

Power 101 Six Classifications of Power

Adapted from French & Raven "The Social Bases of Power"

Power is a word we use a lot but it can mean many things to different people. In the late 1950s, John French and Bertram Raven conducted research to see if it were possible to identify and classify power in a way that would hold true across a wide variety of contexts. This research resulted in the publication of their seminal work "The Social Bases of Power" which classified five types of power.

Three of these bases were identified as "formal" (or socially conferred) and two as "personal" (or internally conferred). Over the years people have added to these but never subtracted or modified the original five, underlining the relevance and endurance of the bases they originally identified. These bases are outlined below with an additional sixth classification of personal power.

Positional Power (formal)

A position or title that gives someone authority within an organization or system. What we often think of when we think of the word "power". French and Raven referred to this as "legitimate" power.

Reward Power (formal)

The ability to confer rewards to other people.

Coercive Power (formal)

The ability to punish people for noncompliance.

Expert Power (personal)

A person or thing which is considered to be especially knowledgeable about or proficient at something.

Referent Power (personal)

The power of the network either through existing connections or the ability to make new connections (the latter is often referred to as "charisma").

Power of the Powerless (personal)

Power of the Powerless is a concept developed by Vaclav Havel in his essay "Power of the Powerless" and roughly defined as the ability to live in the truth regardless of the endurance or sacrifice doing so entails. It was not included in French and Raven's bases of power but it is prevalent and manifests as a base of power independently of the other five bases of power, and thus can be considered as a base of power.

Power 101 Further Reading

SHORT READS

- Abudi, G. (2011, August 26). *The 5 Types of Power in Leadership*. QuickBase <https://www.quickbase.com/blog/the-5-types-of-power-in-leadership>
- Take a minute on the Wikipedia summary of “The Power of the Powerless”. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Power_of_the_Powerless
- Suarez, C. (2018, November 28). Effective Interactions: Supremacist Power and Liberatory Power <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/effective-interactions-supremacist-power-and-liberatory-power/>

GREAT WATCHES

- Abrams, S. (2018, November). *3 questions to ask yourself about everything you do* [Video]. TEDWomen 2018. https://www.ted.com/talks/stacey_abrams_3_questions_to_ask_yourself_about_everything_you_do
- Crenshaw, K. (2016, October). *The urgency of intersectionality* [Video]. TEDWomen 2016. https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality

TOOLS FOR MAPPING POWER

- Restorative Justice Project. (n.d.). Resource Guide to Power Mapping. https://rjdt toolkit.impactjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Resource_Guide-to-Power-Mapping_.pdf
- Gibbs, P., & Shinott, S. (2014, October). Strategizing. In *Organizing: People, power and change* (pp. 30-35). NOTE: there are also worksheets on pp 47, 48 and 49 https://actionnetwork.org/user_files/user_files/000/041/455/original/organizing_people_power_changeadaptedfromMarshallGanz.pdf
- Boyd, A. (n.d.). Power mapping. Beautiful Rising. <https://beautifulrising.org/tool/power-mapping>

LONGER READS

- Battilana, J. & Casciaro, T. (2021). *Power for All: How it really works and why it's everyone's business*. Simon and Schuster.
- French, J. R. P., Jr., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 150–167). University of Michigan.
- Diamond, J. (2016). *Power: A user's guide*. Belly Song Press.
- Gladwell, M. (2013). *David and Goliath: Underdogs, misfits, and the art of battling giants*. Little, Brown and Co.
- Havel, Vaclav. (2009). *The power of the powerless (Routledge Revivals)*. Routledge.
- Suarez, C. (2018). *The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics*. New Society Publishers.