Lord Acton, Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 1887

In the March/April 2008 issue of the Clinical Leadership and Management Review, I implied and firmly believe, that without power it is impossible to be an effective manager. So are we doomed to either impotence or corruption? Fortunately those are not the only options.

All organizations have checks and balances in place to monitor and limit as necessary, the misuse of power by managers and executives. However, these systems can and frequently do fail (which is clear from recent headlines.) The more arcane and esoteric the work that is done by a group, the more difficult it is to monitor the actions of managers. That’s why IT departments had a fairly free hand for many years – no one knew what they were doing and everyone was terrified that the systems might fail! I sometimes refer to labs as magical boxes – bodily parts and fluids go in and very soon incredible, detailed reports emerge – what happens in between is mystical.

“The problem of power is how to achieve its responsible use rather than its irresponsible and indulgent use - of how to get men of power to live for the public rather than off the public.”

-- Robert F. Kennedy (1925 - 1968),
'I Remember, I Believe,' The Pursuit of Justice, 1964

So, what’s the answer? How can we gain and maintain enough power to do our jobs without becoming despots? Before I provide some specific

recommendations, let's look at the model David McClelland developed as a result of his research into the ways managers use and misuse power. He describes power as having two faces:

Personalized Power – Power used for personal gain and self aggrandizement.

Socialized Power – Power that is used for the good of the group.

A Comparison of Personalized Power and Socialized Power

Personalized Power

- Managers see life as a struggle to win out over an active adversary.
- Life is seen as a "zero-sum- or win-lose game."
- The law of the jungle applies to all aspects of life.
- These managers tend to drink more.
- They collect prestige items.
- They use their power for self aggrandizement.
- They engage in impulsive actions; they have poor impulse control.
- They want to dominate in most situations.
- "Have impact for him or herself."

In summary it is power used for personal benefit.

Socialized Power

- Managers who are hesitant about expressing power in a direct interpersonal way.
- They make others feel strong and competent.
- They exercise their power for the benefit of others.
- They tend to be ambivalent about the exercise of personal strength.
- They realize that most victories must be carefully planned.
- They help to develop and demonstrate concern about group goals; they are advocates for success through teamwork.
- "Have impact for the group."
- They exhibit good impulse control.

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

--Abraham Lincoln (1809 - 1865)

Influence

Since influence technically involves "power" outside your chain-of-command, building influence involves:

- Getting out of the lab
- Telling the lab's story

- Finding areas where your skills and experience can be helpful to others in the organization.

These activities tend to be counter to the personality traits that attract many people to the work of lab techs and med techs.

Is influence free from the hazards of power? No, in fact in some ways it can be more seductive – influence is something that you generate for yourself, it isn't a gift that comes with your job.

Things You Can Do:

Clarify your values. Spend some time thinking about what is really important to you personally. Patient satisfaction, customer service, high product quality, and employee involvement should be at the top of your list. But making a list is not enough, it's how your values drive your actions that counts. (In the next three paragraphs you will have an opportunity consider some questions that will help you "prove your values.")

Identify your sources of power Do your employees perform out of fear or joy? Think back to the last column; is it the power that is implicit in your job or your personal attributes and style that motivates and ignites your employees to action? Are you good and consistent at rewarding excellent performance? Do your employees see you as a source of knowledge and someone to emulate? (Don't be shy.)

Test your actions. Think about the last three significant decisions you have made (hire/fire, equipment purchase, new policies) how did you come to the decisions you took? Were you motivated by the contribution of the decision to support your values?

Monitor your results. Are your customer service scores high and rising? Are your employees

enthusiastic and highly motivated? Are your reports quick and accurate? Are you gaining influence within the organization? Are people transferring into your department or are you losing people?

Study managers whose values you want to emulate. Read books and articles about ethical managers; managers who exercise their power in ways that lead to their staff feeling strong and in control.

"It is said that power corrupts, but actually it's more true that power attracts the corruptible. The sane are usually attracted by other things than power."

David Brin (1950 -)

A Cautionary Tale

The experiment began in July 1961, a year after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Stanley Milgram devised the experiment to answer the question "Could it be that Eichmann, and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?" The results of the study were published in Milgram's *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (1974).

The "teachers" (who were actually the subjects of the experiment) were recruited by Milgram from respondents to a newspaper advertisement. The subjects came to participate in a Psychology experiment investigating memory and learning at Yale University's campus. He or she was introduced to a stern and official looking experimenter in a white coat and a pleasant and friendly co-subject who was also presumably recruited through the newspaper ad. The experimenter explained that one subject would be assigned the role of "teacher" and the other would be assigned the role of "learner."

Two slips of paper marked "teacher" were handed to the subject and to the co-subject. The co-subject was actually an actor who indicated that his slip said "learner" so the subject would believe that his role as "teacher" had been assigned randomly.

Both learner and teacher were then given a sample 45-volt electric shock from an apparatus attached to a chair into which the "actor-learner" would be strapped. The story given to the "teachers" was that the experiment was intended to explore the effects of punishment for incorrect responses on learning.

Over 400 subjects in their role as teacher gave simple memory tasks by reading lists of word pairs and asking the "learner" to read them back. They were then instructed to administer a shock by pressing a button each time the learner made a mistake. The electric shocks were increased by 15 volts each time the "learner" made a mistake.

The shock generator control that the "teacher" operated had 30 switches in 15 volt increments; each switch was labeled with a voltage ranging from 15 to 450 volts. The switches were also labeled from "slight shock" to "danger: severe shock". The final two switches were labeled "XXX". The "learner" was in a separate room but the "teacher" could hear the "actor-learner's" pounding on the wall and recordings of screams.

No further shocks were actually delivered. The experimenter was in the same room as the "teacher" and whenever "teachers" asked whether increased shocks should be given he or she was verbally encouraged by the experimenter to continue. Sixty-five percent of the "teachers" obeyed orders to punish the learner to the very end of the 450-volt scale! No subject stopped before reaching 300 volts!

The "teachers" questioned the experimenter

about who was responsible for any harmful effects resulting from shocking at such a high level. When they were told that the experimenter assumed full responsibility, teachers seemed to accept the response and continued, even though some were obviously extremely uncomfortable in doing so. (For more information Google Milgram or read the more detailed description of the experiment on Wikipedia.com. As you can imagine the research raised many ethical issues and led to substantial changes in the informed consent required in human experimentation.)

What does this have to do with me – my people will hardly do what I beg and plead with them to do? For a surprising number of us, the compulsion to comply with the demands of an authority figure can supersede our moral judgments and values. The degree of compliance by members of your staff may seem to be slight, but over time, as many lab managers have a very long tenure, an almost automatic and unquestioning level of compliance can develop.

"We didn't need Milgram to tell us we have a tendency to obey orders. What we didn't know before Milgram's experiments is just how powerful this tendency is. And having been enlightened about our extreme readiness to obey authorities, we can try to take steps to guard ourselves against unwelcome or reprehensible commands.

Summary

Review and remember the characteristics of managers whose expression of power is "Socialized." Don't be afraid of power; you can't be a manager without it. Empower your staff; give them an opportunity to develop a healthy relationship with power. Review your values and use them as a guide for your management decisions. Monitor your staff's level of compliance with your authority; encourage challenges to your decisions.

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