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## What It Means to Be in Charge

One of the things that Kelly Marshall noted soon after she stepped into the principalship was that teachers seemed to look at her quite differently. In 12 years in the classroom, she had worked in two different school districts and three schools, so she had experience in working in new schools with new colleagues. But what she was experiencing now was very different. She discovered very quickly that she was no longer “one of the teachers.” Teachers, parents, classified staff, and students approached her in ways different from what she had ever experienced before as an educator. Kelly now felt like an outsider in the groups she had worked with so happily for years. And it was bothering her.

The reasons for Kelly’s current feelings were made very clear only a few days after she had taken the job. A teacher walked into her office one day and asked to have a certain student removed from her class because he was disruptive on the first day of school. Kelly declined because she believed that the student would settle down in a few days. She told the teacher that it was too soon to start making any changes in the class rosters, but that they could talk about things in a week or so. The teacher was clearly displeased with the administrative decision and marched out of the office with the barely audible comment, “Well, you’re the boss.” It was one of the first times that Kelly truly discovered how uncomfortable it was to be in the hot seat.

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Kelly was discovering very quickly another reality of moving into an administrative post for the first time. When she accepted her job as a principal, she had stepped across the line and become an administrator, manager, boss, or one of “them.” It was the realization of a personal and professional dream

in so many ways. She had worked hard to complete her graduate work at university, to the extent that she often felt guilty about ignoring her family times. She spent many hours preparing for and engaging in interviews at positions at several different school districts. She finally found her present job, and she was thrilled with being a principal. There was no question she had now achieved what she wanted to achieve, but like so many beginning administrators, she was also discovering that there were some aspects of her job that were making her quite uncomfortable.

Many people do not fully appreciate that being an administrator means that you are suddenly in control and that you now have power and authority. The concepts of power, authority, and resulting control frequently evoke negative reactions in people. Classroom teachers intent on exploring alternative career options in the field of education seem particularly concerned about the need for administrators to exercise power and authority, perhaps because of a long-standing reluctance among educators to think in terms of trying to control others.

This chapter reviews the realities of power, authority, and control as part of the world you will experience as an administrator. These things come within the turf of a leadership role. Authority and power are a part of any formal administrative role. If you find that unpleasant, you may wish to reconsider your decision to enter the world of administration.

We will explore the issues of power and authority as well as how the exercise of these by administrators may serve to control others. Using power and authority correctly can also result in more effective organizations. The chapter begins with definitions and essential characteristics of organizational power and authority. It concludes with a consideration of some of the immediate, practical applications of these concepts for you as you proceed toward a career in educational leadership.

## Alternative Definitions

*Power* and *authority* are terms that often come up in discussions of organizational leadership, but they are often used vaguely. For example, many classroom teachers frequently express distrust for those who appear to possess either characteristic. However, those same teachers often forget that they also engage in the use of authority, power, and control when they walk into their classrooms each day. Any fundamental understanding of the nature of administration or management, whether in schools or in other organizations, must include an understanding of power and authority. In addition, research on beginning principals shows that a consistent problem for them is related to their inability to assume and understand the concepts of power, authority, and control that all come as part and parcel of any leadership role.

In simple terms, the German sociologist Max Weber (1947) defined power as the “probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance” (p. 52). Power, then, is the fundamental ability of one person to command some degree of compliance on the part of another person. By contrast, authority suggests a much less general concept. Clayton Reeser (1973) defined authority as “a right granted to a manager to make decisions, within limitations, to assign duties to subordinates, and to require subordinates’ conformance to expected behavior” (p. 311). On the basis of the distinctions suggested in these definitions, we can make some important generalizations about these differences between power and authority.

First, *everyone has power*, or at least the *potential* for exercising power. Each of us potentially has the ability to encourage another person to behave in some particular way. Even a person whose role in society seems most unimportant may effect some change in others or in society in general. Understood in this way, power is not simply owned or exercised by people who wear the title of *administrator*. Indeed, classroom teachers, classified staff, parents, and students all have the “power” to move others toward new behaviors, practices, or even beliefs.

When we think of power, we tend frequently to think in terms of its use or in many cases, its abuse. We think first of those whose roles automatically provide a potential for influencing others. Everyone has power, but not everyone makes use of it or develops the skill required to exercise power effectively from a position that does not appear to be strong. This observation is true regardless of how that power was acquired in the first place, whether by assuming a position where formal authority is normally delegated or by demonstrating competence in a typically “nonpower” role.

Not everyone, on the other hand, may have access to authority, which is a condition normally possessed by a relatively small percentage of people. According to Herbert Simon (1957), a person with authority has and “uses the formal criterion of the receipt of a command . . . as his basis of choice” (pp. 108-109). Authority is a legitimized statement of one (or more) person’s formal designation to control the behaviors in an organization, and it derives from certain societal forces.

The primary distinctions between power and authority are fairly straightforward. *Power* is the *ability* to make others behave in certain ways and is available to most people in society, regardless of whether or not they have formal authority. *Authority* includes the *right* to make others behave in certain ways and is not available to everyone but rather is formally conferred on some. Interestingly, however, the fact that people have authority does not necessarily guarantee that they will exercise power.

Which of the approaches to power described above have you used in carrying out your duties as a classroom teacher? Which approaches are most effective when used with you?

## Characteristics of Power

This section examines the broader concept of power by looking at its traditional sources. French and Raven (1960) suggested five sources of social power, and these are examined as they relate to the role of an educational administrator.

### *French and Raven: Sources of Social Power*

Reward power is the capacity to provide rewards or incentives to others in the organization as a way to influence their behavior. This form of power is often associated with practices people see (or think they see) by school administrators. However, many other educators use coercive power. Teachers frequently try to control pupils' behavior by threatening punishments ("You won't get recess today if you don't behave!" or "There will be a quiz tomorrow if I don't think you're keeping up with your reading assignment.") Richard Gorton (1980) noted the following assumptions related to the use of coercive power:

- The strength of coercive power will increase with the magnitude of the punishments or costs that the other person perceives that the person exercising power may apply.
- The strength of the coercive power will depend on the actual sanctions or punishments that are applied, not on what one hopes to apply.
- Unsuccessful attempts to exert coercive power will tend to decrease the personal strength of that power in the future.

Legitimate power is most similar to what shall later be described as *formal authority*. Control of one person by another is based on the assumption that the person exercising the power has the legitimate right to do so and is supported by a statement of policy, law, or even historical precedent and tradition.

This type of power is hierarchical in nature and derived from the organizational structure of a school system. The board of education is at the top of the chart, the superintendent reports to the board, building principals are accountable to the superintendent, and teachers must respond to the legitimate dictates of their principals. All these examples show the nature of legitimate power being applied. What an organizational chart does not show, of course, is *how* legitimate power is exercised in any particular school system.

Referent power is the tendency of other individuals to be attracted by and to identify closely with the person who exercises the power. A certain emphasis is therefore placed on the charismatic qualities of the administrator or other person who is making use of the power. Simply stated, this is power derived largely from the extent to which people respect the person in charge. Gorton's assumptions related to this source of power include the following:

- The greater the perceived attractiveness of the person exercising power, the more likely that there will be identification with the leader.
- The stronger the identification with the leader, the greater will be the likelihood that the leader can successfully use referent power.

Finally, expert power is the ability to influence others' behavior through special knowledge. Here, the emphasis on making use of competence and expertise is a way to increase public perception that the leader knows a great deal about what others in the organization are trying to do. When school building administrators were teachers first and principals only on a part-time basis, it was easy to see that the main source of influence by those early principals was often the result of others' perceptions that they had advanced or superior teaching skills.

Gorton's assumptions regarding the application of expert power follow:

- The strength of the expert power of a person will vary with the personal knowledge and skill that he or she might possess, along with others' perceptions of her or his expertise.
- The stronger the perception by others that the leader possesses expert power, the higher will be their satisfaction and evaluation of the quality of the leader's performance.

French and Raven's five sources of social power can be understood from both a descriptive and a normative perspective. They provide certain insights into how power may be classified for further analysis, and they also provide the administrator with a way of understanding the implications of reliance on one source or another. Understanding the differences that exist between referent power and reward power, for example, and the likely effect that each may

have on people who work in organizations is a powerful way to guide behavior. Consider the possible response to an administrator who works to increase his or her expert power by learning more about a particular topic, contrasted with the probable response to an administrator who tries to increase his or her rank by using threats, punishments, or other efforts associated with coercive power strategies.

Reflect on your own experiences by considering administrators you have worked with. How many times have people made use of each of the power strategies described here (expert power, referent power, coercive power, legitimate power, or reward power)? What are the effects that the use of one or more of these approaches to power had on your ability to serve as a professional?

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## Compliance Theory

Amitai Etzioni (1961) analyzed power relationships in organizations through the concept of compliance theory, a perspective that suggests that power sources should be matched with organizational types for more efficient use. Etzioni identified three major types of organizations defined by their fundamental goals as "economic," "order," and "cultural." If the primary goals of an organization are to preserve order (political, moral, financial, or any other type), for example, the most appropriate source of power might be coercive. To understand this, look at how police often make use of coercive (or implicit coercive) power in their work, which is primarily directed toward fostering order and control. In the case of schools, people make use of the value of learning and the goal is most often cultural; power might most often be defined as expert power. However, we can see where an assistant principal in charge of student discipline for a school would make greater use of coercive power according to Etzioni's theory.

## Characteristics of Authority

The legitimized and sanctioned use of power normally referred to as authority may also be understood according to certain characteristics.

### *Authority Types*

Max Weber (1947), whose definition of authority was noted earlier, suggested that there are three major types of authority used in different organizations:

1. *Traditional authority.* Authority derived from tradition. People accept the control of others because it is assumed those “others” have some sort of traditionally legitimate absolute right to exercise that authority with no challenges. In school settings, for instance, a parent may tell a child to obey a teacher for the simple reason that the person is a teacher and a teacher always deserves respect. Although this may not hold true in classrooms on a daily basis, many such forms of reliance on traditional authority types may still be seen.
2. *Charismatic authority.* Authority based on the assumption that the leader has some special gift or even supernatural powers. Examples of this type of authority are religious leaders and some televangelists, who, despite apparent inconsistencies in their personal lives, continue to attract millions of followers and their money. The leaders have successfully established in the minds of their adherents that they possess special gifts from God.
3. *Legal authority.* Authority derived from laws, policies, or statutes. Military officers have authority because such authority is decreed by regulation. As many enlisted personnel recognize, superior officers may lack identifiable skills or charisma at a given time; they are, however, in charge simply because they are officers.

Educators can use these descriptions of different types of authority to understand why we defer to certain individuals. In addition to determining *type* of authority, however, we also need to determine whether it may be *formal* or *functional*.

### *Formal Versus Functional Authority*

Robert Peabody (1962) defined *formal authority* as authority derived from such sources as organizational hierarchy, laws, a person’s position in an organization, or office. *Functional authority* comes from such things as a person’s

professional expertise and competence, interpersonal skills, and the suggestion of great experience in handling a particular situation. The tendency to assume that functional authority is “softer” or “better” is really not warranted. People who exercise authority make use of both approaches. On the other hand, a person may deliberately select one strategy to effect a desired goal. A school superintendent, for example, who might normally rely on his or her formal authority to bring about changes in the behavior of the teaching staff in the district, might choose instead to seek a more indirect way to influence changes in behavior. The superintendent, in other words, may consciously seek to exercise functional rather than—or in addition to—formal authority.

Effective administrators should not necessarily shift frequently between formal and functional authority patterns. Such inconsistency would probably be unwise, if not impossible. Deliberate switches from a formal to a functional approach are often perceived by staff members as manipulation, just as a game of good cop-bad cop is a staged strategy used for manipulation. Selecting one pattern rather than the other might be impossible for those administrators who have no (or at best limited) access to formal authority strategies. The critical issue for the practicing administrator is to recognize the strengths and limitations of both formal and functional authority patterns.

### **Implications for Someone Becoming an Administrator**

Power and authority are central themes in understanding the field you are pursuing—educational administration. It would be quite naive to think that you could take on an administrative position—whether in schools or in some other kind of organization—without being endowed with power and authority. In fact, it may be critical for you to decide if you are comfortable with being in a position of control. If you believe that you are not, you may wish to reconsider your decision to pursue a future position in school management. You cannot be a principal, for example, without being viewed as an authority figure in a school.

On the other hand, simply assuming a job where being viewed as someone with power and authority does not necessarily mean that you will have to make use of those characteristics in a wrong or negative way. Quite the contrary. By becoming the person in charge, you may find that you will be isolated from many former sources of support and understanding. Perhaps you will be able to promote many of the kinds of changes that you wish you could have promoted when you were in the classroom. An individual teacher wishing to make changes for the benefit of students can do so only in one classroom at a time. A principal can move toward more responsiveness across an entire school.



The use of power and authority is like the use of any other tool that a person might employ in doing a job more or less effectively. People will look to you as the person in charge of a school or district, and as a result, they will defer to you as the person who controls things. What you do with that status is a critical issue and one that will have a great impact on whether you perceive yourself—and others perceive you—as an effective leader rather than simply as a person who seeks power, authority, and control as ends in themselves. As with so many things that will contribute to your initial success or failure as a school administrator, your use of power and authority must be governed by your personal value system and sense of what is best for you to work effectively with the people around you.

### **Summary**

This chapter considered some definitions of two inescapable characteristics of people who take on administrative or managerial positions. They are in charge, and as a consequence, they have authority and power, and they can control many things that go on within an organization. The goal is to promote the idea that effective leaders are those who engage in the judicious and wise exercise of power and authority in their schools.

The chapter reviewed the salient characteristics of power, including the sources of power offered by French and Raven and compliance theory as developed by Etzioni. The section dealing with authority included a brief overview of Weber's definitions of three types of authority—traditional, charismatic, and legal—and a discussion concerning the distinction between formal and functional authority. Finally, I explained how the concepts of authority and power are germane to the development of a personal vision of what it means to be an administrator.

### **Suggested Activities**

1. Interview a group of administrators and ask them to describe the strategies and techniques they follow when they try to encourage teachers or other staff members to comply with a new school district policy. As each person in the group describes their practices, make an assessment of the types of power (according to French and Raven's conceptualization) that are being used.
2. Talk with four or five teachers and give them brief descriptions of the different types of authority presented in this chapter. Ask each person to identify situations in which they would expect administrators to rely on one or more types of authority.