Expertise and Relationships Drive Power

Idea In Short

Focus on getting really good at your craft and building genuine relationships. Positional power is fleeting, but expertise and relational equity compound over time and sustain your influence.

Three Kinds of Power in the Workplace

There are three types of power in the workplace: positional, relational and expertise. You might not have all three, but you better have some. This framework applies to each professional individually and to the consulting project as a whole. The model is simple but elegant, and it helps you think through how influence actually flows in organizations. Understanding these three forms of power allows you to diagnose where you stand and where you need to invest. 1

Positional Power Is Blunt and Fleeting

Positional power is straightforward. It is top-down power that comes from your title, budget, headcount and role. In a simple formula, chief operating officer outranks vice president, who outranks director, then manager, then analyst. Positional power works, but it resembles a hammer: blunt, short-term and tiresome. It is like telling your child to do something and responding to their question of why with because I said so. It works, but it is not the best approach. Command-and-control management rarely succeeds anymore, even in hierarchical Asian work cultures. The average chief executive officer holds the job for fewer than four years, as A.G. Lafley noted in his book Play to Win. Peter Drucker was ahead of his time when he wrote in 1988 that the large business of the future would resemble a hospital or symphony orchestra rather than a manufacturing company.

Relational Power Is the Primary Currency

Relational power is the primary currency in large organizations. People work together, help each other, team up for success and forgive mistakes. They share history and remain inter-related. Robert Cialdini writes extensively in Influence about reciprocity and other persuasion mechanisms. We are social creatures, and relationships matter deeply. The most challenging problems are ambiguous, political, risky and cross-functional, requiring you to dislodge people from vested interests. Being chief marketing officer does not guarantee the sales force will adopt your new trade promotion campaign. For Master of Business Administration (MBA) graduates, the problems that drive promotions and compensation always involve people. As the Workplace Therapist notes, intelligence quotient may get you the job, but emotional quotient will get you promoted.

Expertise Power Is Where Individuals Shine

Expertise power is where education, experience and real thinking converge. The resource-based view from MBA programs states that competitive advantage comes from things that are rare, valuable and difficult to imitate. This principle applies to people as much as firms. Malcolm Gladwell argues in Outliers that real expertise requires 10,000 hours of practice. This claim builds on research published in Harvard Business Review called Making of an Expert, which states that experts are always made, not born. Gary Vaynerchuk emphasizes that hustle matters. He defines hustle as putting all your effort into achieving the goal at hand, making every minute count and tapping into your strengths rather than relying on talent alone. 2

How Consulting Teams Accumulate Power

The consulting process is designed to help consultants accumulate power and influence at the client site. Six mechanisms drive this leverage. The kick-off meeting serves as the first, where the executive sponsor formally introduces consultants to staff, thereby loaning them authority. The project plan gives consultants control over rhythm and momentum, much like an air traffic controller directing airport operations. Best practices bring objectivity through outside-in perspective, benchmarks and maturity models. Data gives consultants credibility and conviction because clients often cannot quantify their own performance. Being on-site builds relational equity with working-level stakeholders who hold the keys to implementation. Making clients successful cements the relationship and builds lasting trust.

The Kick-off Meeting and Project Plan

The kick-off meeting is where positional power transfers. The executive sponsor formally introduces the consultants to her staff, loaning them authority to do work and create change. It is a privilege and borrowed power, similar to being a substitute teacher. The project plan then sustains that momentum. Consultants maintain the schedule, which organizes activities, scopes the work and creates pressure to finish. Due dates generate project momentum. The plan functions like air traffic control: you are not flying the planes, but you influence how the airport runs. Both mechanisms are positional in nature, deriving their force from the sponsor authority and the structured timeline.

Best Practices and Data Build Credibility

Consultants bring objectivity because they work across multiple competitors, suppliers and customers. Clients value the outside-in perspective and want to know where they stand relatively. The question of what constitutes best practice is common from executives. Best practices, maturity models, benchmarks and survey results all represent expertise power. Data serves a similar function. Many clients do not know whether they are running a five-minute or twelve-minute mile. They have a sense, which is usually right, but struggle to produce supporting data. Consultants love data because it provides credibility and conviction. Numbers transform subjective impressions into defensible arguments that resonate with executive audiences. 3

On-Site Presence and Client Success

Consultants often lack relational equity at the start. They might know the buyer of the services but meet working-level stakeholders only at the kick-off. Getting to know these stakeholders quickly is critical. Collaboration is a two-way street requiring professionalism, friendliness and helpfulness. Some of it involves the tacit understanding that consultants can help or sometimes hurt career prospects. Be likable and never be a jerk. The main reason consultants stay at client sites Monday through Thursday is relational. The travel is demanding, but it builds relationships through shared meals and proximity. The former chief marketing officer of Deloitte wrote a bestseller called Never Eat Alone about building relationships. The title captures the entire thesis. Making clients successful is the ultimate relational strategy. Two big four partners built entire 25-year practices serving two or three key clients each.

Power Is Temporary and Borrowed

All of this power and influence is temporary, borrowed and sometimes fragile. Most consultants behave professionally and treat clients with respect, but exceptions exist. Some consultants have shouted at or threatened working-level clients, which is low-class, unprofessional and abusive. Marvin Bower, the patriarch of McKinsey, believed management consultants should maintain the highest level of professionalism, integrity and candor. His standard remains the benchmark for the industry. Power without character destroys trust and undermines everything consultants work to build. The lesson is clear: accumulate power through expertise and relationships, but wield it with humility and respect for the client.

- 1Harvard Business Review on Influence Without Authority
- 2Harvard Business Review on Increasing Influence at Work
- 3Harvard Business School on Influence Without Authority

Summary

Power in the workplace comes from three sources. Positional power fades, relational power endures and expertise power distinguishes you. Consultants accumulate all three through kickoffs, best practices, data and on-site presence. Build relationships and hone your craft relentlessly.