

A Field Guide to Social Power

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*“When you are confused about power,
remember love.”—Victor Anderson*

Introduction

I wrote this to crystallize my thoughts on how power moves in groups, based on my observations as a neighbor, worker, and community activist. By sharing it, I hope to spark a generative discussion about power, especially in egalitarian countercultural groups.

I’ve noticed that progressive folks are often uncomfortable with the subject of power. For many, the word is synonymous with non-[consensual power over](#). But through this analysis, I’ve come to realize that there are many forms of power, and none of them is in itself abusive. It all depends on whether power is wielded by the fearful, controlling ego, or whether it is used with skill, generosity, and [love](#).

Many of these concepts come from other sources. I honor [Starhawk](#), [Tree Bressen](#), [Joanna Macy](#), [Carrie Jo Stairs](#), [rain crowe](#), and many other teachers and writers for their inspiration. Thanks to Marty Wilder for pointing out [the Power of Subcontext](#).

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- How do you see different forms of power being used in the communities you’re part of?
- Which forms do people seem most comfortable with, and which are they most challenged by?
- What are some of your own reactions to and patterns around power?

How to leave feedback

Constructive feedback is welcome. To insert comments in this document, highlight the text you want to comment on, and select Insert > Comment. I’d appreciate your including your name if you’re editing anonymously.


Quick Reference


	Also called	What it says	How it works
Personal power	Autonomy Self-empowerment Leadership	"I can..." "I will..." "I need..."	Expressing individual perspective and initiative
Collective power	Power-with Solidarity Collaboration	"Together we can..." "We support each other" "So say we all"	Working together to achieve shared vision
Power over	Hierarchal power Command and control	"You must..." "You better not..."	Using force, intimidation, and/or rules enforced by penalties
Affiliation	Loyalty Shared identity	"You're one of us" "We're on the same team"	Building connection through shared identity or group membership
Privilege	Unearned social power	"I have..." "I get to..." "I don't need to..."	Being rewarded for societally valued traits
Earned influence	Social capital Reputation	"We respect you for..." "We trust you to..."	Making contributions to the group and its members
Resistance	Negative power Power not-to	"I won't..." "We must not..."	Passively or actively opposing others' actions
Power under	Naming oppression	"I can't..." "You won't let me..."	Calling attention to disempowerment


Higher-order powers


The use of these powers shapes and conditions how other forms of power can be used.


The Power of Consent	Alignment Shared purpose Consensus	"I am a willing participant" "We are agreed on this"	Aligning individual power with group direction
The Power of Context	Facilitation Hospitality Leadership	"Here's what's going on" "Look, this is important"	Establishing context and helping make meaning
The Power of Subcontext	Underlying assumptions Social conditioning Cultural commons	"As we all know..." "This is how the world is"	Identifying and rebuilding underlying assumptions
The Power of Connection	Love Interdependence Magic	"You are another self" "We are parts of a larger whole"	Enlarging perspective and connection


<p>Personal power</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Autonomy Self-empowerment Leadership</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>“I can...” “I will...” “I need...”</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Expressing individual perspective and initiative</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Express your point of view ● Ask for what you need and want ● Step up and take initiative ● Propose new solutions and directions ● Follow through and be accountable ● Acknowledge and learn from mistakes ● Identify and hold personal boundaries ● Practice self-kindness and self-care ● Cultivate personal and spiritual growth
<p>What it’s good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Providing initiative and drive ● Balancing personal needs with the needs of the group ● Inspiring others to step into their own power ● Building trust based on an accurate sense of individual and group capacity ● As a necessary basis for collective power
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Monopolizing the conversation ● Rogue / vigilante / lone crusader dynamics ● “Savior behavior” ● Overcommitment / martyrdom / organizational codependency
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Differences in earned influence and privilege result in varying capacities for personal power, but everyone can learn to use what they’ve got and develop more. ● When personal power is used effectively and in alignment with the group, it increases earned influence. Otherwise, it may encounter resistance. ● There’s only so much one person can accomplish alone. For bigger jobs, collective power is needed.


<p>Collective power</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Power-with Solidarity Collaboration</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>“Together we can...” “We support each other” “So say we all”</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Working together to achieve shared vision</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Invite participation, collaboration, and shared ownership ■ Seek common ground and larger solutions ■ Direct group activity in pursuit of shared goals ■ Speak up in support of others and group ■ Identify and uphold group values and agreements ■ See what’s already moving and join in ■ Say “yes, and...” instead of “yes, but...”
<p>What it’s good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Accomplishing big goals ■ Strengthening relationships and group cohesion ■ Experiencing shared accomplishment ■ Moving power around within the group ■ Co-creating culture
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Groupthink / intolerance of autonomy and divergent views ■ Scapegoating ■ Fascism ■ Ostracism & shunning
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Effective use requires the willingness to place group goals ahead of individual preferences, and the accountability and self-awareness to step up and step back as needed. ■ Requires patience, especially when contrasted with the seeming efficiency of personal power or power over. ■ Heavy-handed use or misuse tends to decrease earned influence and to evoke resistance in response. ■ Group involvement in decision-making needs to be balanced against practicalities and the need for autonomy. ■ Sometimes groups that value inclusivity give more energy and attention to the people who aren’t showing up than to those who are.


<p>Power over</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Hierarchal power Command and control</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>“You must...” “You better not...”</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Using force, intimidation, and/or rules enforced by penalties</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use power deriving from an official role, special access, or rules and agreements ● Give orders and expect obedience ● Use personal power or privilege to impose your will ● Use or threaten to use forms of institutional power-over such as the legal system ● Use force or the threat of force
<p>What it’s good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Protecting self or others from imminent threat ● Excluding or disarming those who won’t respect boundaries and agreements ● Forming groups that are highly efficient and cohesive ● Establishing dominance and instilling compliance ● Imposing and maintaining structures of power and privilege
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bullying / preemptive attack ● Verbal and physical abuse ● Abuse of authority ● Authoritarianism
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In dominant culture, this power is commonly used in ways that are unconscious, oppressive, and abusive. ● In a nonviolent egalitarian subculture, this power must be used with consent, accountability, and conscious care, and only when no other form of power will work. ● Use of this power tends to provide security and comfort for some, and to spark resistance and rebellion in others. ● Not using this power when needed can result in disruption and harm caused by those who ignore group boundaries and agreements.


<p>Affiliation</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Loyalty Shared identity</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>“You’re one of us” “We’re on the same team”</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Building connection through shared identity or membership in a group</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Build relationships among those who share a gender, orientation, race, ethnicity, or other identity, or who belong to the same team, club, movement, party, or other group ● Share experiences and identify common challenges ● Advocate for the group’s needs and interests ● Create a caucus or exclusive space ● Wear distinctive clothes or other signifiers ● Celebrate the group’s triumphs and holidays ● Share subgroup experiences and gifts with the larger group
<p>What it’s good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creating team spirit and group loyalty ● Building solidarity based on shared experiences ● Giving minority subgroups a collective voice ● Advancing group needs and interests
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Polarization / “us vs. them” ● Fragmentation / splintering / schism ● Groupthink / suppression of divergent views ● Reinforcing essentialism
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The strong human need for affiliation must be balanced against the need for autonomy and the subgroup’s loyalty to the culture and goals of the larger group. ● Overemphasis on affiliation works against the ability to build solidarity with other groups. ● Reducing individuals to a singular identity trait can oversimplify complex human experiences and reinforce stereotypes. Not all individuals fit neatly into predefined identity categories, and those who do not align with identity-based subgroups may feel marginalized or ignored by them.

<p>Privilege</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Unearned social power</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>"I have..." "I get to..." "I don't have to..."</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Being rewarded for societally valued traits</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be (perceived as) white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, American, Christian, neurotypical, physically and mentally able, middle- or upper-class, well-off or rich, educated, literate, married or coupled, professionally employed, articulate, confident, charismatic, conventionally attractive, well dressed, and/or "hot" (young / thin / muscular / well endowed) ● Possess other beneficial traits resulting from good luck and/or alignment with power structures ● Possess other inherent traits that are valued by the group
<p>What it's good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rewarding culturally valued traits ● Maintaining the status quo ● Perpetuating the patriarchy / kyriarchy ● Sharing gifts that can be used on behalf of the larger good ● Motivating change regarding the mechanisms of oppression through "privilege hacking"
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clueless entitlement ● Defensiveness or denial of others' experiences ● Conscious or unconscious support for injustice and oppression
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Having privilege is not a moral failing—everyone benefits from some forms of privilege. ● Membership in an oppressed group does not preclude benefiting from privilege in other areas. ● Skillful and conscious use of privilege can contribute to positive change when it is used to dismantle oppressive systems to allow for more equitable distribution of personal power and earned influence. ● Attempting to deny the existence of privilege can be an attempt to camouflage the use of power over.

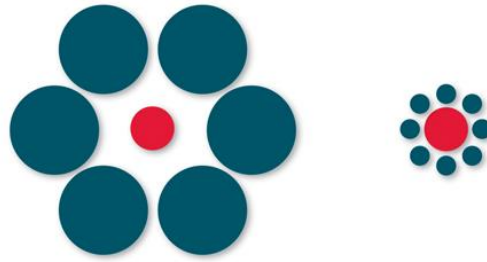
<p>Earned influence</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Social capital Reputation</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>“We respect you for...” “We trust you to...”</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Making contributions to the group and its members</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use personal power and privilege on behalf of others and the group ● Show up and do the work ● Cultivate relationships across subgroups ● Give gifts, do favors, make sacrifices ● Gain education and skills ● Be sensitive to unwritten norms ● Be accountable for mistakes ● Stay around for a long time
<p>What it’s good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rewarding those who contribute to the group ● Reinforcing collective norms and values ● Enhancing the capacity to use other forms of power
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Popularity contest / Cult of personality ● Guru dynamics
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Earned influence becomes harmful when it is used to exempt the holder from disagreement or accountability. Using earned influence in a good way requires vigilance about using it in service to the group and not just to protect and feed the ego. ● Groups need to look at what behaviors are rewarded with earned influence to ensure they align with group values and interests. ● Egalitarian groups need to give everyone, even the newest or least popular member, the same baseline amount of influence. ● Attempting to deny the presence of earned influence can be used to camouflage the use of power over.

<p>Resistance</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Negative power Power not-to</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>“I won’t...” “We must not...”</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Passively or actively opposing others’ actions</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Withdraw from or boycott the process ● Drag your feet, be unresponsive to requests ● Raise practical or procedural objections ● Block consensus proposals ● Polarize the group and get people arguing ● Create confusion and disruption
<p>What it’s good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expressing disagreement ● Preventing action that violates the values or best interests of the group ● Calling attention to bad process ● Protecting oneself or others from harm ● Resisting oppression ● As a means to power for those who feel otherwise powerless
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Passive-aggressive behavior ● Obstructionism ● Terrorism
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wise use of negative power on behalf of group interests is essential to consensus process. However, blocking is often misunderstood and overused. ● May inhibit its users from acknowledging and using personal power, or be used to avoid doing so. ● Frequent use diminishes earned influence, especially when unaccompanied by positive contributions.

<p>Power under</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Naming oppression</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>“I can’t...” “You won’t let me...”</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Calling attention to disempowerment</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speak on behalf of an oppressed or absent group ● Point out ways that others are preventing full and equal participation ● Call attention to patterns of oppression and exclusion that may be invisible to the dominant group ● Say you feel triggered, unsafe, or excluded ● Hold others responsible for the current situation ● Demand group attention
<p>What it’s good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Calling attention to distress, injustice, and oppression ● Prompting group self-examination and movement towards greater fairness and inclusion ● As a means to power for those who feel otherwise powerless
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learned helplessness ● Victim playing ● Persecution complex
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reactions to the use of identity-based power-under tend to polarize and monopolize group discourse in progressive groups. ● May be used as a form of resistance. ● Overuse may inhibit users from acknowledging and using personal and collective power. ● Nobody wins in the “I’m more oppressed than you are” game (a.k.a the Oppression Olympics). ● Initially tends to increase the user’s earned influence, but unskillful or disingenuous use does the opposite and may desensitize the group to valid and important issues.

<p>The Power of Consent</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Alignment Shared purpose Consensus</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>"I am a willing participant" "We are agreed on this"</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Aligning individual power with group direction</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be transparent with actions and intentions ● Articulate clear vision and direction ● Make sure everyone understands the process ● Solicit and incorporate feedback ● Make space for and learn from dissent ● See conflict as an opportunity to craft a better solution ● Be patient, don't try to move too fast ● Check for alignment throughout the process ● Seek active consent to decisions ● Minimize the use of power over ● Leave room for individual autonomy and innovation
<p>What it's good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Protecting individuals from being steamrolled by the group ● Enabling the group to benefit from divergent opinions ● Catalyzing collective power
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Misuse of blocking in consensus ● Decision-making gridlock
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● At times, individuals must be willing to put aside individual opinions and needs for the good of the larger group. This can be a major challenge in a culture based on individualism. Cultivating affiliation through shared purpose helps increase this capacity. ● Resistance is an expression of the withdrawal of consent.

The Power of Context



The red circles are exactly the same size.

Also called

Facilitation
Hospitality
Leadership

What it says

“Here’s what’s going on”
“Look, this is important”

How it works

Establishing context and helping make meaning

Ways to get it and use it

- Explain, interpret, and provide background for events
- Hold aspects of the collective [container](#)
- Set personal and collective intention
- Inspire and motivate others
- Tell community stories and legends
- Welcome newcomers
- Hold space for conflict
- Give and receive feedback
- Express appreciation and gratitude

What it’s good for

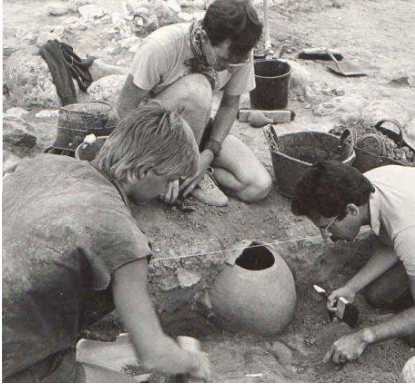
- Providing focus and direction
- Inspiring greater use of [personal power](#)
- Creating shared meaning, stories, and vision
- Catalyzing [alignment](#) and [collective power](#)
- Activating [the Power of Connection](#)
- Inviting people to consider other ideas and points of view
- Making the invisible visible and giving the unspoken a voice


How it can turn ugly

- Too much talking
- Bossiness / experiential micromanagement
- Intolerance of silence, uncertainty, and chaos

Tips

- Remember that everyone is constantly using this power through the stories we tell ourselves to explain what’s going on ([cf.](#) the [ladder of inference](#)). These stories influence our assumptions about others’ motivations and determine how we treat each other.
- [Subject-SUBJECT consciousness](#) is a positive application of this power. Blaming, spreading rumors, and trash-talking are negative applications of this power.
- The capacity to use this power on behalf of the group is conditioned by the user’s [personal power](#), [earned influence](#), and [privilege](#). Its use both draws down and adds to earned influence.
- Using this power to uphold group agreements and boundaries takes skill, transparency, and above all collective [consent](#).

<p>The Power of Subcontext</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Underlying assumptions Social conditioning Cultural commons</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>“As we all know...” “This is how the world is”</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Identifying and rebuilding underlying assumptions</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Look deeper ● Pay close attention to what is valued and whom that serves ● Become a critical consumer of mass culture ● Examine historical context ● Listen to your elders ● Expose the histories of words and dare to rewrite them ● Unpack metaphors and deconstruct myths ● Create new memes
<p>What it’s good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Revealing underlying beliefs and social norms ● Making the invisible visible and giving the unspoken a voice ● Redefining the basic premises of the group or the container ● Exposing the roots of privilege ● Reinvigorating tradition and co-creating culture ● Creating dramatic shifts of consciousness ● Establishing a strong foundation for the Power of Context
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Psychological manipulation ● Deceptive framing / spin control ● Demagoguery
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This power is latent in the words and myths that have been handed down to us, loaded with metaphor and invisible meaning. It is constantly influencing our thoughts and values, whether we are aware of it or not. ● Reclaiming slur words, introducing new pronouns, and changing language around race, class, gender, and ecology are positive applications of this power. False dichotomies, divisive political rhetoric, and many forms of advertising are negative applications of this power. ● The collective use of this power is a deep practice for addressing deeply rooted issues and creating profound cultural shifts. Using it effectively requires ongoing dialogue, critical thinking skills, deconditioning work, exposure to new stories, etc.

<p>The Power of Connection</p>	
<p>Also called</p>	<p>Love Interdependence Magic</p>
<p>What it says</p>	<p>“You are another self” “We are parts of a larger whole”</p>
<p>How it works</p>	<p>Enlarging perspective and connection</p>
<p>Ways to get it and use it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be kind and loving ● Practice service and devotion ● Include the ancestors and descendants ● Learn from and give voice to the natural world ● Invoke benevolent spirits, larger historical movements, etc. ● Do practices that bring in more than just the rational mind: meditation, art, movement, chanting, visualization, silence, etc. ● Worship, pray, do ritual together
<p>What it’s good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Exponentially increasing personal power and collective power ● Catalyzing evolutionary change ● Activating auspicious influences ● Accomplishing miracles
<p>How it can turn ugly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pompousness ● Dogmatism ● Denial of shadow / spiritual bypass ● Emotional / spiritual manipulation
<p>Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Effective use needs to be grounded in shared culture. ● Treat diversity with respect, allowing room for a full range of individual experiences.