

TOOL

Sources of Social Power



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Sources of Social Power

Purpose

A coaching and facilitation tool to help you create the conditions for transformative learning—so adults shift their beliefs, behaviors, and ways of being.

Why It Matters

Adults don't learn through compliance or information alone. Learning happens when conditions are right—when people feel safe, see purpose, have agency, and can make meaning. Without these conditions, there may be activity, but there is no real learning.

When to Use

Use when designing or facilitating professional learning, or when participants are disengaged, resistant, or not applying what they've learned.

How to Use This Tool

- Review the principles (drawn from *The Art of Coaching Teams*) as a check: What conditions for learning are present? What's missing?
- Identify one or two principles to strengthen (don't try to do all at once)
- Adjust your design or facilitation to better meet adult learning needs
- Ask: How can I create the conditions for people to truly learn—not just comply?

Sources of Social Power

Table 3.2 describes the origins of the sourcing and provides examples. As you read these descriptions, see if you can come up with other examples of people who draw power from each source.

Table 3.2 Sources of Social Power¹

Source of Power	Description
Position (Positional power or legitimate power)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comes from a formal right to issue directives or make key decisions because of position in an organization. • Granted by a title, role, and/or status. • Examples: a superintendent determines a district’s annual goals, a principal spearheads an equity initiative, a teacher decides on grading policies. The Director of Curriculum and Instruction introduces the year’s PD focus at the first all-teacher PD session. She says, “The data from last year’s benchmark assessments indicate that there’s a breakdown in how you assess students’ progress toward mastery. So this year, everyone will be expected use daily formative assessment methods to track progress and adjust course when needed.”
Coercion (Coercive power)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comes from the ability to punish someone for noncompliance. Consequences can be losing a job, public shaming, being kicked out of class, or being socially ostracized. • Often relies on punishments that are vague and obtuse. • Relies on fear to induce compliance. • Can be explained as “the ends justify the means.” • Examples: dictators, bullies, and the teacher who at the start of a PD session says to the facilitator, “Why are you presenting this session? You don’t know our students.” The district adopts a scripted literacy program and hires curriculum coaches who are charged with ensuring fidelity to the program. They do unannounced classroom visits to make sure that teachers are on the designated page for that day. The names of teachers who are not delivering the assigned lessons are reported to the principal.
Rewards (Reward-based power)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comes from the ability to issue rewards such as a promotion, high grade, public compliment, or group approval. • Can be coercive if rewards are used to achieve compliance. • Reward-based and coercive power are typically tied to positional power, but not always. • Examples: a district gives bonuses to teachers whose students score high on standardized tests, a promise of Friday afternoon free time if everyone turns in the week’s homework. During an activity, the PD facilitator says, “While you all practice, I’m going to circulate and listen in. I’m hoping to hear a few great examples of how to use this strategy so that after the practice time, I can ask those folks to share with the whole group.”

Table 3.2. © Elena Aguilar, *The Art of Coaching Teams: Building Resilient Communities that Transform Schools*. Jossey-Bass, 2016.

(continued)

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Source of Power	Description
Expertise (<i>Expertise-based power</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comes from someone’s experience or knowledge, and/or from reputation or qualifications. • Expertise doesn’t have to actually exist, but the perception of expertise must exist. • Examples: a leader with a Ph.D., a teacher who won a “teacher of the year” award. A fifth-grade teacher is invited to present a PD session on how to develop classroom community because he’s been at the school longer than almost anyone else and everyone says he’s a “great teacher.”)
Relationships (<i>Relational or referent power</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comes from being trusted or respected. • Based on personality and interpersonal skills. • Isn’t contingent on positional power. • Examples: the beloved school custodian who treats everyone kindly and who has been at the school for decades; a student’s parent who is a community organizer; the staff member who leads a rebellion against a leader’s equity initiative. The newly hired principal leads an all-staff PD session and begins by saying, “My vision for this time is that you’ll teach me. I will facilitate the structures in which we’ll learn together and make sure this time is useful to all, but all of you are the experts on our students. I am eager to learn from you.”
Information (<i>Informational power</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comes from access to facts and knowledge that others find useful or valuable. • Can result from and indicate relationships with power holders. • Builds credibility. • Examples: the department head who attends meetings at the central office and is informed about upcoming changes, the student’s parent who knows all the kids in the neighborhood. The grade-level team lead informs teachers that they need to revise the scope and sequence of their units. He says, “In the Leadership Team meeting, our principal explained changes to funding sources, and while it’s too complicated to explain, we need to do this.”

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¹French and Raven were the first to write about power in these ways, and they used legitimate power for what is now commonly referred to as positional power and referent power, which is commonly known as relational power.

The first step in navigating power is getting really clear on where you are drawing power from. Often, we draw from multiple types of power simultaneously, although it’s also common to have a tendency to habitually draw from one or another source. Once we consider the ways to use power and the impact we have, we’ll be able to evaluate our decisions. But the place from which we draw power is complicated by where we are, whom we are leading, and how we respond to dominant culture. That’s what we’ll explore next.

WHAT'S NEXT

Keep Learning with Bright Morning



Ready to take your facilitation skills to the next level? Introducing [The Resilient Facilitator Toolkit](#).

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- Save hours of prep with editable digital and printable resources for use in any session.
- Quick reference guides for those “up-oh” moments during facilitation.
- Integrate new practices step-by-step and start seeing results within 10 days.
- Keep essential facilitation tips and action steps within reach during every session.
- Turn every session into a growth opportunity for yourself and your learning community.



Join [PD that Changes Practice](#).

Engage adult learners in PD that energizes, inspires, and activates.

- Master facilitation techniques that balance structure with responsiveness.
- Design agendas that engage even the most reluctant participants from start to finish.
- Transform routine staff meetings into powerful learning opportunities that spark change.

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