

# *The Power Differential and the Power Paradox:*

## *Avoiding the Pitfalls*

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**Editorial Note:** Here Cedar Barstow offers her latest thinking about integrating different aspects of power so that “changing our personal and collective expectations about right use of power to one that embodies social intelligence and links power with heart is truly ethics as soul work.” Cedar Barstow is the author of *Right Use of Power: The Heart of Ethics*, a relational and dynamic approach to the important issues of power and ethics. She has published articles in previous issues of the *Hakomi Forum*, and *The USA Body Psychotherapy Journal*. Her other books include: *Seeds: A collection of Art by Women Friends*; *Winging It: Interviews with Women on Independence*; and *Tending Body and Spirit: Massage and Counseling for Elders*. She teaches the Right Use of Power approach and the Hakomi Method internationally as a Certified Hakomi Trainer. She maintains a private psychotherapy practice and ethics consulting service in Boulder, Colorado. She can be reached at Cedar@rightuseofpower.com and you can visit her website: www.rightuseofpower.com for more information about the programs she offers.

**ABSTRACT:** The power differential and the power paradox are dynamically linked. The power differential is the enhanced amount of role power that accompanies any position of authority. The power paradox is the term given to the information emerging from research that shows that while we have inborn neurological connections for empathy and altruism, these natural impulses tend to degrade when we are in positions of power or rank. Our understanding of this energetic and behavioral link can empower us to stay on the right side of power. This article presents neurological and sociological research from both sides of this paradox and the author posits some factors that influence the misuses of role power. In support of this research, several theories of moral development and ethical intuition and judgment are examined. Two models of power, the traditional one—power as force, and an emerging one—power as applied social intelligence are described and compared. The author offers her view of 12 tenets of the right use of and influence linked to the four aspects of her power spiral. The author believes that changing our personal and collective expectations about right use of power to one that embodies social intelligence and links power with heart is truly ethics as soul work.

### Introduction

Have you noticed that people who have a lot of compassion and social intelligence in their use of their personal power, often surprisingly begin misusing their power when they get into professional positions of trust and authority? Teachers, Supervisors, Politicians, Therapists, Administrators, Doctors. As a student, Sandra complained that teachers frequently interrupted students, not even bothering to ask. When she became a teacher, one of her colleagues pointed out that she herself was now interrupting her students. Minor, but disrespectful. Dan worked very hard to give respectful and useful feedback to his supervisor, but when he became a supervisor, he just said what was on his mind without considering the impact. A politician, who in his campaign made a point of listening to all views, was heard to say that he only wanted information that supported his view. Why is it that people stop acting from the natural empathy that is key to social survival? This is a question I have been tracking since I was a youngster at camp and I became very distressed and just could not understand why one of my tent-mates had stolen another camper’s comic books. Why would anyone want to knowingly steal or hurt?

Now, as an ethics teacher and consultant, I continue to wonder when my students speak in distress and dismay about supervisors, administrators, other colleagues who consistently misuse their power in both subtle and severe ways.

### Neuroscience of Empathy

The facts emerging from recent research show that empathy, the precursor to altruism and ethical behavior is hard-wired into the brain in the form of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are the ones that give us information about other’s feelings and motives by simultaneously re-creating in our own bodies what another is doing as we watch, listen, or otherwise sense their feelings and actions. Early evidence came in 1996 when researchers (led by Giacomo Rizzolatti, a neuroscientist at the University of Parma in Italy), observing monkey behavior in detail, noticed something they weren’t even looking for, when a graduate student returned to the lab eating an ice cream cone. To the researcher’s amazement, the same cells that would be required to move food to the mouth and eat, would fire in

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the brain of the monkey without hand and mouth movement, but just from watching the lab assistant eating the ice cream! In follow up research, it turns out that “humans . . . have mirror neurons that are far smarter, more flexible, and more highly evolved than any of those found in monkeys. . . . The human brain has multiple mirror neuron systems that specialize in carrying out and understanding not just the actions of others, but their intentions, the social meaning of their behavior, and their emotions” (as quoted in Blakeslee, 2006).

Dr. Rizzolatti says, “We are exquisitely social creatures. Our survival depends on understanding the actions, intentions and emotions of others” (as quoted in Blakeslee, 2006). For example, in another study, neuroscientist Dr. Marco Iacoboni, found that “mirror neurons could discern if another person who was picking up a cup of tea planned to drink from it or clear it from the table.” As Dr. Iacoboni puts it, “If you see me choke up, in emotional distress from striking out at home plate, mirror neurons in your brain simulate my distress. You automatically have empathy for me. You know how I feel because you literally feel what I am feeling” (as quoted in Blakeslee, 2006). What a remarkable discovery this is—with multiple ripples!

It turns out that mirror neurons work best when we are in physical proximity, when people are face to face. This has interesting implications for the beneficent use of power in a global society. In the realms of the world wide web, we are constantly receiving images and words about dangers, tragedies and disasters that, even when not face-to-face, must overwhelm our mirror neurons. It is truly impossible to respond to all the global suffering in the empathic way that our mirror neurons are programmed for when these situations are face to face. For the survival of our nervous system, we must either shut down our empathic responses, or learn how to selectively respond with great discernment—a difficult task.

Right use of power with heart then, involves a well-honed skill at discernment coming from an understanding of the greatest need and the greatest good. Following another ripple—the frequent and frustrating misunderstandings that happen with email communication is explained by mirror neurons working best in close proximity. Without being in each other’s presence (or even voice contact), our mirror neurons are unable to discern emotions and intentions. Most of us have had hard lessons in the limitations of email communications.

There is other remarkable information: Neurological research by Moll and Jordan Grafman has shown that taking action in the best interests of others is coded in the brain. In a study in which they scanned the “brains of volunteers as they were asked to think about a scenario involving either donating a sum of money to charity or keeping it for themselves,” the results showed that “when the volunteers

placed the interests of others before their own, the generosity activated a primitive part of the brain that usually lights up in response to food or sex. Altruism, the experiment suggested, was not a superior moral faculty that suppresses basic selfish urges, but rather was basic to the brain, hard-wired and pleasurable” (as quoted in Vedantam, 2007). There is a surviving and thriving impulse for service that builds social connections of good will and is mutually rewarding.

## **Global Values**

This organic and self-rewarding impulse for altruism has social and spiritual foundations as well. Remarkably, there is global agreement that common values of honesty, responsibility, respect, and fairness exist (Kidder, 1994). Global unity about basic human rights is elucidated in detail in the remarkable document: the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights ratified in 1948. Look it up. It is inspiring reading. Spiritually there is also agreement about the value of an ethic of compassion: “The early prophets did not preach the discipline of empathy because it sounded edifying, but because experience showed that it worked. They discovered that greed and selfishness were the cause of our personal misery. When we gave them up, we were happier. Egotism imprisoned us in an inferior version of ourselves and impeded our enlightenment” (Armstrong, 2005). Jonathan Haidt speaks of

five main moral rules, found in most cultures, that the brain systems for moral intuition seem to enforce. Traditional ethical codes and virtues are built on these: Prevent physical harm, so we protect the vulnerable and restrain our violent impulses—and those of others. • Do unto others what you would have done to you—the universal moral principle. • Respect authority, so that we defer to those who hold social power—and protect those who depend on us. • Be loyal, which leads us to act to protect the interest of our family or the groups we identify with most strongly. • Respect sanctity—follow shared rituals and rules for living properly (as quoted in Goleman, 2008).

There are common virtues describing the qualities that are important to being a good person in the core teachings of major world religions. Linda Kavelin and Dan Popov identified 52 of these through studying the texts of the world’s great religions (Popov, 1997). Clear situations where there is a choice to alleviate suffering, like picking up a hurt child, giving money to support victims of a fire, sharing food with someone who is hungry, activate a straightforward mirror neuron brain response, it seems. Neurological, social, and spiritual underpinnings all support the benevolent use of power and influence. The question about what causes misuses of power by those in positions of trust and authority gains momentum.

## The Traditional Model of Power as Force

Given that neurological research, sociological research, and universal religious values support basic goodness and natural altruism, why is it that there is so much misuse and abuse of power? What often happens to this in-born empathy when people move into power differential positions? How much of this change is unconscious? How much of this shift to more power-over and less compassion could be reversed by understanding more about the impacts of the power differential on LEADERS as well as the impacts on clients?

Dr. Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California has put considerable thought into these questions. It seems we have been “guided by centuries of advice from Machiavelli” and more recently “from Robert Greene’s *The 48 Laws of Power*, (for example: *Conceal Your Intentions, Use Selective Honesty and Generosity to Disarm Your Victims, Crush Your Enemy Totally, Keep Others in Suspended Terror*) to tend to believe that attaining power requires force, deception, manipulation, and coercion. Indeed, we might even assume that positions of power demand this kind of conduct, that to run smoothly, society needs leaders who are willing and able to use power this way” (Keltner, 2008).

It seems that this “model” of power, its acquisition, and its use is the frame, as George Lakoff would put it, that most of us have associated with the concept of power. Most people, when asked for their felt sense, first response to the word “power,” report things like—tightening up, turning away, shrinking or puffing up, getting ready to fight, feeling manipulated, angry, forced, aggressive, betrayed, disrespected, or humiliated. This frame for the idea of power is what is generally transmitted culturally, experientially, and systemically. I believe that we have come to accept this model and then define powerful and powerless by whether or not we have “force” and authority. How curious it is that this frame is so different from the empathy and altruism studies referred to in this article.

In this conventional model of power, there seems to be a disconnect between power and heart. We see it in the politics of being tough and aggressive in response to fear, with compassion and mediation seen to be weak and ineffective. One of my clients went through a classic, perhaps archetypal, process in relation to power. Anna (name changed) had been diagnosed with chronic fatigue and wanted to see what psychological components might be connected with this. At the beginning of one session, she said that she now understood that the crux of her problems was that she was hypersensitive to any kind of upset—either anger toward her or her own anger toward others. Because of this terror, she would spend enormous amounts of energy trying not to do anything to bother anyone else and enormous amounts of energy trying to stop feeling critical

of others. Her goal was to be a comforting, soft, and kind person. Her life had become very small and fragile.

Growing up, Anna’s father was extremely critical and easily upset, and her mother was very conciliatory. She located her terror of upset in her belly and chest and with her permission we went back in time to find the source of this fear. At “before birth” a deep well of feeling spontaneously emerged. Exploring this feeling, she found that she was very angry, and that her “purpose” here is to be a “truth bringer”—even the truth that doesn’t feel good. She experienced the “truth bringer” aspect of herself as very deep and very strong and very brave. She went forward with truth even though she felt “she was getting beaten over the head” over and over again for it. To protect herself, she learned how to “go sideways” with the truth and look like she was being good. Eventually the aspect that wanted to be soft, comforting, and loving took the lead, and she began to be very self-critical of the truth bringer, relegating it to an image of “sharp, jagged pieces of steel in her belly.”

When Anna experienced how strong, brave and pure the truth bringer was, she was again overwhelmed with feeling—this time the feeling was of grief that in order to be true to herself, she would now have to give up being kind, soft, and comforting. Acknowledging that this huge struggle between strength and kindness had been going on for decades opened the doorway to a new possibility—that she didn’t have to choose, that she could somehow learn how to have both power and heart. She sat for a while, letting this new possibility reverberate through her cells. I’m reminded of this quote from Edward Markham since I was a child: “He drew a circle that shut me out—Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout, But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in.”

## A Socially Intelligent Model of Power

Let’s look at a few more of Greene’s *48 Laws of Power*. For example: “Law 2: Never put too much trust in friends, learn how to use enemies; Law 42: Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter; and Law 12: Use selective honesty and generosity to disarm your victim” (pp. 8, 358, 89). Two evolutionary imperatives are missing: depth and breadth of inclusivity and empathy (or compassion). As Ken Wilber (2006, p. 227) puts it, evolution proceeds by transcending and including what went before. The foundation of the right use of power is inclusivity and compassion. Evolution expands and deepens in both the horizontal and the vertical. Here’s a simple example—someone has named it the Platinum Rule: Do unto others as they would have done unto them. This wording transcends the idea that everyone is the same, brings compassion to the differences, and still includes the tenet of service implicit in the golden Rule. The linking of heart and power is a necessity.

Ultimately, I believe, the 48 Laws fail because they are not aligned with the forces of empathy, complexity, and sustainability that are the focus of evolution. But it is very powerful to understand the strategies of this model of power while embracing a more socially inclusive and beneficent model. As Anne Wilson Schaef (1976) pointed out in the 70's, those who know two systems have more power than those who only know one. She was speaking in 1976 about the white male system and the female system. The focus in this article is on two systems for using power. Knowing both systems brings wisdom and skill. For survival, the ones in the power-down system must know both systems, whereas those in the power-up position only know their own system. Unfortunately, those with lower rank seldom realize or utilize the power that knowing both systems gives them.

In a socially intelligent model of power, heart and strength work together, and the focus is on collaboration and inclusivity, resolving conflict peacefully, and treating all with respect and dignity. This is not a brand new idea, but rather one that is coded into the ideal vision of moral and ethical behavior worldwide. There are many people and groups who are honing new skills and wisdom for making this ideal real, common, and practical. Marshall Rosenberg (2003) for communication skills, Bill Ury (1999) and Restorative Justice Programs for mediation, and Mark Gerzon (2004), Amina Knowlan (www.matrixleadership.com), and Mukara Meredith (www.matrixworks.org), for their work with group leadership models come to mind.

In contrast to this Machiavellian model described above, sociological and altruism studies, supported by neurological research suggest some interesting things about power on the collective level. According to the work of Dacher Keltner and others, "power is wielded most effectively when it's used responsibly, by people who are attuned to and engaged with the needs and interests of others. Years of research suggests that empathy and social intelligence are vastly more important to acquiring and exercising power than are force, deception, or terror" (Keltner, 2008.). The research is interesting. "Highly detailed studies of 'chimpanzee politics' have found that social power among non-human primates is based less on sheer strength, coercion, and the unbridled assertion of self-interest, and more on the ability to negotiate conflicts, to enforce group norms, and to allocate resources fairly" (Boehm as quoted in Keltner, 2008). Dacher Keltner's research shows similar results with human social hierarchies. In research about social hierarchies within college dormitories, the researchers

made the remarkable discovery that modesty may be critical to maintaining power. Individuals who are modest about their own power actually rise in hierarchies and maintain the status and respect of their peers, while individuals with an inflated, grandiose sense of power quickly fall to the bottom rungs. . . . [In

addition,] people instinctively identify individuals who might undermine the interest of the group, and prevent those people from rising in power, through what we call "reputational discourse" (Keltner, 2008).

Cultivation and use of social intelligence, i.e. modesty, empathy, engagement with the needs of others, and skill in negotiating conflicts, enforcing norms, an allocating resources fairly is not only right use of power but important to both gaining and maintaining power. There is a powerful advantage for those who develop and use their capacities for social intelligence.

## **Power Paradox**

Interestingly to me, the power paradox has long been understood, as in the well known phrase: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Acton, late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century). Given the research referenced here, what are we learning about Keltner's power paradox? According to Keltner, studies also show that once people assume positions of power, they're likely to act more selfishly, impulsively, and aggressively, and they have a harder time seeing the world from other people's points of view. This presents us with the paradox of power: The skills most important to obtaining power and leading effectively are the very skills that deteriorate once we have power" (Keltner, 2008).

The power paradox identifies two sides of power—the socially intelligent use, and the deteriorated use. Naming and understanding this power paradox is of great importance to the soul work of right use of power—using power with skill, wisdom, and compassion. When in positions of authority, we are in roles that put us on the power-up side of the power differential. Knowing that research shows that in these positions, we are more vulnerable to misusing power, we can use this information about the power paradox to increase our sensitivity and vigilance in using power with wisdom and skill.

Now let's look at the research about the corrupted side of the power paradox.

One survey found that high-power professors made less accurate judgments about the attitudes of low-power professors than those low-power professors made about the attitudes of their more powerful colleagues. . . . Power even prompts less complex legal reasoning in Supreme Court justices. A study led by Stanford psychologist Deborah Gruenfeld compared the decisions of U.S. Supreme Court justices when they wrote opinions endorsing either the position of a majority of justices on the bench—a position of power—or the position of the vanquished, less powerful minority. Sure enough, when Gruenfeld analyzed the complexity of justices' opinions on a vast array of cases, she found that justices writing from a

position of power crafted less complex arguments than those writing from a low-power position. [In another study,] when researchers give people power in scientific experiments, those people are more likely to physically touch others in potentially inappropriate ways, to flirt in more direct fashion, to make risky choices and gambles, to make first offers in negotiations, to speak their mind, and to eat cookies like the Cookie Monster, with crumbs all over their chins and chests (as quoted in Keltner, 2008).

Research shows that

power leads people to act in impulsive fashion, both good and bad, and to fail to understand other people's feelings and desires. . . . For instance, studies have found that people given power in experiments are more likely to rely on stereotypes when judging others, and they pay less attention to the characteristics that define those other people as individuals. Predisposed to stereotype, they also judge others' attitudes, interests, and needs less accurately. . . . Power encourages individuals to act on their own whims, desires, and impulses. . . . Perhaps more unsettling is the wealth of evidence that having power makes people more likely to . . . interrupt others, to speak out of turn, and to fail to look at others who are speaking. . . . Surveys of organizations find that most rude behaviors—shouting, profanities, bald critiques—emanate from the offices . . . of individuals in positions of power (Keltner, 2008).

Once again, here's the power paradox:

Power is given to those individuals, groups, or nations who advance the interests of the greater good in socially-intelligent fashion. Yet, unfortunately, having power renders many individuals . . . impulsive and poorly attuned to others . . . making them prone to act abusively and lose the esteem of their peers. What people want from leaders—social intelligence—is what is damaged by the experience of power (Keltner, 2008).

### **Contributing Factors**

What factors would begin to explain this odd paradox? Many years of working as an ethics consultant and teacher, I have identified these probable factors. 1) Because of the impact of the power differential, those in power-up role are removed and remove themselves from the checks and balances of the feedback loop in which people tell each other either directly or indirectly about their impact both positive and negative. When in power-down position, it is perceived and may truly be too risky to offer negative feedback. They don't hear the negatives and either or both lose their ability to reality check and feel immune to the usual consequences of abuse of power. Without feedback, power-up persons are insulated from the feelings associated with their impacts making empathic responses more

difficult. In addition, leaders become isolated and lonely leading directly to poor judgment.

2) The biologically inherent desire and capacity for kindness and compassion can easily be overridden by strong emotions such as anger, fear, and shame because these strong emotions are responses to feeling threatened. When feeling danger or life threat (as compared to concern), our nervous systems revert from social engagement to the less evolved nervous systems that are associated with fight, flight, or freeze.

3) We have all been wounded by misuses of power and there is an unconscious natural tendency to treat others as we have been treated, or to cause harm by overcompensating to avoid causing the same harm. 4) People tend to over-identify with their power role, experiencing their enhanced power as entirely personal rather than role power. This leads to grandiosity and an unrealistic sense of Self. From this enhanced power role, people forget or override the kinds of respectful and beneficent behaviors that were effective in the power-down position. When sensing their role power simply as increased personal power, people also can begin misusing power in revenge for past hurt or because now they can get away with it.

5) Once gaining role power, those who equate this power with the dominant model of control tend to become motivated or driven by fear of losing it and greed for more (Ireland, R. Right Use of Power Guild discussion, 2008). 6) Promoted to positions of authority for which they are untrained and/or unprepared, leaders may feel insecure. Insecurity breeds separation and negative emotions.

7) People in power-up are also embedded in systems in which it is difficult to act alone and which become invisible to those in the system. These systems support or even mandate particular behaviors that contribute to right or (often) wrong uses of power. Systems are very complex because members usually are aware of only one or several pieces of the system. 8) We have socially conditioned expectations and misconceptions about the use of power. We have long been accustomed to thinking of power as manipulation, undue force, coercion, terror, and deception. We have understood that that was what power was, how it was earned, and how it was effective. And so we have put up with this model of power and sanctioned it, even though it causes egregious harm.

Now is the time to change our dominant model of power to one with more social intelligence and long-term effectiveness. What I want to stress here are the things that are needed for right use of power to become the dominant model: shifting the frame that is associated with the word and concept of power, and understanding of the nature of the power paradox. Understanding the power paradox

requires a high level of self and group awareness, skill and pro-activity. Shifting the frame has enormous power in itself because it brings automatic negative responses toward power to awareness where they can be changed to more positive and effective ones. “The eye refuses to see what the mind does not know” (Chopra, 1991). Annie Dillard writes of a group of people who, blind from birth, were given sight through a new operation. Expecting to be overjoyed, they were actually very bewildered and lost their sense of peacefulness. For example, the thought of climbing up stairs was frightening because it seemed like walking up a wall. One young woman, who was very familiar with her mother through touch, was asked how big her mother was. She indicated the size through holding her fingers about two inches apart. One man, could tell the difference between square and round with his tongue, but when seeing these two objects, could no longer tell them apart (as quoted in Chopra, 1991). We have automatic and familiar frames for many things. Even when something new is right in front of us, we can’t see it because we are operating from a different frame. So it is with the frame we have for power.

### **Increasing Skill and Sensitivity**

Right Use Of Power is the use of personal and role power to prevent harm, heal harm, repair harm, and most importantly to promote well-being. Right use of power behaviors and sensitivities are the essence of the field of ethics. Ethics is a set of values, attitudes and skills intended to have benevolent effects when applied through professional behavioral guidelines, decision-making processes, and the practice of compassion.

In my experience in teaching ethics as right use of power, I have heard many comments like these: “I’m a kind and good person. I don’t need a list of rules to follow. I’m not going to hurt people. I’m here to help them heal.” “Oh, I already know about ethics. There are three rules: 1) Don’t sleep with your clients, 2) Don’t sleep with your clients, 3) Don’t sleep with your clients.” “Ethics is like a dirty word. You read about it and then you don’t talk about it.” “I want to be good. I don’t need to be scared into it.”

Ethics has gotten a bad rap. Helping professionals *do* want to help and heal their clients. However, being in a leadership and/or professional service role is not simple and straightforward. It calls for more than mirror neuron empathy. Even through fueled by caring, helping is complex and can be personally challenging as well as rewarding. Good intentions are certainly necessary, but not sufficient in managing the dynamics of power. For example, here are a few additional complexity factors: difference between intention and impact, transference, cultural or contextual differences, shame, and fight/flight/freeze responses. The strong desire and capacity

to use power magnificently needs lots of support— acknowledgment, understanding of the power paradox and the dynamics of the power differential, and some skills such as resolving difficulties, self-care, ethical decision-making, and giving and receiving feedback. Since we have both an inborn empathy and an inborn tendency to defend and protect ourselves, we need education, self-awareness, and an active felt sense of a socially intelligent model of power.

### **Power Differential—The Core Dynamic**

Of course, we can’t determine how much of the impact of the power paradox is unconscious, but we can take this information and use it to be more and more vigilant about the impact of the power differential on both our own behaviors in leadership positions and on the behaviors of our clients. Right Use of Power is a relational model and the Power Differential is a relational concept.

### **Consideration of Impact on Clients**

The power differential is the inherently greater or enhanced power and influence that helping professionals have as compared to their clients. Clients are in a position in which they must trust in the knowledge and guidance of their caregiver. This difference results in a greater than ordinary possibility of vulnerability on the part of the client. Consequently clients are unusually susceptible to harm and confusion through misuses (either under- or over- use) of power and influence. The power differential has much value in helping relationships. When used wisely and appropriately it creates a safe, well-boundaried, professional context for growth and healing. It offers clients confidence in their caregiver’s knowledge, training and expertise, direction and support, role boundary clarification, and allocated responsibilities.

While both parties are responsible for the quality and integrity of the relationship, the practitioner, as the one in the role of greater power, is ultimately responsible for making sure both parties are: using their power consciously and skillfully, being accountable, and resolving a situation when difficulties arise.

Those in the client role are

- more vulnerable to misuses of power
- more easily influenced
- more invested in being liked, accepted, and/or respected
- more dependent on and concerned about trust
- have varying abilities to understand and use this role well

Those who are most susceptible to misuses of power

- lack personal awareness

- are not relationally skilled
- are impaired by pain, or anxiety
- have low self-esteem
- are not clients by choice

These are the basic impacts of the power differential on clients.

### **Consideration of Impacts on Leaders**

In light of the power paradox, it becomes clear that the impact of the power differential on those in power-up authority roles is as vital to understand as its effect on clients. How does being in a power-up role affect you? How are you the same, different? What's the shadow of your use of personal and professional power? What beliefs do you have about power and authority that might interfere with your wise use of power? How can you stay awake in power differential roles? How often and to whom do you talk about these issues? There are many things to consider. Take another look at the list of eight factors leading to the misuses of power in the power paradox. Are there any you want to add? Are there any you recognize in yourself. This level of truthful exploration of your use of power is the experiential soul work from which the rich harvest is wisdom and effective use of power for the good of all. It goes deeper than following rules for it requires experiential self-study and a focus on pro-active right use of power and the repair of past wounds.

### **Rankism**

In the largest context, the power differential is the core dynamic Robert Fuller refers to as rankism. In his book *Somebodies and Nobodies*, (2003) he refers to rank as the seat of power and to the abuse of rank as the root of all forms of discrimination. Rank is our position in any hierarchy, and rank signals the amount of power we have in the hierarchy—the higher the rank, the greater the power. Ageism, sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism are abuses of rank. Culture, religion, gender, sexual preference, race, socio-economic status, job title, educational level are positions that carry rank with them. Helping professionals by title have a higher rank than clients or office workers. Interestingly, Fuller points out that as compared to the inborn characteristics of race and gender, rank is changeable. For example, we can hold high rank at home and at the same time be of low rank at work. Most of us thus have had numerous experiences of being not only victims but perpetrators of the core dynamic of the power differential (Fuller, 2003).

Acknowledging this mutability, helps us engage our sensitivity to any harm caused by misuses of power.

Misuse of the power of rank of any kind usually takes the form of the impulsive, disrespectful and often exploitive or oppressive behaviors described as the degraded side of the power paradox. It is so important to keep in mind that the difficulty is *not* with rank and the power differential that is created, but with the *abuse* of rank. “We rightfully admire and love authorities—parents, teachers, bosses, political leaders—who use the power of their rank in an exemplary way. Accepting their leadership entails no loss of dignity or opportunity by subordinates” (Fuller, 2004, p. 3). Rank serves an important role. In contrast, leaders who abuse their power betray trust and create seeds of indignity that may ripen into powerful anger and resistance (Fuller, 2003).

As a healing force for the dismantling of all forms of rankism, Fuller proposes a dignitarian society in which “human beings everywhere have an innate sense that dignity is their birthright and are quick to detect affronts to it... The basic tenet of a dignitarian society is that we are all equal in dignity—not just in theory, but in practice” (Fuller, 2004, p. 5).

### **Moral Development**

I feel that an understanding of the process of moral development that conveys people from the simple morality of mirror neuron empathy, to the more complex and inclusive capacity to make more judgments is an essential aspect of avoiding the power paradox. Ethical use of power begins in empathy and altruistic pleasure. We are born with a basic moral compass, based in empathy and the natural desire to take action on behalf of others. This is most obvious in the outpouring of care for a family member or a situation in which one is directly involved. Simple moral decisions activate a straightforward brain response. Other situations are more complex and activate competing brain center activity, like abortion, euthanasia, population control, use of global resources. Here's where the life long process of moral and ethical development begins.

There are many moral development theories. I'll mention several here.

Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist at the University of Virginia has a theory that describes our moral sense as the interlocking of two independent neural systems. The older system, already described with the development of mirror neurons, provides us with an instantaneous “gut reaction” based on an interior mirroring of another's experience. He calls this “moral intuition.” The second neural system is

a more recent addition to the brain, with circuits in the neo-cortex [and] evolved along with language. This system operates more slowly, and lets us give words to our moral decisions, explaining our ethical rationale—or at least coming up with a plausible rationale for our gut reaction. Haidt calls this “moral judgment.”

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Philosophers write at the level of moral judgment; our day-to-day responses are more often enacted based on our moral intuition” (as quoted in Goleman, 2008).

My colleague, Anna Cox, works with prisoners on death row in Little Rock, Arkansas. She teaches them Buddhism. Her newsletter (Cox, 2000) contains several writings from prisoners describing significant changes in their ethical understanding and judgment. Here’s one of them.

From G. M.: There has been a lot of conversation in *Dharma Friends* lately about the treatment or respect for women and to tell you the truth, I actually have never thought very much about this before. I guess that I just thought it was cool to be the stud and let them know that I thought they was attractive. There is a lot of talking where I live that goes on whenever a woman comes onto the unit. I used to join in on it but now I see that it is kind of disrespectful. Is it abusive to say things to a woman that say that she is sexually attractive and to kind of invite her to respond to me? Doesn’t this let her know she is beautiful? Or should I just ignore this person and what she does? Really, I’m kind of confused because I am just doing what the brothers do, and I never thought about this before. But I want to do the right things and I don’t want to cause harm to another. (Cox, 2000, p. 1)

He’s seeing things in a new way and his ethical judgment is getting more complex.

Extrapolating to professional ethical decision-making, there are two kinds of ethical decision-making that draw on and interlink with each other. One is ordinary moment decision-making. These are the gut level empathic decisions about how we care for our clients that Haidt calls moral intuition. These require being attuned to client’s unexpressed needs, subtle energy cues, and relationship dynamics. The warmth and effectiveness of your client relationships is built and maintained by sensitivity of your refined gut responses. The vast majority of ethical decision-making is made moment to moment. The other is the complex decision-making that requires time, consultation, ethical codes, reflection, and more information. These decisions are based on moral judgment. I believe that both moral intuition and moral judgment can and need education and refinement. Consider Haidt’s five main moral rules named on a previous page. They are based on moral intuition. However, as moral intuition becomes more refined and wise, it overlaps with moral judgment to produce more complex, inclusive, and situation appropriate responses. For example, the gut impulse to be loyal can result in an us versus them identification that leads to war.

Lawrence Kohlberg, who delineated the classic theory of stages and levels, identifies developmental perceptions of rules and of what “right” is. Oversimplifying his system, rules are to be obeyed to avoid punishment; then rules are to be followed in order not to cause harm; and then rules are

seen as beneficial and can be changed if they are unfair. “Right” is first seen as satisfying one’s own needs; then as doing one’s duty and respecting authority; and then right is an integrated and organic expression of concern for all in a given situation (as described in Schueler, 1997). Knowledge of these developmental and perceptual differences has potential value in fine-tuning your skills in dealing with clients, colleagues and superiors who may be guided by different perceptions, especially in talking about ethical codes and the concept of right use of power.

Carol Gilligan, another theorist, using Kohlberg’s model, found that in their moral development, men tend to operate from an ethic of justice while women operate from an ethic of care. While Kohlberg puts focus on justice as a higher stage than a focus on care, Gilligan considers these a same level difference between boys and girls. Gilligan says, “An ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that all should be treated the same,” while “an ethic of care rests on the premise of non-violence—that no one should be harmed” (Gilligan, 1984, p. 174). The flavor of this difference seems to be reflected in the difference in perspective between relationship prudence (as seen in mediation and restorative justice programs) and jurisprudence (as seen in most grievance processes and in legal actions.) The right use of power model advocated here is a meld of the two concerns—for justice, and for care—power with heart.

Ken Wilber speaks of evolution as proceeding by including and yet transcending what went before. (Wilber, 2006, p. 227) Both he and Gilligan would agree that moral and ethical development proceeds in this fashion. Moral development is seen as a hierarchical in that “each stage has a higher capacity for care and compassion” (Wilber, 2006, p. 13). Stage 1 is labeled *egocentric*—morality is centered on “me.” Including and transcending, by Stage 2 called *ethnocentric*, a person’s identity now extends to members of their group, i.e. community, family, religious affiliation, school. At Stage 3 *world centric*, another inclusion and expansion has taken place and care and compassion is felt and expressed toward all of humanity. Gilligan follows development further in describing the highest stage of moral development, which she calls *integrated*, as a 4<sup>th</sup> stage in which the voices of the masculine and feminine, the voices for justice and the voices for compassion, become integrated (Wilber, 2006, p. 13). It is clear that at the egocentric stage, moral decisions are relatively simple and black and white. Parents and teachers know that children feel empathy and can act on behalf of others. However, as we expand into the ethnocentric, world centric and integrated stages, ethical sensitivity, awareness, and decision-making becomes more and more complex and challenging. These higher levels of development are what I consider the soul work of using power with heart. Gary Zukav says it well. “Reach for your soul. Reach even farther. The impulse of creation and

power authentic—the hourglass point between energy and matter: that is the seat of the soul” (Zukav, 2001, p. 288).

### Staying on the Right Side of the Power Paradox

That would be Right Use of Power--no surprise. In summary, neurological and sociological research points out that we are born with mirror neurons that are the precursors to empathy, and empathy is the forerunner of ethical and moral behaviors and attitudes. People who treat others with respect and fairness, listen well, are warm and personal, manage conflict well, and collaborate are given leadership positions. In the big picture and over the long run, these

leadership qualities are the most effective. However, once in power differential positions, people tend in either small or egregious ways to lose the very qualities that brought them their leadership positions. They begin to misuse their power. How can we stay on the right side?

I see ethical development as occurring in a spiraling fashion through the four dimensions of what I call the power spiral, as named below. Ken Wilber speaks of development unfolding in 4 quadrants (4 fundamental perspectives). These seem akin to the 4 dimensions in the right use of power model. Wilber’s 4 quadrants (Wilber, 2006, p. 20) roughly correspond to the 4 dimensions perspectives as shown in Table 1.:

**Table 1: Quadrants & Dimensions:**

4 Quadrants

- “I” (the inside of the individual)
- “It” (the outside of the individual)
- “We” (the inside of the collective)
- “Its” (the outside of the collective)

4 Dimensions

- Self (Be Compassionate)
- Guidance (Be Informed)
- Relationship (Be Connected)
- Wisdom (Be Skillful)

Organized around these four dimensions, here are tenets for a socially intelligent model of power. These are integrated from my work as an ethics consultant and with my Right Use of Power programs. Rather than another 48 laws, these are tenets or recommendations. I hope they will be useful.

### 12 Tenets of Right Use of Power

#### Be Informed

- 1) Gather and use information from both outer and inner resources.

*Right Use of Power is a learned set of skills and attitudes honed over time and built upon inborn empathy. Be clear about these resources. “The final piece of reaching for authentic power is releasing your own to a higher form of wisdom.” (Gary Zukav, 2001, p. 285)*

- 2) Know the strategies of the non-socially intelligent model of power.

*Then you can be conscious of being used by these strategies and self-correct or transform them with compassion and inclusivity when you find yourself using them. It is more powerful to know two systems than one.*

- 3) Ask for help.

*Becoming isolated or over or under-identified with a power-up role, leads to poor judgment.*

#### Be compassionate

- 1) Reframe and own your personal and professional power as the vital ability to use power to prevent harm, reduce harm, repair harm, and promote well-being.
- 2) Become more and more sensitive to your impact especially when in power differential positions.

*Self-study about the impact of the power differential on you. Find out about your power shadow. Stay alert to the power paradox and its strong tendencies toward misuse of power when in a power position. Consider that goal is to create happiness and reduce suffering rather than to protect your position. This offers you much freedom.*

- 3) Work collaboratively to empower others.

*Power is abundant, not scarce (Sadlek, C., Right Use of Power Guild discussion 2008). Power dynamics are embedded in every human interaction (Ireland, R. Right Use of Power Guild discussion 2008).*

#### Be Connected

- 1) Develop and use your skills for actively participating in the feedback loop.

*Discern what the other is ready to hear. Be aware that actions that harm others, inherently and ultimately harm the actor. We can easily be insulated from this by denial and short-sighted vision (Ireland, R. Right Use of Power Guild discussion 2008).*

2) Track for and resolve difficulties before they escalate.

*Stay connected in conflict. Stop the escalation.*

3) Hold good and clear boundaries.

*Stand in your power, stay in your heart.*

### **Be Skillful**

1) Be respectful, strategic, and wise.

*Think in the long run. Be proactive. Look for the best next step. Keep including others and offering ways to save face. Focus on what's working.*

2) Hold an expanded awareness of the impact of your actions and decisions on those beyond your sphere of influence.

*From this larger perspective, look for creative, inclusive and win/win solutions.*

3) Strategically and skillfully stop expecting, condoning, or feeling helpless about misuses of power in systems and power-up individuals.

*Expect and require social intelligence. Campaign for a socially-intelligent model of power.*

Changing our personal and collective expectations about right use of power to one that embodies social intelligence and links power with heart is truly ethics as soul work. The power differential and the power paradox are dynamically linked. Our understanding of this energetic and behavioral link can empower us to stay on the right side of power. What we need is a new model, a new frame about power that ripples across the globe and eventually becomes the new traditional model, aligned with human evolutionary and spiritual process.

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