

Episode 282: Understanding Power in the Workplace and How It Impacts Workplace Dynamics with Catherine Bell

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

Power. It almost feels like a bad word. But whether we acknowledge it or not, power is at play in the workplace. And the key is to understand your own power and the power dynamics so that you and your team can accomplish great things together. A warm welcome to Karina been to the podcast plus community.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:18

Today's guest is Catherine Bell. Catherine is a professional certified coach, facilitator and nonprofit consultant who has spent two decades working collaboratively with people to unleash their power as changemakers. She specializes in coaching for anti racist leadership, as well as career development, navigating challenging and her personal and team dynamics and nonprofit leadership and management's. Catherine and I talk about power in the workplace, what the sources of power are, where power dynamics show up, and how we can navigate those power differences, how we can own and expand our own power, while helping our team members own and grow theirs, and so much more. Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:56

Are you a manager, boss, or team leader who aspires to level up and unleash your team's full potential? You're listening to The Modern Manager podcast, and I'm your host, Mamie Kanfer Stewart. Each week, I explore effective strategies and provide actionable insights that supercharge your management abilities, optimize team performance, and foster a healthy workplace culture. Become a rockstar manager and help your team thrive at themodernmanager.com/more.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:21

Thank you so much for joining me today, Catherine, I'm so excited we're having this conversation, it is a topic that I feel like is one that we don't really like to talk about so much in the workplace, I feel like as managers I talk to a lot of managers who just are uncomfortable with the idea that they have power over their team. They don't, they don't want to think that way. Like that's the old school way. If I'm a manager, and I have all this power, and I get to deploy it. And it actually just makes us very uncomfortable to acknowledge the power we have and how we might use it and the power of other folks. And there's just so much around power that we don't ever talk about as managers. So thank you for coming on today and helping us get smarter about this really kind of ever present thing that we all have to deal with called power.

Catherine Bell 02:08

Thank you so much for having me Mamie and and I think you know, one overall thing I'll say just to start out is there is no one specific right way to talk about power. If you feel like you're tiptoeing through a minefield, afraid to say the wrong thing. I don't think that that's, that's a metaphor I want for us to be able to embrace as managers, I want to, I want us to be able to feel like we can communicate directly, explicitly, transparently, about the fact that power is at play in our workplaces. But there's no one magic formula that you have to say otherwise poof, that that bomb goes off. I come from a background as a community organizer, who was inspired by the idea that there's lots of different ways to get power to build power. And power can come from someone who has, you know, let's say a lot of money, or a really high status, or all the power can also come from groups of people who are working in unison and towards a common goal. And from that, I have always been, I've always been sort of approaching situations knowing you know, there's wanting to look out for how power power is at play in any given situation. And I was on a nonprofit board one time. And I wanted to understand how does so how like, what's going on here? What's the lay of the land? How does this work? And my approach is to sort of approached one of the board members who was there because he cared about the mission of this nonprofit. And I said, so. So who has power here? And he looked shocked. And he was like, well, well, none of us have power. We're all equal here. And I was like, oh, like I sort of realized. For him, acknowledging that there is a power dynamic, acknowledging that someone has power is like a negative thing that he associates with. I don't know something something bad. I was approaching power as a very neutral thing. It's neither good nor bad. It can be deployed for lots of different uses. And it's something that we can talk about, on so that we can use it sensitively, thoughtfully, and we can even shift it if we need to.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 04:22

Yeah, I mean, that experience of feeling like oh, you know, we're all the same here. Like we don't we don't have differences in our power. We're all, we all got an equal voice if we'll say,

right, it's a little naive, right to, to believe that. And I have definitely been in meetings where I have not acknowledged my positional power, right that I have as the most senior person in that room at that table and walked out going that was so great. Everyone really spoke truthfully. Right. And then you hear later Well, someone sounded really like speak up, or he there's some side chatter afterwards. And I vote for a long time. I was like, I don't understand why that's happened. As I keep saying, you guys know, speak up, say your truth, like, get all the ideas in the room. And the reality is that like, as many times as I say, I want you to be comfortable, I want you to be yourself, I want you to speak your mind, I want you to push back, I want to disagree. If I hold power, and we're not able to acknowledge that power, then something is not working, as well as it could within our team. So trying to pretend it's not there's definitely not a way around it. Yeah,

Catherine Bell 05:30

I was recently facilitating a conversation between a CEO and her deputy her number two, to help support them through a challenging dynamic. And the idea was to have each of them have a chance to name what's what's working well in this dynamic in our working relationship and what's not working so well. Before we started, I had to start by saying, I felt like one way I could help address that challenge that you just named me was to say, let's just be real, let's name the elephant in the room, the CEO has positional power, has power over the deputy, that doesn't mean that it's not risky for the CEO to be vulnerable in this in this setting, because it is, but it's a different kind of risk. And even if the CEO is not actually intending to exercise power in a sort of explicit way to sort of coerce or crush her deputy, which, of course, she she didn't, I felt like it was important for both to acknowledge for both of them, that there was a different kind of risk for the more junior person, and that the CEO, therefore needed to act accordingly, which I think means doesn't mean a specific thing. But I think it means being particularly encouraging, of dissent of critical feedback, of specifically going out of her way to not be defensive, early in the conversation to send a sort of a positive feedback loop to the more junior person to say like, this person is not going to use their power to crush my voice. Simply saying, simply acknowledging the power didn't make the dynamic disappear. But it allowed people to use more self awareness as we proceeded in a delicate conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 07:20

I love that. Just naming it right just helps take some of that edge off. And I mean, that in of itself is just like so hugely powerful. A little pun power is powerful. Okay, great. So next up.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 07:33

Alright, so we talked about positional power, which I think is like the easiest one for most of us to

understand, because we mostly work within some sort of hierarchical system. Even if it's a relatively flat organization, there are still managers or bosses or superiors, and individual contributors to direct reports, right, there's still some dynamic of positional authority. But that's not the only way that we have power. So can you maybe walk us through some of the other ways we have power.

Catherine Bell 08:00

I mean, some that I that I have been thinking about what I call informal power, which you know, if you come from a source outside of your role in the organization, so it could be if you're someone who has an extensive network, you're just incredibly networked in. And you have a huge amount of political or social capital, a lot of power associated with a particularly valued skill or expertise. If you have someone, for example, on your team, who's the only one who really knows how to work members, and really, no one else has that skill, there's a lot of power in being the person who holds the key to that, to that door to our quantitative work together. You also could have power that comes from having the ear of someone who does have powers and you might be adjacent to power. And, and that gives you some informal power. There is also another form that I call personal power, which I think of is our presence, or our internal power. It's the power that comes from within us. Sometimes you hear people encouraging their direct reports, their their team to really step into their power or own their power when we want to see our team step into leadership, and not just sort of be happy being assigned tasks, but really sort of step up and own a piece of work, we might be calling on them to really step into their personal power. That also might be something I think that comes up when we think about public speaking and public presence where we want someone to to shine and to let their full brilliance out into the world. And I think of that as sort of stepping into your personal power. Lastly, there's this category that I think of as unearned power. And sometimes people talk about this like unearned privilege. But you know, if I have power in a situation that comes not from my title and my role, not from my skills, or from my experiences or my network, but let's say just from, for example that I'm white, a white person That's not power that I've heard it's power that I was born into. And yet I still, I still experience it participate in it, whether I like to or not. And so that's another category that I think about. Yeah.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 10:11

You know, it's helpful to think about these different dimensions of power. And where it is something that we can access more easily or something that is, something has to build over time or something that we are just born with, or without, in whatever way that means. And I think about like relational power, if you are, you have a broad network, right? That is something that you can build, if you want to increase your power within an organization, you can actively go out and network with people inside your organization. Same thing with your expertise, right, we can actively develop our skills or expertise, our knowledge, our experiences, to increase our power

within the context of our team or our work. And then personal power to I've never even thought about that when when someone says like step into your power, but there is something that is very powerful about speaking with confidence about making your presence known in a room, right? And that's something that we can tap into, I think probably like anytime, right? That that's something that we can just connect with ourselves. And then the unearned power like that one. That's tricky, right? That's one of those dynamics that we don't get a say in. And it makes for challenging workplace relationships, challenging workplace dynamics. So yeah.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 11:31

I'm wondering how, like, how do you think about what power you have, that doesn't matter what team you're on? Or what organization you're in? Or what meeting you're in? Do we kind of always possess the same power? Or is there are some dynamic that changes based on who we're with or what we're doing?

Catherine Bell 11:51

I really appreciate that question, Mamie. I think, you know, except for a very few people, President of the United States of America with unquestioned, you know, you know, positional power, for most of us. However, it's really contextual. And I just, I feel like, there's certain kinds of power that are very true for me wherever I go, the United States, but that might change if I go to a different country, for example. And there's certainly I think, power, the changes, you know, when I'm inside the context of my organization, let's say I'm the CEO, or let's just say I'm the manager of a team. And when I walk outside of that organization, and I walk into, let's say, an angry mob, who's angry at me, it doesn't really matter that I'm a CEO of an organization in that moment, right. And it's important for us to be mindful of that. I think that people who are often savvy and successful in navigating upside down of business and organizational life are people who are able to read the nuance and how power shift and desert of ride ride those changes, not not necessarily entirely succumbing to if you notice a new power dynamic, you're not necessarily going to say, well, then I defer entirely because someone, there's, I don't have as much power in this place. But you want to be savvy, that the power that you might have in any given situation, shifting. What you said also made me think a little bit about when you said about relational power; it was really interesting, because I think it's possible to be a manager who has positional power, to be on paper to be the boss of a team and number of people or one person, but not necessarily have relational power. And I think it's possible to be a manager who really leans into and utilizes relational power to do their work of management effectively. That meant that relational power could be about taking time to build thoughtful boundaries and professional but meaningful relationships within the team between teams that power whether or not it's part of the it's written on the org chart is going to come in very handy at times of stress, at times of conflict, at times when it's difficult to navigate a path forward. I feel like for managers to rely solely on positional power and say, Well, I'm their boss, so I don't need to, I don't need to invest

in this relationship. I mean, there's a clear there's a clear line of command here. That's that is a short sighted approach.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 14:30

I have a client who used to, you know, jokingly say like, I don't understand why I have to, like, bring them in and have the conversation and like, think through together what this is going to look like, like, I'm the boss. That's what I paid them for. Can I just tell them what to do? And I was like, Oh my gosh, please, please do not do that. That is using your positional power. I didn't use that language. But that's basically what her MO was. Let me just use my positional power to tell them what to do to get the job done. And where it, she was working towards was how do I have relational power where people want to do the work, where they feel connected to our shared goals because of the relationship that we have built not because I'm telling her this telling, you know, anyone on my team, you have to do this, but because we're on the same team, and we are, we have that relationship. And yeah, like there are so many times when it's the most amazing feeling to be like, I know exactly who I need to call to get that thing done or to ask, ask this question, find out this information. And you can call anyone inside your organization, and you know, they're gonna help you out because you built those relationships. There's like no amount of money, you can put, you know, value you can put on those. And those relationships only come when you do the work to invest in them.

Catherine Bell 15:44

I think that can go a little bit too far. Sometimes when we go to the like, you can take that pendulum swing all the way to an extreme, where you might have someone as a manager, think like, oh, man, I'm like a friend. And we start where you started, Mamie, like, I'm a friend, like, you know, people are in this, we're like a family, we this is like we're peers. And if you lose sight of the positional power all together, then that's actually a source of confusion, I think, for your team, because you there is there isn't clarity, both and having, you know, professional boundaries, that sort of help people separate private relationships in our private lives from relationships, and a professional I think is a healthy thing to do. But also, because there continues to be a line of, I don't want to say command, but there's a but there's a line of power, when you have a positional role of authority. And if you go too far to the other end with relational power, and say, this is all about like, mutual consent, and I'm gonna, like, inspire my team to do this, rather than tell them to do it, that can also become a place of confusion for a team member who might say, Well, I actually don't feel like doing this today. And then it might be a shock or a rude awakening, to remind them that they are still part of this. So I think that there's a way that we need to sort of operate within a happy medium.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 17:08

So important to remember, right? That power is neither good nor bad, as you started us out with and saying that it just it exists. And we cannot defer our power, we can't necessarily get rid of it. But if we aren't, if we don't acknowledge the places where we need to appropriately hold it, it can be just as bad as as the opposite. So such an important thing is to remember that we do have positional authority and power that we need to use appropriately.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 17:36

So let's switch gears and talk a little bit about our colleagues. So if we want our team members to really embrace the power that they have, and to feel empowered, what are some of the ways that we can help our colleagues or team members really understand the power that they hold?

Catherine Bell 17:52

Yeah, and you're talking about, like, maybe someone who reports to me, or are you talking about a peer?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 17:58

Let's start with people who report to me.

Catherine Bell 17:59

One important thing is clarifying when you're handing someone a task versus a responsibility, right, like a task being a very discrete action versus responsibility being share no sharing a desired outcome and then telling that person, the strategies, the tactics you use to reach that desired outcome are up to you, what I wanted to ask you is to reach his outcome, and it's up to you. And then if you're able to assign a responsibility, and then really let go, and allow that person to use their, their best strategy for achieving that, that outcome. That is, I think, an opportunity to let that person exercise experience some of their own power. And depending on how you react to that, like that, the assigning is the first part. And then depending on how you react to that, and how you close out the loop, how you check in with them, in the middle of the process, how you look together at the outcome and decide did this meet our shared expectations, what we could have done differently, as you think about what kind of not only autonomy and space you give that person, but also the kind of active support you give that person that will help I think create a live and experiential lesson, that they have the power to figure out strategies for approaching goals and expectations that have been that have been set by you. And it will give them confidence to do it all over again the next time.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 19:33

Now this reminds me of a model that I use with teams when we're talking about decision making power, and who has the right to generate ideas, who has the right to weigh in on a decision who has the right to make the decision. And there there's a model called the Leadership Continuum. I'm forgetting who who created this. I think it lays out like 12 different ways that a manager in their direct report can share power all the way from one end, the manager holding all of it through to the other, the employee has all of it. And when we delegate work, or delegate responsibility, one of the places I see people getting so stuck is around decision making power. Because we can say go use any kind of strategies you and I has, oh, but except for I need to make the decision that I want to have the final say on what the budget is, or which vendor we use, or what the timeline is. And so getting really, really clear about where are we actually empowering a person? What, where at what is the sandbox? What are the the, you know, the boundary that we're setting for someone to have to really step into their power and, and make those decisions? And where are the places we say, actually, no, we still need to share some power here. And we need to come together. And I need to, I need to have a final say, or at least I need to have some input. It's like, it's nice when it sounds like big and grand. But it actually always comes down to like the little details of making this decision, or, you know, signing on that dotted line or establishing that deadline, right.

Catherine Bell 21:07

And for example, being able to clarify, no, you have the power to make this decision. But I would like that I as a manager would like to, I'm going to retain veto power, for example, which is in case of emergency, here's the emergency brake that I will pull if I have to. But but but short of that, I'm going to sort of do everything I can to let you approach this aim with from from your perspective. There, there's another thing I'm thinking about with the way power plays out for our team is also around psychological safety and thinking about how important it is for highly functional creative teams for there to be voicing creative ideas out of the box ideas, things that might be high risk, high reward, or dissent against a sort of groupthink or popular opinion. Being able to dissent, being able to offer a critical opinion or an outside of the box idea, I think we all know is really important for highly functioning teams and for succeeding and like in a huge range of activities. It can be really easy for people, for team members early on to learn to learn unintended lessons, like it's, you know, I'm clearly I'm a subordinate here, it's not good for me to rock the boat. So I think that there's other things that we need to do to invite our team to step into their power. By not just saying it's okay to have a dissenting opinion, it's okay to throw out an idea that's outside of the box, we have to actually demonstrate that it is not only safe, but valued to do those things. And so when we're able to use either sort of model vulnerability ourselves as managers, by doing those things, or when a team member does it to sort of go out of our way to say, to lift that person up to say, this kind of vulnerability, this kind of risk taking this kind of creativity is really valued here, even though it might not succeed, it's really important to

like, we have to go out of our way to lift that up. We can't assume that like the example you gave me Mamie sitting in the room and saying to everyone, like, tell me what you're really thinking and feeling like no one really did it, we can't assume that people are actually going to feel empowered to do that unless we take some corrective steps.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 23:29

Meetings is my jam, you know, so like power plays out in meetings all the time. And two of my favorite techniques to do exactly what you're talking about, which is to try to reduce the or to increase the psychological safety, and kind of reduce the risk that power is going to interfere with getting the best thinking in the room. The first which many teams have already probably done is to use anonymous Input Tools, right? There are all these great boards now online where you can go and you just become like an anonymous little icon, and you can put your ideas on the board and no one knows who they came from. Right. And that is such a great way to reduce the the risk that you know, the personal risks that you're putting out by sharing something that's a dissenting idea or a crazy idea. The other which I've only tried once, and I think it went really well was we did a brainstorm session on Zoom, but we had everybody turn their cameras off. And so you couldn't see people's facial expressions after you spoke, which normally is like a sheet the whole opposite, right? The whole point is that we want to help people react, we want to see their facial expressions is how we connect and get so much information for our body language. But actually, when you're sharing dissenting ideas, or or sharing criticism or sharing risks or sharing kind of out of the box thinking as soon as you see someone in the room who you believe has more power than you do, whether that's authority power, right or could be, they've been here longer and everyone kind of just respects them on the team or whatever, as soon as you see them, you know, imperceptibly me because that kind of look, it totally changes right the room, it shuts you down as a as an idea sharer, it could just increase whether it's real or perceived, it can be a problem. And so we did this one time. And it was super fun because people were sharing their ideas, and you couldn't see how anyone was reacting. So it was just like a firecracker of, you know, fireworks of ideas being shared out. And then afterwards, we turned our cameras back on, and we started really having a discussion. And it was just, it was just a fun thing. And I hope some teams will try that. And let me know how it goes if they if they do.

Catherine Bell 25:32

I love that. I've never heard of that. And I definitely want to try it. I've definitely been in the Zoom camp, have the more videos on the better. And I think that's a great example where that's not always true. It's also making me think about, you know, as a manager, the the ways that we're trying to help our team step into their power. And, you know, I think like, everyone having power rises all boats, it's not a zero sum game, right? It's not like if I, if my team members feel empowered, that I, as a manager have less power, I actually think that we can build our overall

effectiveness and power to, to, you know, achieve our goals when people are all living into it. In addition to what you described, there's a way that we want to help support our team to build their tolerance and resilience to things like subtle messages that they are not valued. So that, you know, over time, not only are you know, can they be taught that, you know, you won't be punished for having for sharing an unpopular idea. But also, like you're you're someone who can weather naming an idea that not everyone loves, and that's okay. And you can sort of develop the resiliency, and that that tenacity to continue to think independently as part of as part of this team. That kind of support of your teammates could come through one on one meetings after, after a group meeting, for example, where you can say to someone, I saw that not everyone voted for your idea, but it's really important to, to keep sharing ideas. That's what's going to help us you know, get to that or the box idea one day that's going to help us.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:14

Like we could go on and on. But unfortunately, we're out of time. So Catherine, can you tell us about a great manager that you worked for and what made this person such a fantastic boss?

Catherine Bell 27:22

Well, I worked for Adeep Klein, who is the CEO of Cachette, which is an LGBTQ advocacy and education organization that works nationally in the in the Jewish community. And she was an incredible boss, because she led with the power of optimism, she believed in me, she believed in our team, she believed in our mission. She is a descendant of Holocaust survivors who felt like the world is ours to to make it as as amazing, as powerful, as excellent as we can. And one of my first weeks on the job, she asked me to lead, to plan and facilitate retreat for a team that I was overseeing. And in my previous job, that would have taken me like six weeks to plan. And I was like, Well, I can't do it. I only have one week. And she was like, Catherine, I know you can do this. And I did. And from that odd, I was able to plan retreats in one week, because of the power of her optimism. She sort of helped me leap over my perceived self limitations. And so I'm always going to be grateful to her fabulous.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:27

All right, and where can people learn more about you and keep up with your work?

Catherine Bell 28:30

The best place to find me is on my website, which is catherinebell.consulting.org.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:37

Awesome. Well, thank you again, for coming on. I love this conversation. I hope more teams will go and talk about power talk about how they can use their power as individuals collectively, and that it'll stop being such a weird thing and just become like part of how we get our work done.

Catherine Bell 28:52

Thank you so much, man. It's great to talk with you.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:54

Catherine is providing a free PDF that contains resources and tips for learning more about and navigating power in the workplace. This PDF is available to members of The Modern Manager Podcast Plus community. Members also get the extended interview where Catherine and I talk about how to navigate the uncomfortable dynamics of unearned power of race and gender. To become a member of Podcast Plus, go to themodernmanager.com/more. All the links are in the show notes, and they can be delivered to your inbox when you subscribe to my newsletter. Get that at themodernmanager.com. Thanks again for listening. Until next time.