

# Building Your Power Base

Learn how to find power and use it to gain influence and stature.

---

By THOMAS L. QUICK

**T**rainers these days are under increasing pressure to perform in a way that many of them are not accustomed to. They are being urged by many, including management, to take initiative and exercise more influence in organizational long range planning.

Yet in most organizations top management doesn't invite HRD people to join in the planning process, and many trainers don't view themselves as occupying positions of power and influence. So planning continues without substantial and knowledgeable contributions by HRD professionals, and HRD professionals continue to be chided for their "follower-ship" and lack of impact.

## The need for power, and its sources

There's little question that an organization's planning and strategy are inadequate if insufficient expert consideration is given to the development of the human resources necessary for carrying out the strategy. But there's a *large* question about the ability of many internal training professionals to master the usual organizational power sources to gain even temporary entry to the executive suite.

Some trainers have a staff mentality and are bound by their perceptions of

powerlessness. Many have come from the public sector and from positions with minimal influence. The dynamics and complexity of corporate life take time to understand. And some HRD people are openly disdainful toward "playing politics," an unhelpful attitude for advancing the prestige of their training and development functions. But probably the greatest impediment is most training professionals' lack of understanding about where to find the power and how to use it to gain influence and stature.

Drawing on observations over the past 30 years, I can identify 10 kinds or sources of power that may be available to most trainers: competence, position, personal, assigned-delegated, associative, resources, alliance, reward, professional, and availability. Two kinds of power not generally associated with trainers are autocratic and charismatic-visionary, although there have been extremely rare instances of charisma. Let's look at the common sources.

## Competence

At least two kinds of competence are valued by any organization, especially in the private sector. One, of course, is what you have to offer as a trainer or internal consultant, bearing in mind the organization's needs. Your professional competence is based not only on what you do well but also on your knowledge of the HRD field and its theories, concepts, and practice.

The other kind of competence is knowledge of the organization's operation and mission. You can't hope to be evaluated as competent unless you can talk the operation's language, identify its problems, suggest solutions, and empathize with operational concerns.

But just as in your professional life you must know both your specialty and the field as a whole, you need to understand not only the specific organization but the context in which it functions. That means reading professional literature and trade and business publications. If you're not reading *The Wall Street Journal* and periodicals such as *Business Week*, your competence has a bare spot.

## Position

Power through position in the hierarchy is not frequent for trainers, but it does exist. Even a trainer can build an empire.

Think of some well-known personalities in our field who, because of internal connections or identification with innovative programs, enhanced the positions they held and expanded their influence throughout their organizations. Granted, the original source of their power was not the position itself, but with the help of other kinds of power described in this article, these professionals turned their positions into a continuing font of strength.

## Personal

Personal power is easier to recognize

---

Quick is executive director of the Resource Strategies Institute in New York City.

than to describe. Some people create a presence and an impact through their personalities and their self-confidence. They project a firm sense of knowing who they are, what they're capable of, and where they're going. Your achievements can also contribute mightily to your self-image. Some people achieve influence through their speaking, their obvious thoughtfulness, their command of language.

You may scorn dress-for-success uniforms, but the idea is valid. Look around your organization for power people who believe in dressing well. Perhaps their clothes are not expensive, just fashionable and well tailored. These people attend meetings in their jackets while others come in shirt sleeves. They do not wear sports combinations. They carry themselves with a slight, but not offensive, air of value and importance.

### **Assigned-delegated**

Assigned or delegated power comes from your boss, your boss' boss, or even higher up. In many cases, it is there waiting for someone to tap it. Many people make the mistake of waiting for someone to grant it.

Years ago in his book, *The Mobile Manager*, Eugene E. Jennings urged upwardly mobile managers to be crucial subordinates. Find ways to be indispensable to someone higher than you. Move into areas or functions that people above don't want to handle or don't handle very well. Offer to take on responsibilities that others are overlooking. Create new responsibilities for yourself.

**Initiate:** you know that in the typical organization, there are lots of things that could be done, even should be done, and aren't. Become especially known in areas of expertise so management thinks of you when looking for someone to do a job. **Volunteer:** for example, identify a persistent problem and suggest forming a task force to solve it. Task forces are an excellent and usually underused way to get power and authority from above.

### **Associative**

If you are fortunate to have a strong boss, a mentor, a sponsor, or are seen as the protege of a powerful executive, you can bask in the reflection, which gains you power through association.

If you don't already have a sponsor or a mentor, look for one. Plenty has been written on the subject in recent years, and you shouldn't have any problem getting directions. Your sponsor-mentor-boss-friend

can keep you advised of organizational plans and developments that spell opportunity for you, can mention your name at the right times and before the right people, and can give you much good, relevant advice about how to increase your influence in the organization. But you must cultivate the relationship, and you must offer something in return: competence, prestige, fulfilled promises, and so on.

### **Resources**

When you control something someone else needs and wants, you have power through resources. Look at the early days of data processing, when computer specialists were high priests in the temple (computer room). In some operations legal departments wield tremendous influence because management can't move without their counsel.

Trainers offer means to greater productivity and profits, but many give away their control over those resources by extensively using outside consultants and vendors. Don't give away *everything* you have, even if it's easier and you have the money to do it. Think instead of the trainer who was called one day by a division manager who asked, "Would you get someone who can brief us on MBO?" The trainer answered, "I don't have to. I can do it." He had what someone wanted. Look around your own organization to identify the kinds of expertise managers need and value. If you don't have people knowledgeable in these areas, get them.

### **Alliance**

Seek to build coalitions among managers who have worked with you, enjoyed the benefits of your services, and are supporters of your work. Don't get isolated in your staff position.

One trainer in a large corporation routinely invites "friendly" managers to attend presentations before other potential internal "clients" to supply stories attesting to the effectiveness of whatever she is presenting. Another shrewd trainer encouraged line managers to form a "manager's club" that meets regularly to exchange experience. The trainer acts as informal consultant and facilitator.

Stay close to your allies in the line, and build support in the staff as well. People who are happy with the results you have achieved for them make good components of your power base.

### **Reward**

Reward-related power doesn't just concern the people who report to you,

although you mustn't neglect to recognize their performance. You may be surprised to realize how much people who have enjoyed your services value your public esteem.

You may be considered an expert in some areas, and if you make it known that certain managers and other trainees have successfully and profitably applied your techniques and concepts on the job, your praise, however muted and tactful, will win you support and friends. No manager who is ambitious undervalues praise and publicity, so look for ways to pat some backs. Word of mouth, a letter to key members of management, an article in the company newspaper, all are tools for you in "rewarding" people who can contribute to your expanding influence.

### **Professional**

For you, professional power may mean visibility in an organization such as ASTD. As long as your participation is sanctioned by the organization, you can score professional points as a valued member of the association. Obviously, if your professional peers express esteem for you, some of that esteem will find its way back to the organization. Writing articles and giving speeches are other ways to increase your professional image.

If your organization's management is enlightened, they will see your outside activities reflecting favorably on them. But always be sensitive to the possibility that some of your coworkers may believe that by being active elsewhere, you are neglecting internal responsibilities. But if you can handle both outside and inside duties, management may see you as an important asset.

### **Availability**

Power coming from availability usually is described as being in the right place at the right time. It's rooted in your ability to analyze and anticipate organizational needs and training trends. As Pasteur put it, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

### **Powerful persuaders**

It's unwise for a trainer to depend too much on one kind or source of power when there are many. They are, as you can see, interrelated. One leads or contributes to another. Competence is the one that is *indispensable*. It's hard to see how a person could build an enduring power base without demonstrating ability to do things well.

People who successfully gather power know the need to test reality continually.

Managements change and so do missions and structures. One source of power may short out. The trainer needs to be sensitive to the environment in which the organization operates and its impact.

In addition, the trainer wanting to expand influence would be well advised to look at the models of influential people. Emulating the following characteristics of successful influencers might help trainers create more of a leadership role for themselves.

#### Influential people

■ know what they want. They have goals and are careful not to lose sight of them. They want to win, although they are realistic enough to know that they can't win consistently at the expense of others.

■ know they have a right to try to get what they want. They know they don't have a right to get it, but no one says they can't try to get a new program approved or a budget that will allow innovation and expansion.

■ are articulate. They know how to express their needs and wants in terms that others can accept.

■ are sensitive. They realize assertiveness is only a part of the story. They know they must involve others in their transactions. They must be responsive to others' needs and wants. Influencers are skillful in understanding verbal and nonverbal language. They are sensitive to time and place, knowing how, when, and where to go after certain kinds of actions and decisions.

■ have credibility. To influence others you don't have to be loved, but you must be trusted and respected. People must believe you know what you're talking about. It won't disturb them that you are looking out for *your* interests if they trust you not to knowingly violate *their* interests in the process.

■ know how to deal with opposition. They don't let resistance from others cripple them. After all, anytime you press for something different, you're going to run into walls. But influencers welcome opposition, since it's evidence that others are involved. Overt opposition shows the influencer what he or she has to contend with. Their response to resistance is to keep the door open and people talking.

■ know how to ask for the order. They have good selling skills. They know how to close, to get the action they want.

■ know what motivates others. They understand why people behave as they do and how that behavior can be changed. It's distressing to find trainers who lack this important characteristic.

Another characteristic of some, but not all, influencers that could be beneficial for trainers who want to build their power base is that they seek visibility, even in small ways. If you want to achieve more impact, get out of your office and your classroom. Know as many people as you can, and make it easy for them to know you. Ask for things: your own subscription to *The Wall Street Journal*, better office furnishings, more equipment, perks, whatever. The important thing is not that

you get everything you want, but that people become accustomed to dealing with your requests. It's a useful way of publicizing yourself.

Your record may look excellent to those who take the time to examine it. Keep your name prominent. Continue to build your power base and practice your persuasive skills. Shed the criticism that trainers are almost by nature reactive. Use your influence and power base.



## Frustrated trying to squeeze everybody's needs into one management program?

Call 1-800-345-6525 and discover how our family of management programs lets you stretch training instead of squeezing it.

**Psychological  
Associates, Inc.**



Corporate Headquarters:  
8201 Maryland Ave., St. Louis, MO 63105 USA  
Foreign Affiliates:  
CANADA-Communicare, Inc. (416) 769-0846;  
UK-People Skills International 01-928-1781;  
PARIS-IFSE (1) 47-61-03-44

"I'll give you one day."

"Make sure it's practical."

"Our supervisors need help."

"We need skills, not theory."

"We want it customized."

"What about middle managers?"

"All they do is argue."

"I want video demos."

"I want real-life practice."

"I want my people to run it."

"How about train-the-trainer?"

"Productivity's way down."

"We need it yesterday."

"I want a modular approach."

"My people aren't motivated."

"We need coaching skills."

"We don't want jargon."

"Our managers need feedback."

"What's its track record?"

"Will it work on the job?"

"Has this been tested?"