

Privileges and Perils of Power

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Power, simply the ability to have an effect or to have influence, is a magnetic, addictive, and corrupting force. Research shows that taking on higher role power or having higher rank power inevitably changes you. You are given gifts, actually privileges, from the outside world that change how you see yourself, how you see and relate to others, and how they see and relate to you. The greater the power difference the greater the effect. These privileges change you whether your intentions are for service or for selfish gain.

What is it about power that is corrupting? Why are we so corruptible?

These are questions that Julie Diamond asks in *Power, A User's Guide* (Diamond, 2016). It gets right down to the bottom of things. Power is the ability to have an effect or to have influence. We all have power. Even a baby has power. Think about the effect of a baby's cry or a baby's laugh. This is personal power. It is personal and unique. It is part of part of our identity. We may use it wisely and well. We, or the people around us, may inflate it or diminish our awareness or access to it, but as long as we are alive we have the ability to have an effect.

It is another kind of power that is corrupting—*role power*. Role power is the increased power that is embedded in a role or position you are given. Your role power is *not* your identity. Your role power is like a scarf or mantle of extra power that is added on to your personal power. It is attached to the role and should come off and on with the role. Teachers, Clergy, Therapists, Presidents, CEOs, Policemen, Politicians are roles that come with increased power. The power that comes with higher *rank* also changes people and how others experience them. Rank power can also be corrupting. Wealth, higher education, experience, celebrity, white, male and even parenting are examples of higher rank. In summary, personal power is immutable, role power is earned, won, or assigned, and rank power is mutable by culture and is sometimes earned. In this article the primary focus is on the privileges of role power and how to mediate the perils. (Barstow, 2015, p. 303-307) Some of the greatest perils of power come from the tendency to blend personal, role, and rank powers instead of seeing role and rank as add-ons to personal power.

Here's a taste of research that describes some of the changes power brings. Studies show that once people assume positions of power, they're likely to act more selfishly, impulsively, and aggressively, and they have a harder time seeing the world from other people's points of view. Dacher Keltner calls this the paradox of power: "*The skills most important to obtaining power and leading effectively are the very skills that deteriorate once we have power*" (Keltner, 2007). These skills (what most people want from leaders) are characteristics of what could be called social intelligence: modesty, empathy, engagement with the needs of others, and skill in negotiating conflict, enforcing norms, and allocating resources fairly. (Barstow, 2015, p. 316-318).

[In another study,] when researchers give people power in scientific experiments, those people are more likely to physically touch others in potentially inappropriate ways, to flirt in more direct fashion, to make risky choices and gambles, to make first offers in negotiations, to speak their mind, and to eat cookies like the Cookie Monster, with crumbs all over their chins and chests (as quoted in Keltner, 2008, Barstow, 317-318).

Research shows that power leads people to act in impulsive fashion, both good and bad, and to fail to understand other people's feelings and desires. . . . For instance, studies have found

that people given power in experiments are more likely to rely on stereotypes when judging others, and they pay less attention to the characteristics that define those other people as individuals. Predisposed to stereotype, they also judge others' attitudes, interests, and needs less accurately. . . . Power encourages individuals to act on their own whims, desires, and impulses. . . . Perhaps more unsettling is the wealth of evidence that having power makes people more likely to . . . interrupt others, to speak out of turn, and to fail to look at others who are speaking. . . . Surveys of organizations find that most rude behaviors—shouting, profanities, bald critiques—emanate from the offices . . . of individuals in positions of power (Keltner, 2008, Barstow, p. 318).

Some additional research does indicate that people with a moral center made up of attitudes and values such as kindness, humility, honesty, respect and fairness, are less affected by the corrupting effects of elevated power (Lammer, Stapel, 2009, pp 279-289).

I find this information both unsettling and liberating. I have long wrestled with how to understand what is called evil. With an infusion of empathy and compassion, I see, through the lens power, that, not only do we all have the capacity to misuse power, but we are all subject to the addictive trance of elevated power that reduces our empathy and inhibitions and pulls us toward prioritizing our own needs and interests because our higher role or rank allows us to. It takes a mighty commitment to self-awareness and the well-being of all to be able to mitigate these effects. This is a life-long engagement with understanding and refining your impact on others.

We have all, mostly inadvertently, caused harm in minor and sometimes major ways, and we have all been hurt by misuses and abuses of power. This is human. I'm thinking of the teacher who says she was open to feedback but gets defensive and angry when she hears critical words; the therapist who has an emotional affair with his client; the CEO who begins to think of her employees as simply cogs in a wheel; the doctor who offers choices without medically evaluating the options; the banker who makes money from giving a bad loan; the policeman who privileges people with rank; the parent who offers authority with no love, or love with no authority; the Priest who mixes up love relationships with congregant relationships; or the politician who thinks only of re-election strategies rather than what is best for her constituents. I wonder how many of these could have been reduced or prevented if this information about the corrupting nature of power were part of everyone's basic education.

Why are we so corruptible?

This is the second part of Julie Diamond's question (Diamond, 2016, p. 49 ff.). She goes on to say that "*Something happens to us like being under the influence of drugs. . . . This creates a deadly cocktail of opportunity and immunity.*" Since everyone is affected, we need to take a moment to feel compassion for ourselves as human beings. We are all vulnerable to the deteriorating effects of elevated power. The greater the power difference, the stronger the effects, and the more tempting the perils.

I'd like to take you on a journey to help you understand more about how the changes that come with power feel and the impact they have on you. Disneyland has a ride called Thunder Mountain. Now, please imagine that, with a group of other leaders, you are climbing not Thunder Mountain but Power Mountain. You are excited. You've just been given a role with increased power. You want to use it for the good of all. The higher you walk, the further away the village and the villagers look. The higher you climb, the greater your role power and the greater the power difference

between you and the people you are responsible for. You climb up the path, for example, from student to graduate student to teacher to assistant professor to dean to college president. The higher you get the greater the view and the rarer the air.*

Along the way you will receive four gifts or privileges that will support you in doing your job and fulfilling the responsibilities of your role. These are the four gifts that power gives to everyone, no matter what their intention. These are the gifts that will impact and change you, inevitably. You have not earned these gifts of power, although you may have earned the power role. They are not given because you are good or bad. Each weaves its own spell.

Receive now your first gift, symbolized by a coin: Access to resources and opportunities, including money, people, information, supplies, and control. The functional leadership purpose of this gift is to provide you with the support you need to fulfill the responsibilities of your role. *As you take in this gift, notice how this alters your inner experience and how you see others. What perils can you feel or imagine?*

Receive now your second gift, symbolized by a scarf that you put around your neck: You become bigger than yourself. You are bigger because, to others, you are now a role—an add-on to your personhood. The needed leadership purpose of this gift is to provide you with the increased ability to have an effect and to have the influence that you will need to fulfill your role. *As you embody a role in addition to being a person, notice your inner experience and how others may see you. What perils can you feel or imagine?*

Receive now your third gift, a piece of paper with slits cut in it to symbolize changes in your vision and how you are seen: You gain social distance and prerogative to enable you to see the big picture and not get too caught up in the details or with individuals. *As you take on more distance, notice your inner experience and how it changes your perceptions of others. What perils can you feel or imagine?*

Receive now your fourth gift, symbolized by a wand: Freedom to act with limited interference, and significant immunity from the impacts. This will allow you to make decisions in a timely and direct way. *As you feel this freedom and immunity, notice your inner experience and how you approach making decisions and taking action. What perils can you feel or imagine?*

Now you have reached the top of the mountain. You hold your gifts. You are at the summit. You have a great deal of role power. The gifts enable you to do your job. They are privileges and they are empowering. Take a minute to notice what they allow and help you to do. They also change you in corrupting ways. Take a minute to get a sense of the perils that come with the advantages. Notice the magnetic pull toward being self-serving, toward less empathy, toward impulsiveness and control.

Here at the top of Power Mountain you must choose how you will use these gifts. The gifts pull like a magnet toward being self-serving. When you have so much intoxicating power, why would you choose to use it in service to others? As in Star Wars where the dark and the light are of the same genetic pool, you must choose.

Here's where you get to decide whether or not you will fully embrace and say "yes" to your role and rank power. This is a humbling and sacred moment. You can decide that your good intentions will be enough ensure your right uses of power. You can take a "wait and see" attitude and let bumpy experiences be your teacher. You can decide to pretend these negative aspects don't exist or don't apply to you. You can make power itself the enemy and deny that you have greater power. You can choose to use your power in the service of your own wealth, fame, and ego-gratification. Or you can let the impact of the drug of power pull you to use your

powers for wealth, fame, control, or self-aggrandizement. Or you can make the most challenging and ultimately rewarding choice: owning and using your role power in service of others and for the good of all.

Here's an interesting thing: only if you choose socially responsible power, do you need to understand both the gifts and perils and how they are affecting you. (To misuse your power, you do not need to know the intentions and strategies for right use of power.) If you don't choose to monitor and mediate your own shadow tendencies and vulnerabilities, you will blindly and inevitably misuse your power. Power is a strong teacher. You will have many opportunities to look again at this choice.

If you are paying attention, you will be able to take advantage of the great teachings power has to offer you through mistakes, self-reflection, and self-correction. Your relationship with power is a life-long engagement with your impact, vulnerabilities, limitations, and mistakes. This relationship with power, in itself, will prove to be an extra gift. What do you choose?

Next we descend and return to the village where you can find out more about how you are changed and how differently you are responded to. One more thing. Choosing to understand both the privileges and perils of increased power is surely and deeply humbling. Humility is an under-acknowledged value for leaders, and yet, honored and appreciated by those they serve. *"If you don't have a way to incorporate the humbling experiences that come with elevated power, you will have to depend on your role alone to carry through or to legitimize your behavior"* (Rosenholtz, private conversation, 2016).

Here is a chart that describes, in the left column, the perils that come with the four gifts and privileges. The right column lists some activities that can help empower you and also mediate the changes, temptations, habits, and tendencies. This is a big light to shine on territory that has not been much named or explored. Be compassionate and curious as you look over this chart. In the perils side of the chart, think about harm caused by over-uses, under-uses or unconscious uses of power from your own life experience or that you have heard of or read about. Thoughtfully notice several perils that you may be particularly vulnerable to in your work in the world. Then look at the mediating activities and make a commitment to be self-aware and pro-active.

A few reminders as you look at this chart. First of all, since power has a neutral meaning of the ability to have an effect or to have influence, it is not power itself that is corrupting. It is role power that changes us. As Julie Diamond puts it, *"Something happens to us when we step into roles of power: its like being under the influence of drugs or alcohol or having someone cast a magic spell that alters our perceptions and emotions. As though slipping on Sauron's Ring of Power, when we step into a position of power, we think, feel, and behave differently. The role itself allows for its own corruption. It is a magic that must be carefully managed"* (Diamond, 2016, p. 31).

The second reminder is that your personal power is the foundation that you need to stand on, rest in, and be nourished by. Personal power is what we all need to do things, to accomplish our goals, and to engage well with other people, and to make the world a better place. Role power *"is based on the external, [while] personal power is self-sourced. . . . Your personal power can thus be independent of the validation of others. In fact, it is the only power that can transfer from context to context"* (Diamond, 2016, p. 63). *"Cultivating personal power starts with knowing and valuing who you are. Growing our personal power is our greatest asset for good and strongest weapon against the corrupting influence of power"* (Diamond, 2016, p. 67).

The third reminder is compassion: compassion for ourselves, compassion for others. We are all affected by the magic spell of role or rank power. We all feel its pull toward being self-serving and less empathetic. The news is overloaded with horrific examples and images of abuses of power. And yet, most people care about the well-being of those close to them and have good intentions at heart. Again, drawing on Julie Diamond's wisdom, although *"corruption implies an illegal act, it also refers to non-conscious, unintended, unpremeditated acts that break or stretch social and relational bonds, and in so doing, inflict harm. . . .By and large these are unconscious actions carried out by someone with high rank, good intentions, and benign neglect"* (Diamond, 2016, p. 51).

Understanding the spell of role and rank power is one of the primary reasons for working with this chart.

Each • on this chart is a nugget to which numerous stories and examples could be added.

RIGHT USE OF POWER

GIFTS AND PERILS, PRIVILEGES AND TRAPS, SHINE AND SHADOW

Power Gift and Privilege: You get access to greater resources and opportunities (money, people, information, supplies, control)

Symbolic Object: coin

Possible Power Perils

- you prioritize your own needs and interests and decrease your sensitivity to others needs and interests
- you think and act from unconscious bias (*forgetting that advantage begets more advantage and disadvantage begets more disadvantage*)
- you fall under the spell of perks and privileges
- you lose awareness of your limitations

Purpose: To provide you with the support you need to fulfill the responsibilities of your role.

Mediating Activities

- consult often
- practice and cultivate humility, authenticity, and transparency
- stay connected to your moral values and ethics
- embrace your limitations as well as your strengths
- harvest the lessons from your personal history with power wounds so that you are not destined to repeat them as a leader

Power Gift and Privilege: With the addition of your role, you become larger than your personal self.

Symbolic Object: robes

Possible Power Perils

- you over- or under-identify with role
- you become an object for projections of images and expectations associated with your role; (you are no longer able to "just be you")
- you are idealized and devalued, and then you believe in your greatness or devalue yourself and/or your role or rank (imposter syndrome)
- you project your own issues onto others
- you assume and don't earn trust and authority
- you get your personal needs for these inappropriately met through your role or rank
 - love, respect and approval
 - money
 - intimacy, friendship, sex
 - control
 - intensity and drama
 - refuge
- you mistakenly confuse student/client/subordinate affection and attachment with romantic personal love
- you imagine you are more sexually attractive & desirable than others perceive you to be
- others adjust their behavior around you

Purpose: To provide you with the increased ability to have an effect and to have influence you will need to fulfill your role.

Mediating Activities

- own and embrace your role and rank power—say "yes" to these powers
- choose to know, understand and handle your shadow temptations and habits and the pull to be self-serving
- know how to apologize and forgive when needed
- get your needs met, but get them met elsewhere
- learn to manage your "triggers" and don't let them run the show
- avoid burn-out with pro-active self-care
- cultivate resilience
- self-reflect and self-correct
- track for, de-escalate, resolve and repair painful or conflicted situations
- apologize and forgive authentically

Power Gift and Privilege: You gain social distance and prerogative.

Purpose: To enable you to see the big picture and not get too caught up in the details or with individuals.

Symbolic Object: kesa

Possible Power Perils

- you feel and show less empathy
- you are more isolated (*lonely at the top*)
- response to feedback:
 - less open, more removed
 - impervious to negative feedback
 - removed from accurate feedback
 - in an ever-escalating positive feedback loop
 - make mistakes of believing all feedback or no feedback
- you use cognitive strategies to legitimize or deny unethical behaviors
- you are less willing and less accurate in seeing other's perspectives and sensing their emotions
 - you are unaware of your impact
- you are isolated and disconnected from reality, dependent on others for information, and propped up by unreal images and expectations
- you have immunity from social expectations to fit in, adapt, or to feel pressured by others

Mediating Activities

- cultivate a mixture of up- and down-power roles and rank
- grow your personal power
- engage and invest in a diversity of activities and relationships
- cultivate individual connections and universal compassion
- recognize feedback as an investment in relationship, seek accurate feedback and respond without shame or blame, but with genuine appreciation
- find creative ways to stay connected to those down-power to you
- don't lead with defensiveness

Power Gift and Privilege: Freedom to act with limited interference and increased immunity from impacts and accountability.

Purpose: To allow you to make decisions in a timely and direct way.

Symbolic Object: Whisk

Possible Power Perils

- you loosen your inhibitions, you act on whims, and are impulsive and insensitive
- you are unrealistically enamored of your own ideas
- you have heightened confidence in predicting positive outcomes
- you act and speak in ethically hypocritical ways (*You have stronger rules for others than yourself, or blame others for your own misuses of power.*)
- you get lax about rules for yourself and strict about rules for others
- you have a heightened sense of control over events
- your limited accountability and reduced oversight creates an opportunity to take advantage of people and situations
- you focus on task and lose sight of people

Mediating Activities

- stay in your heart while standing in your strength
- be mindful of the 150% principle
- assess your power peril tendencies and challenges and be pro-active in recognizing and addressing them
- close the gaps between your intention and your impact
- track and attend to your impact, especially when it doesn't match your intention
- Be proactive and sincere in making repairs
- Make frequent and skillful use of feedback

