

Challenging Organisations and Society

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On the Move: Patterns, Power, Politics

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Peter Heintel and Maria Spindler

Organised Power Relations and Their Potential

Abstract

We focus in this article on organised power relations as a nexus between routinized relations interwoven with human dignity. We re-defined the relation qualities “power over” and “power with” and added “power for”. All three are applied to organisations and leadership in relation to a differentiated and complex world, a world we all create each day by choosing and organising how people behave in relation to each other, how many opportunities and limits and how much security, risk, sense, and liveliness we enable for individuals and for collectives. Organisations, leadership systems and every single person all have responsibilities, because it is through patterns of arrangement and perpetuation of power relations that power is exercised.

Keywords: Power relations, organisation, leadership and power, power for future

1. Introduction

Why do we want to talk about power? Some people feel impotent, stuck or demotivated. Others are on a global power trip and believe they can subdue markets, organisations and other people. Still others have no desire for power and want nothing to do with it. What does this mean for our responsibilities to create organisations and society? How can we build frameworks and conditions for dignity in people’s lives? How can we as individuals become aware of and make sure that we enter into and create societal realms?

For one thing, we take on responsibility through organisations when we create conditions for behaving towards individuals that provide limits or opportunities for those people’s development.

Part 2 of this article shows the nexus among societal change, organised power and human dignity, while in Parts 3 and 4 we discuss how different relation arrangements can be channelled through structures and organisations. The article is based on two pillars: first, theoretical and historical discussions, and second, references to empirical data from our consulting cases and quotations from interviews with managers and entrepreneurs.

2. Societal Changes and Their Interplay with Organisations and Human Dignity

Old powers stabilised in social differences (e.g. rank, caste, religion, skin colour, and place of origin) and based on unquestioned authority have always been, and still are, tested by social revolutions. We are speaking here of religious and political revolutions whose goals are smashing perceived structures and enabling radical social power realignments, e.g. the American Revolution and Declaration of Independence (1776), the French Revolution (1798), the Chinese Revolution (1911), the Russian Revolution (1917) (Skocpal, 1979) or the recent Arab Spring and the related civil war in Syria, which began in 2011 and as of this writing is still going on (2014). They all share one mechanism: power is no longer seen as unquestionable and given by a kind of higher authority. The result is the necessity to realign power among people and social systems and to create power relations consciously. How, though, can social relations among people be rearranged? How have social orders succeeded in aligning relations to increase independence for individuals?

- On the one hand there is power *through inclusive organisations*, for instance in a difficult development to a form of government (democracy, republicanism). We view organisations as power constructs which transform social possibilities through decisions.
- On the other hand there is *more freedom and self-determination* for the individual. Western liberalism, orientated toward the individual, and today's neoliberalism feature individual choice and effort as central categories for validation. Classical liberalism, concentrated on the individual, was meant

to disentangle the Gordian knot of hierarchy (inequality) and equality. It suited the concept of the empowerment of the individual person and the complete spirit of the age of Western Enlightenment and its doctrine of freedom, with important consequences for ethics and concepts of autonomy and conscience. The related concept of dignity found a place in human rights. This history of self-determination gives us the right to question every heteronomy and every power.

Neoliberalism can help to solve the contradiction between hierarchy and equality. Personalisation of freedom and empowerment are seen as self-empowerment. Within the idea of the dignity of the person the principle of equality is hidden. In organisations, career opportunities are offered; the more effort, the greater the prospects of promotion. Inequality is neither the will of nature nor of God, nor the result of existing power interests. Inequality is the remuneration for effort by self-actualising individuals and is “just”. Before people began to question power positions in organisations, promotion and demotion was not an issue at all; one was born into a position by family or rank. Positions in today’s layout, however, can be considered to be the result of self-empowerment and thus are far more intimately related to the person. This can lead to the need for the person constantly to prove that the power is deserved.

The process of individualisation makes personal property more important: my dominance over things and goods; art celebrates the original genius; copyright protects my work. Work and effort are individually assigned, aligned and reckoned to the person and increased to the place of the self-actualisation. With this direction it is also possible to convey the contradiction between the demand for equality and the necessity of hierarchy. Every person makes her/his own luck. Clegg (2006) sees the legitimacy of neoliberals because power seems to be absent.

In Part 3 we focus on structures of organisations and consider these questions: What is the impact of which organised relationships? Which goals do we want to follow with whom and with which arrangement? How can

relations in organisations explain and differentiate among themselves? How can self-empowerment and dignity happen within which organised scope?

3. Organised Power Relations and Leadership

Social relations are awakened to life in, between and through organisations, be it through networks, contact with colleagues, cooperation between profit and non-profit organisations, or interdependence between political and economic organisations. Organisations are seen here as sedimented societal opportunities whose forms are patterns. They transform societies' complexity; they create and stabilise in the form of structures, processes and decision-making (Spindler 2012). Organisations are a collective life-world of past solutions for challenges, and the need to transform in the here and now and to take on new meanings for future arrangements. As power relations they create more or less complexity, limitations and opportunities for society and individuals. Leadership systems create through structured scopes, frameworks, space, goals, invitation, etc. and in so doing make use of different power qualities and their interplay with dignity and societal arrangements.

We explore the theory development of Follett (2013). Her distinction between “power over” and “power with” (Follett 2013, p. 101) creates very helpful categories for discussing power structures for organisations. Building on her work and that of Arendt (1999), we further develop what they intended into a third category called “power for”. These three relation patterns are presented here in increasing order of coping with and creating complexity and humanity.

3.1 Relation Pattern: Power Over and Power Under

Power over relations (Follett 2013) make the “object” of power the others, be they individuals, groups, organisations or nations. In this relationship dominance and coercion are used before other alternatives are sought. This power concept understands a power relationship as polarity, opposite views and differentials in power that attract each other from a posture of suspicion. One

side vies for power over the other; this can be influencing the other to concede its position but also using brute force to get its way. Max Weber (1957) defines this form of power as “the probability that one actor in the social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probably rests” (p. 152). He focused on bureaucratic organisational power as the source of the mechanisation and routinization of human life, and as a threat to the freedom of the human spirit.

The power concept developed in 1532 by Machiavelli is the most well-known “power over” relationship. It is based on biological survival, which for organisations nowadays can be interpreted as a struggle for survival on the market. This struggle generates primitive biological patterns of coping with “power over” principles. Two other power categories, namely causal power (oriented towards something certain) and fairly straightforward episodic power (securing certain preferred outcomes, where one agency seeks to get another to do what they would not otherwise do) are here considered as power over. Power under occurs when we give up our own power; we have the choice to accept obedience or to develop a countervailing power. Through interviews in organisations we observed three main reasons for putting oneself in a power under relationship:

Survival: The person estimates that personal needs will be better met, e.g. ensuring survival, coupled in this case with a personal tendency.

“I am divorced, have a mortgage on my house, two kids at university, and a new car, and the job market is not good...I am dependent on this job: a lot of reasons not to act more. A little creativity is appreciated, but not too much. And also...to move into the first row is not my thing. I like to duck sometimes and avoid conflicts. Conflicts suck the energy out of me.”
(Head of Marketing, banking)

Power over works with fear: fear that one will be worse off than one already is, will be punished, will lose status, one’s job, or one’s good and comfortable life, or will have even more conflicts.

Impotence: The person sees no hope in resisting and developing a sufficient countervailing power. It shows a form of helplessness and existential fear of entering an equal relationship:

“I am the department head and he is project manager in my department. But he does whatever he wants and I do not stop him. For one thing, through his style of action and his knowledge, he is very powerful within the entire corporation ... over the years he established a good informal position for himself; the board trusts him. It would be professional suicide to compete with him or try to guide or overpower him.” (Head of IT, banking)

Prospects of more: Dominance also works with the promise of a better future, i.e. career development as hope for more power over in the future. These development programmes become structurally permanent, for instance in career paths, mentoring systems, appraisal talks and performance contracts. The hope of promotion makes the person more patient and tolerant and reduces the will to resist, which the person also wishes to receive from his own “subjects” in the future. The dominant relation is built on the premise that we have to create a secure and predictable world in order to survive; it reduces insecurity and takes over responsibility for the future of others.

“I have subordinated myself for the last fifteen years; I have played along. Now I’ve made it. Now it’s MY turn, now I’ve got the management position I’ve longed for. And now I have the problem that I’m not...that I don’t want to be like my bosses were, but at the same time I have waited too long to have this power, and naturally I want to exercise it. But not the way my old boss did. But the entire university clinic only knows that kind of power.” (Medical Director – university clinic)

A middle manager of this CEO said in the interview about the power relation:

“He is really authoritarian and pushy; nothing we do is right. Sometimes it’s demotivating for me...I have the feeling what I do is not good

enough...Why do I even care what he thinks? ...I want a better position, I want to become department head - is it worth it?"

Our discussion and empirical material highlighted that unquestioned dominance-organised relation patterns disintegrate. When complex interconnections and the need for equal cooperation opportunities and a person's own dignity come into play in connection with the development of the whole and the environment, an active move and responsibility shift of leadership systems and each individual is required. There is a decision to be made: do I want to follow patterns through unquestioned acceptance, or do I question them and actively create communication and structure?

3.2 Relation Pattern: Power With and From Within

It is organised relations that bring groups of people together for closer and better equal collaboration (power with); this can be a government, an enterprise or an NGO. The goal is on the one hand further development of division of labour and on the other hand promotion of necessary teamwork and interdependence. It also means constant integration and differentiation, overcoming and involving what is strange or foreign.

Power with¹ (Follett 2013) is relational and collective, a form of collaboration and participation that we today call stakeholder engagement, multisector approaches and co-creation of power. Follett argued in her "power with" concept that reciprocal influence could lead to creative synthesis.

This includes concepts like:

- Collaboration on an equal level as system with all differences (diversity, inclusion, etc.), negotiation, dialogue, and shared decision-making, and

¹ Calibrating "new power behaviours based on learning" is the solution for Follett, who calls this "the law of the situation". Instead of marshalling top or outside experts, requirements or orders, the learning is in the here and now. Follett sees this in the service of bringing forth a collective will that can generate innovation and overcome obstacles by honing a shared purpose.

- Self-empowerment of individuals, active participation, motivation and responsibility for self-learning as a condition for stepping up and being able to collaborate on an equal level.

The concept implies that leadership-systems follow the action logic of abdication of power in order to share power in the service of the whole system. The transformation from power over to power with is a crucial paradigm shift. How can this paradigm shift be managed? We will illustrate power and structural shifts and their conditions and thresholds by means of eight case vignettes from our own consulting practice:

Vignette 1: Give free rein - then rein them in

Decentralisation is an attempt to dissolve centralised hierarchies. The principle of self-empowerment is transferred to individuals and units in their expertise. They should develop autonomous entrepreneurship. We saw cases in which abdication of power by headquarters was half-hearted. If the decentralised facilities made what headquarters considered to be real use of their independence, they often heard, “Everything’s getting out of control there.” Those who had been given free rein were reined in again.

Vignette 2: Framework steering, support and foothold

In cases where the swing of power between headquarters and decentralised units is successful, two points stand out: first, well contrived framework requirements, in which the connection between central and decentralised units and between developmental and decision-making competences is functional; and second, installed measures (controlling, reflexion, mentoring) which observe the success of this connection. Headquarters and decentralised units tend to meet eye to eye when the decentralised units take over active responsibility (power from within) for the step up in the sense of cooperation for the benefit of the whole.

Vignette 3: Connections in the matrix

Matrix organisations provide a colourful picture of relations. Their structural principle is to link autonomous functional units on a cooperative basis with central, superimposed units. In the process, meeting places result, functional crossroads where the various interests and proposals are exchanged and negotiated and decisions for the next steps are made. Conflicts, including conflicts in goals, are part of the daily routine when options for decisions are discussed. In practice one usually finds primarily middle management at these meeting places. If these problems were solved by power over, one could immediately forget about a matrix organisation. Practice shows that negotiators require clear framework conditions safeguarded by top management, a clear assignment containing room for negotiation, and the will and ability to develop room for personal responsibility and learning.

Vignette 4: Projects and teams

In successful cases power is delegated for a time from the line to the project, which functions on the principle of power with and from within. Contradictory principles meet and are dependent on each other as projects unite representatives of diverse units from various line organisations. Experts and special interest groups develop and decide in various team formations. Project organisations and their teams develop their own authority and special knowledge that cannot easily be communicated to employers. In successful cases power over is relativized. Collaboration in and between teams, their membership and their modes of decision making (steering panels, groups and committees, etc.) provide information about power with relations. Here we can see how far the line organisation has shifted from power over to power with.²

² For several decades, project organisations and teams have been drivers of this power over structural fragility and are systematically employed for this purpose. (Compare Heintel & Krausz, 2011) Projects also place the expertise of the staff and clients at the centre of things; their knowledge is their power and also the source of self-empowerment. (Spindler/Steger 2008)

Vignette 5: Use of experts – example IT

The IT surge, together with its form of communication and the specialists necessary for it, brought a far-reaching liquefaction of the power over principle. As essential experts they unsettle inherent power relations and pay schemes. One of the questions which arise is on which hierarchical level these specialists should be established, as they are responsible horizontally for the entire organisation. In successful cases communication paths are revolutionised; the horizontal possibilities are expanded and strengthened and the distribution of responsibilities is facilitated.

Vignette 6: Process and interface management

Vertical structures become more strongly connected horizontally through the attempt to line up specialist departments. Frequent causes are customer contacts that require bespoke solutions. A process manager is responsible for the continuity of the process; on the one hand process managers are responsible to the hierarchy, and on the other they supervise the functioning of the process. Cases show that successful interface management is essential, since interface management cannot be accomplished in a power over style – above all the question arises as to where it makes sense to plan for interfaces. In successful cases two things are necessary: power differentiation between power over and power with is put into effect, and places are provided where uncertainties about individual roles can be clarified.

Vignette 7: Conditions for network cooperation

Relations are questioned in as well as between enterprises. Consultation of successful networks between enterprises shows that the following conditions concerning the power with principle are required:

- A hybrid space in which diversity in terms of interests and contributions can be made visible.

- Overlapping groupings which constantly create new connections and fill the network with new life.
- Conscious development of power relations such as the reassessment of the meaning of individuals, groups, organisations and their special contributions.
- Active fostering of qualities such as trust, commitment and trustworthiness.

Vignette 8: Organisation development

Organisation development and consulting offers the opportunity of targeted engagement with the difference between power over and power with and self-empowerment. Consultancy enables reflexion on power when it succeeds in opening the assignment, the architecture and the design to a power-free space. Practice shows that special importance is attached to the positioning of the consultancy in the course of the shaping of the assignment. Above all the positioning of the consultant in relation to top management is decisive in opening up space in which power relations can be observed. (Heintel & Zouwen, 2013). If the consultant enters into the established power pattern of the system, this power-free space can only be opened with difficulty. Successful cases show that a good combination to raise awareness of power relations and make them easy to shape consists of:

- Tightly led framework steering with the top management of the system requiring change.
- Targeted change architecture that dissolves routine structures.
- Large-scale interventions. (Zouwen van der 2012)

These examples emphasise that every structural decision, every organised form of communication and cooperation has an impact on relations. Organised forms in which abdication of power over and power under relations is possible on both sides open up space for negotiation, collaboration, dialogue, shared developments, shared decision making and innovation. This requires

both taking leadership responsibility to create a framework and communication structure and also the commitment to create together. Consulting can help to design free space for observation and reflection on power relations and their functional use, for whom and for what.

3.3 Relation Pattern: Power For

Hannah Arendt (2011) defined practical wisdom in her book *Vita activa*³ as an orientation, a recognition and judgement perspectives in connection with the world⁴. She refers to knowledge about how we are connected to the world, how we interact with it and what our concept of a good life is. The highest and most important relation to others is an active life embracing the future potential of true realisation of human freedom. Each mutual action finds its meaning in recognising the action as part of a larger movement. In Arendt's concept, power can be realised when we actively create our reality:

“While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse. ... Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them ... Power is always ... a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength...” (Arendt 1999, 200).

This positive approach defines power as a shared interest for potential that can emerge among us. An active social life (practical wisdom) is a condition of power and vice versa. Through acting together we gain power potential, which corresponds to the condition of plurality in relating to each other. For

3 The title of the English version is *The Human Condition* (1999).

4 Hannah Arendt refers in her work to Aristotle, who describes practice as action that deals with what is changeable in the given world. There is no permanent valid rule for this; there are no conditions existing outside time or rules for what is good, what is virtuous and what is just. Practice in this sense means responsible human action which requires human freedom, since valuable, ethical action for the community is an end in itself. Practice derives from the Greek word *pronesis* and means practical wisdom. (Compare Spindler 2013.)

the same reason, power can be divided without decreasing it. And living this creating interaction is a condition for and result of individual freedom and dignity within organisations and thus also in society. Arendt argues that freedom does not pre-exist in the organised community but is constructed there, as the common space to which its equal members bring their own uniqueness and create something of lasting value such as an organisation or a state.

“Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.” (Arendt 1999, 200)

Our capacity to analyse ideas, wrestle with them, engage in active shared practice and learn from our actions is what makes us uniquely human, socially alive and powerful together. In fact, she sees this power as the element that gives us a reason to create our future potential together; it is the reason we build organisations.

“What keeps people together after all fleeting moment of action has passed (what we call today “organization”) and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power. And whoever, for whatever reason, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons.” (Arendt 1999, 201)

We interpret her positive definition as connecting us anew with our human dignity, our individuality, and responsibility for our collectives beyond downloading old shared power patterns⁵. Our term “power for our shared future” is here understood to mean creating new realities, as a lively nexus between

⁵ In her book *On Violence* Arendt uses the term “harmony” to refer to totalitarianism. Arendt does not see this as a mystical, ego-centred wholeness and defines a boundary between it and the totalitarianism which seeks harmony. It is not praise of harmony but power relations that create the opportunity for civilization to flourish and differentiate (Compare Arendt 1969).

the world and energy for life creation. This gives leadership systems and organisations a different sense in our complex society. For organisations, current terms for this include CSR and sustainability as well as sensemaking and transformation⁶. The way we lead ourselves and organise ourselves together is what our organisations have become socially in relation to the world and also in relation to us as individuals in this society. “Power for” focuses on reflective cooperation, responsibility and emancipation, mutual actions that expand the freedom and activity of others in any form of collective social construction, e.g. team, department, corporation, network, state or society. The possibility for “power for” has to be given and taken and if necessary defended; the space for it has to be guaranteed and fostered. Arendt (1969) goes so far as to say that at certain moments this type of power needs violence to create and maintain itself. See also the discussion by Peters (2008).

In business practice we experienced “power for” and felt the potential it carried within itself at the very moment. Here are two examples showing its connectivity with oneself, others and the whole, its simultaneous social complexity and individuality:

“I conceived this project as the Virgin did her Child. Somehow I opposed these rigid ideas of IT solutions and argued my idea of rightshoring. Then I developed a concept with experts and presented it to the Board at their next meeting ... and then suddenly I had been assigned its development and realisation. It has grown very big in recent years, throughout Europe and Asia. In hindsight this project has fundamentally changed the enterprise from a rigid to an open culture with more responsibility for the individual, the management and the environment. I was in the right place

⁶ With focus on organisations we can find case studies that deal for instance with “Building a Collaboration Capability for Sustainability: How Gap Inc. is Creating and Leveraging a Strategic Asset”. (Worley, C.G. & Feyerherm, A. E. & Knudsen, D. 2010) We also find companies like that of Eileen Fisher, which produces and sells and provides awards for sustainable businesses. For group dynamics this concept of movement as a principle is described as “creative relations” by Schüller and Zvacek (2013). Lammers (2005) named this category “power of creative intention”.

at the right time with an idea that supported many interests and movements.” (IT Expert)

“It was like a cosmic spark. We met to work on something for our network and on the side we talked about what we were working on at the moment. I told her about a buyout I was doing at the moment of a global journal that tries to make a difference to mainstream science, which supports ideas outside the box, connects theory and practice and to create a conference line. She jumped right into this with her passion and her future ideas and projects. All the opportunities grew immense as the energy seemed transformed into more intensity.” (Entrepreneur)

The quotations show the spark in shared creation for the whole and thus a form of hoping to do the right thing by actualising the possibilities of serving the interests and voices of many. “Power for our future” is a condition for organising actions with and for human dignity. It is here defined as a special quality of creation, a connectedness with oneself and at the same time with other people, as well as with the whole as an entity with all its differences, a connectedness that points, here and now, to the potential for creation in our future. Power for underlies the value for a good shared life.

4. Consequences for Organised Power Relations

The theoretical and empirical knowledge and data show that if we interpret power not as God-given relations but as choice, we put ourselves into a position where we are able to gain a positive perspective on power by composing as individuals and through organisations with action, reflexion, decision making, etc. We generate establishments in the here and now for shared future opportunities.

On an individual level the main questions are: What do I want to yield my power for? How, in what form and with whom (organisations and individuals) do I connect myself in order to create what future? We give away power as soon as we enter collective, organised activities; this leaves us with

self-responsibilities that we choose: Which opportunities do I want to share and give away? Which opportunities to influence do I gain for the future by joining a certain collective? For what goal and in which organised form do I want to have influence and my energy used?

On an organisational level leader systems open collective opportunities when we consciously differentiate and consciously apply different forms of embodiment: power over can be necessary to set and hold the scope, to create a structure in which power with and power for can be fulfilled. Once that scope or vessel for the development of power with and power for is set, leadership has to abdicate power over if the aim is that everyone can share their contributions, exchange knowledge, skills and learning in order to create a shared future in the here and now. This vessel helps the individuals to satisfy their need to belong and improve their power from within and helps the organisation as a collective as well. This is the stage of power for the collective potential of a bigger picture, the beyond, the shared future and our future, open for acting in a willingness to be fully alive, present and participating as an agent of change for the greater good.

The leadership system of an organisation decides which power relations appear as unquestionable and therefore as patterns have to be learned and practiced by everyone, and which can be mutually created. If leadership systems want to support power with and from within to encourage power for a shared future, it is helpful to ask and answer together questions like:

- For what purpose and how do we want to create functional power forms, organisations, structures and their dependences for future developments, in order to create movements beyond existing systems? How can we fuse patterns and routines, and how can we flow beyond established forms?
- For what purpose and how do we want to use the possibilities and limits of various power relations and their interrelations, as well as the interplay of power relations with the current system, the historical patterns, structure and culture? Applying power over consciously can be useful in flux change

processes in order to have a safe grip in the flow. Consciously set power over relations can give us back stability in order to open new shared activities. Keywords here are framework steering, concentration and orientation.

- For what purpose and how can we establish scopes, structures and designs that provide free space in order to encourage, foster and protect power with and power for, in order to build vessels which provide freedom to create together? How can we support collective future developments which ensure dignity in the present for the future?
- For what purpose and with which consequences do we want to connect ourselves with the world and interact with it? How can we renew and re-invent ourselves together with it? For what purpose and when do we want to engage ourselves with others? How and for what purpose can we foster collective bonds so that shared action finds its meaning as part of a larger movement? How can we become aware of the beyond and encourage life-lines, freedom, humanity, sensemaking for our shared doing, and interconnectedness with ourselves, the whole and responsibility for the future of the whole?

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