Why Power Makes People Act Badly

Idea In Short

Research on organizational behavior offers a consistent, uncomfortable finding: giving someone authority over others is one of the fastest ways to make that person insular, insensitive and disconnected from reality. Understanding why power distorts judgment, and why the people around a powerful person often make the problem worse rather than better, matters for anyone climbing toward more authority or advising someone who already holds it.

A Reliable Way to Turn Someone Into a Difficult Boss

A well-known line of organizational research argues that one of the fastest ways to make someone insensitive, insular and difficult to work with is simply to put them in charge of other people.1 This is not a character flaw unique to a few bad leaders; it is a predictable psychological pattern that anyone gaining authority should watch for in themselves, and that anyone reporting to a powerful person should understand.

Credit and Blame Get Wildly Inflated

Leaders account for a surprisingly modest share of overall organizational performance by most rigorous measures, yet they receive a dramatically larger share of both the credit when results are strong and the blame when results disappoint. That mismatch magnifies the perceived stakes of every leadership decision far beyond its actual measurable impact, which in turn reinforces a leader's sense of their own outsized importance.

Constant Attention Distorts Behavior

People instinctively pay close attention to whoever holds power in a group, a pattern observed even in primate social hierarchies, where subordinate animals check in on a dominant figure repeatedly throughout the day.2 The unfortunate side effect is that time

spent by subordinates constantly checking in with a leader is time not spent actually being led, coached or mentored. Surrounded by that much attention, it becomes easy for a leader to focus increasingly on themselves rather than on the people they are meant to serve, and to start believing that ordinary rules simply do not apply to them.

Why Leaders Rarely Get the Full, Honest Picture

Two related dynamics consistently starve leaders of accurate information. First, people tend to flatter those in power even when the flattery is completely insincere, and leaders, like anyone else, tend to enjoy hearing it, reinforcing exactly the wrong lessons about what earns approval. Second, leaders who say they want honest, timely bad news often do not actually welcome it when it arrives, and messengers of bad news frequently get blamed for the news itself rather than thanked for delivering it. Both patterns teach everyone around a leader the same lesson: it is safer to stay quiet, agree, and pass problems along rather than surface them honestly.

The Practical Implications for Advisers

Anyone advising a powerful person, whether a professional consultant, a trusted deputy or a close colleague, should assume that the leader is likely not getting the full, honest picture from everyone else around them. Acting as a genuinely trusted adviser means actively watching for a leader's blind spots rather than assuming those blind spots have already been addressed by someone else in the organization.

Delivering Difficult News Well

Delivering difficult news to anyone in a position of authority requires real skill. Leading with solid data, rather than personal opinion or emotional framing, removes much of the subjectivity and defensiveness that difficult conversations tend to trigger. Framing feedback around outcomes and evidence, rather than character or blame, makes it dramatically easier for a leader to actually hear and act on the message rather than simply defend against it.

Watching for the Trap in Yourself

The most important lesson from this research may be the most uncomfortable one: everyone climbing toward greater authority is susceptible to the exact same distortions,

regardless of how self-aware or well-intentioned they believe themselves to be. Deliberately seeking out honest, unfiltered feedback, rewarding people who deliver difficult truths rather than punishing them, and staying genuinely curious about blind spots are all practical defenses against a pattern that has quietly damaged countless otherwise capable leaders throughout history.

Building Structural Safeguards

Beyond individual self-awareness, organizations can build structural habits that counteract this tendency: anonymous feedback channels, rotating advisers who owe no personal loyalty to a specific leader, and formal review processes that explicitly reward candor rather than agreement.3 None of these safeguards eliminate the underlying psychological pull of power, but together they make it considerably harder for any single leader to drift entirely out of touch with the people they are meant to serve.

- 1Power (Social And Political)
- 2Dominance Hierarchy
- 3Groupthink

Summary

Power distorts judgment reliably: it inflates credit and blame beyond what performance actually justifies, invites constant flattery, and discourages the honest bad news a leader most needs to hear. Advisers who understand this dynamic can help leaders stay grounded, and anyone gaining more authority can watch for the same trap in themselves.