Power

The Ninth Myth of OD

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This article was published in June of 1976 in the *OD Practitioner*, a publication of the OD Network. Its title then was "Another Myth OD Consultants Believe in: Power!" I have lightly touched up some of the more awkward wording, corrected a few typos and restored the original title, but it is otherwise as originally published.

Some time back, Jerry Harvey described eight "myths" that OD consultants live, believe in (and die by): resistance to change, conflict, time as a relevant variable in OD, conformity, confrontation as leading inevitably to conflict, the OD consultant as change agent, the primacy of management style and OD itself.[1]

I agree with Jerry's perception of those eight items as myths, taking as my starting point H. J. Rose's definition of classic myth: ". . . the result of the working of naïve imagination upon the facts of experience."[2]

I think there is another myth in OD – a ninth myth if you will – the myth of *power*. I think power is something humanity has dreamed up to account for certain observable phenomena and that the myth of power has been with us for so long now that few of us have bothered to question it. Because the concept of power is so taken for granted, it has until recently escaped examination – an examination long overdue.

It is perhaps our frequent and indiscriminate use of the word "power" that most serves to sustain and nourish it as a myth. Using the word so often, to refer to so many different phenomena, may well have blinded us to the fact that power is simply a *concept*. Like any other concept, power consists of a generality (the word) and a range of instances (those phenomena to which the word is applied). Power has at various times been used to describe:

- The extent to which control is exerted over resources (both access and allocation)
- The authority (coupled with the willingness) to impose social or organizational sanctions
- Influence over the behavior of others, be it based on position, specialized expertise or personal characteristics (e.g., charisma)
- The extent to which one is seen as instrumental in the attainment of a given outcome or set of outcomes
- Persuasion through logical or emotional (but always convincing) arguments
- Sheer physical strength or demeanor
- A sense of one's own potency

Yet, in discussions involving the use of the word "power," I rarely hear anyone speak directly to the specific instance of power to which they are referring when they use the word. Nor do I hear many asking for such clarification. It is as though the word has but one meaning and that is certainly not the case. By simply using the word "power," without referring to specific phenomena, we fail to bring definition to the concept and, as understanding of these phenomena continues to elude us, so does our ability to manage them.

Another factor supporting the myth of power is the tendency to treat the concept as though it had an existence all its own. Our talk would indicate we think power can be acquired in much the same manner as money (e.g., "He set about the acquisition of vast powers."). We tend to quantify power, both absolutely and relatively (e.g., "She has a great deal of power." And "He has less power than I.").

We certainly seem to be interested in, if not fascinated by power – whatever we might mean when we use the term. (Witness the high attendance levels at the recent ODN Meeting sessions whose titles involved

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[1] "Eight Myths that OD Consultants Believe in . . . and Die By!", *ODP*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Feb., 1975
[2] *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1959, p.12.

the word "power" and this issue of the *ODP*, which focuses on power in OD.) But for all our interest, we seem to have lost sight of the fact that power – like attitudes, values and organizational climate – is a construct that we use to describe or explain certain observed phenomena. Maybe power is best defined as D. G. Bowers described many organizational processes (e.g., decision making):

> ". . . it is well to remember that these 'processes' are simply shorthand descriptions for perceived constellations of the behavior of many individuals at various points in organizational space."[3]

As long as we accord power the status of a *thing* instead of its proper status as a *concept* we shall always be seeking to possess it instead of understand it.

Power and Potency

Closely related to the thing-status we have given power is its supposedly usefulness as a tool for controlling others and, thereby, as a means for attaining certain ends. Power is seen in this sense as some almost irresistible force with which we can make others do our bidding (or, heaven forbid, they might make us do their bidding and we would be power*less* to stop them).

This particular view of power, contrasting as it does potency and impotency, seems to me to have its roots in the avoidance of personal responsibility. When we find ourselves in a situation where we're doing something we don't really want to be doing, it is very tempting to place the blame on something beyond our control; that is, we are being controlled by others through their exercise of power. If others have acquired this magical thing called power, then so can we and we will then have our opportunity to control others.

Our preoccupation with controlling others and with avoiding being controlled by others has prevented us from learning much in the way of controlling ourselves; that is, building our own sense of potency. In short, I think this particular view of power is pretty much overrated and based more on our own fear of consequences than anyone else's exercise of power. We would be more productive were we to concentrate on finding ways of increasing our sense of potency instead of inventing explanations of our impotency.

Potency, for me, is a feeling of confidence in one's ability to cope with one's environment. I like to think that my own sense of potency stems from a firm belief in personal responsibility; namely, I am doing whatever I am doing because I choose to be doing it. I readily admit that in making my choices I factor in what I see as the likely consequences of what I have as options, and that many of my choices are grudgingly made; however, I still take the responsibility for making those choices.

I am not saying that I operate independently of my environment; such a statement would be sheer nonsense. What I am saying is that my decisions to comply (or not comply) with the wishes or demands of others are consciously made. The extent to which I have no choice but to comply with the wishes or demands of others is more a function of the kinds and numbers of options I have available to me than any power they might exercise over me. If I am not too unlike the rest of humanity, then they too are making choices – however willingly or unwillingly – and the frequency of their unwillingness can more likely be reduced through a search for new options than through a quest for power.

Mutuality

Almost all ideas about power refer to human interaction as the locus for the application of power. Since interaction would seem to imply some inherent element of mutuality, I find it noteworthy that power is

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[3] *A Taxonomy of Intervention: The Science of Organization Development*, Office of Naval Research, Organizational Effectiveness Programs, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Technical Report AD 762 085, May, 1973, p.7.

often seen as unilateral. We observe an interaction between people and, because the outcome of that interaction appears to us to have been largely determined by one of the parties to the interaction, we say that that person holds the power or is an influential person. We neglect the element of mutuality that is inherent in any human interaction and ascribe the cause of the outcome to the power of one or a few individuals. (The most fundamental element of myth-building is to assign cause-and-effect relationships to observed phenomena on the basis of imagination. Thus, there is a fine line between theory and myth.) But all forms of power must have some element of mutuality for these phenomena occur in the context of human interaction and interaction implies some degree of joint responsibility and influence.

The mutuality of power leads to another largely ignored area: "followership." If power is indeed mutual, yet some people appear to have more impact on the outcomes of interactions than others, then we would do well to examine why those who appear to have so little effect do what is known as "going along with the program." There are probably many reasons, ranging from fear of sanctions through lack of interest to high levels of commitment based on the prospect of achieving one's own goals and objectives. The point is that these are reactions to be found in the followers, not in the leader! We neglect the basic observation that a leader, by definition, is a person with followers. We have done countless studies on people whom we call successful leaders, trying to discover their sources of power, yet we never examine the simple phenomenon that accounts for our saying they have power: the fact that people are following them. Perhaps we need fewer studies of leadership and more studies of followership.

I have been attempting to place power in the context of being a concept because I find what is known of concepts (e.g., concept learning) to be a useful analytical framework. For example, to classify something as an example of a concept, that something must possess certain critical attributes. If it doesn't, it is a non-example. Further, examples and non-examples are both necessary to clearly define the concept.

If you examine some of the various instances of power, one critical attribute would seem to be an element of control. Control implies predictability and predictability implies certainty. Certainty implies the ability to guarantee a given set of outcomes.

As we interact with our environment, we are attempting to achieve outcomes that are favorable to ourselves. Unfortunately, we often tend to look outward and attempt to control our environment to secure these outcomes. We might more profitably look at the outcomes we seek and, with the environment as a given, develop new ways of approaching our interactions with our environment. In other words, the certainty we seek is not the certainty of control but the certainty of outcomes. Frankly, my certainty in any given situation stems not from a feeling of control of the situation or of others in that situation but from the strong belief that, whatever happens, I can adapt, change, modify or do whatever is required to continue the interaction and still achieve my outcomes. For me to focus on power would be to focus on what might be a means but is most certainly not an end.

My contention has been that power, in its common usage, is a myth. I call it a myth because, although we talk about it incessantly and we sometimes make pretentious displays of having it, we don't really know much about it – mainly because we define it as a thing instead of a concept. In part, the myth of power appears to me to have been invented to avoid taking personal responsibility for our own decisions and behavior. To some extent, the issue of power is muddied and confused because we use the term to refer to so many different phenomena. And I believe we continue to look in the wrong places to study and understand it. In short, the conventional concept of power is truly a figment of our collective imagination.

Dismantling the Myth

Mashall Sashkin, in describing his reaction to Jerry Harvey's eight myths, related a comment made by one of his teachers regarding the work of Freud (and the bible): "There's a lot of good stuff there, and a lot of crap, and the problem is telling the difference."[4] I think the same is true of much of what is currently said about power. But I think that by asking some specific questions we can separate the "good stuff" from the "crap" and, in the process, dismantle the myth of power. This will allow us to more effectively approach some aspects of organizational functioning which heretofore have been vaguely summed up as "power issues." Examples of the kinds of questions I have in mind follow.

General Questions. Is the issue control of resources? Imposition of Sanctions? The perception of one's own potency or impotence? Are we referring to what appears to be unilateral influence but which is in fact bilateral? Are we investigating and analyzing observable phenomena or are we inventing cause-and-effect relationships? Are we simply avoiding personal responsibility for our piece of the action?

Control of Resources. Is the issue access to resources or is it the way in which they are allocated? Who controls which resources? Which resources do we require? What is the basis of current controls? What forms do these controls take? When is control exercised? How is it exercised? By whom?

Imposition of Sanctions. What are the sanctions? What are the reactions to their imposition? Who controls them? On what basis? What triggers their imposition? Are they formal or informal? How are they actually imposed? What is the basis for valuing or fearing their imposition? How are they avoided or negated?

Mutuality of Power. How do you know it does or doesn't exist? When should it exist? When is it immaterial? How does it occur? When? Why is it important? To whom? Are people actually being steamrollered or was it a stratagem for getting what they wanted? Is the "bitching" genuine or is it just "protective coloration"?

Potency. How do people measure it? Through control of their own destiny or through control of others? Through the ability to produce predictable results? Through a perception of certainty in their environment? How do they know they have it? What tells them they don't have it? How can it be increased? How important is it to them? To you?

When I look about me I see coming into existence more and more OD interventions based on or aimed at power strategies and theories. I feel a strong sense of urgency to see performed the fundamental task of defining power – before we undertake too many interventions based on unstated assumptions or, worse, based on "the working of naïve imagination upon the facts of experience."

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[4] Harvey's Myths: Some Hits, Some Misses," *ODP*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Nov. 1975.