

The Paradox of Power

By George M. Prince

Most of us have learned to put a lot of faith in the efficiency of authoritarian structure. It begins when we are children where the usual top manager is Father, and power is distributed down to Mother and then to the children according to age. This structure is repeated in nearly every organization we encounter: church, town government, the police force, and companies.

Even as we support these structures we learn that they do not really 'work' the way the structure says. In my family my father was undoubtedly the boss, yet most of the decisions on which depended the successful operation of the family were made by my mother. In practice, while I was senior to my youngest brother, Charlton, he was the baby of the family and had more power/influence with Mother than I.

In one company after another I have discovered that there is an informal system for getting things done that supplements going through channels. The informal systems depend more upon relationships than upon power and authority. None of this is news to you. You have experienced the same things I have.

It seems to me that the usual authoritarian structure is like an airplane whose speed is limited by the sound barrier. Application of power and control can effectively produce a certain 'speed of accomplishment' behind which it cannot go no matter how power is increased. To exceed that designed speed requires a new concept of organization. Two familiar modifications of traditional structure are teams and cross-functional groups. These configurations enhance 'speed of accomplishment' but do not really break the sound barrier.

These two systems are instructive in that each reduces the authoritarian hierarchical control and focuses on teamwork and group goals. In my experience, the outstanding characteristic of teams that press 'the speed of accomplishment' to new heights is the relationship between team members. There is an absence of resistance and internal competitiveness, of dominant/subordinate power-based transmissions. Decisions tend to be made jointly, through discussion and speculation. There is an inclination to say, "How can we test this idea?" rather than "The trouble with that is..." or "We can't because...". Individuals are most often in learning rather than defensive or power mode.

The difference in mode is extremely important. It governs wholeheartedness. Whenever someone has power over me, I am compelled to keep part of my attention on 'protecting my interests'—whatever I believe they are. There seems to be a difficulty with power when it is exerted over anyone except one's self. As Lord Acton said, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Reflecting on corruption, the definition that applies in this case is “something that harms, interferes with, or destroys the progress and welfare of something else”. The something else that gets interfered with in a hierarchy is self-regard. When a boss exerts something that feels like too much control over me, it registers as a discount, a devaluation, and the law of discount/revenge begins to operate. Wholeheartedness gives way to part of me being impelled to protect my feelings of meaningfulness by defending myself against the wrong I feel.

The action that causes the damage is the *too much* power and control. The line between appropriate direction and too much is as variable as a fingerprint—and it will shift with circumstances. In a time of danger, threat or uncertainty I am much more willing to be directed if I believe the boss knows what to do.

The assumption is that a boss has the right and duty to make a subordinate do the right thing. This is partially true, and because it works—up to the sound barrier—few question its effectiveness out loud. All of us who have been ordered around know the resistances and bad feeling that are generated.

What we have not known until recent brain research revealed it, is how powerful and inevitable these feelings are. Further, we now know that these feelings get expressed by ‘invisible’ behavior that ‘gets even’ for the discount.

Anxiety Driven				Consciousness Driven		
Aggressive	Antagonistic	Passive Aggressive	Neutral	Positive/Courageous		
Disobedient	Adversarial	Distracted	Undermines	Attentive	Receptive	Supports confusions/ uncertainty
Quarrelsome	Opposes	Listless	Neglectful	Supportive	Responsive	Temporarily suspends disbelief
Combative	Controlling	Bored	Mistake-prone	Listens	Hospitable	Builds
Dominating	Contrary	Unresponsive	Misunderstands	Approves	Non-restrictive	Deals as equal
Hostile	Squabbly	Ignores	Careless	Credits	Open-minded	
Angry	Competitive	Oblivious	Disinterested	Connects	Optimistic	
Litigious	Cynical	Unconscious	Pessimistic	Jumps to favorable conclusions	Shares risks	
Contemptuous		Doesn't get it			Listens approximately	
Critical					Protects vulnerable beginnings	
Non-Recruitable		Recruitable		Recruiter		

In order to break the 'sound barrier' to 'speed of accomplishment' we will need to do three things:

1. Invent ways of relating among people who work together that do not threaten meaningfulness.
2. Educate and train people who work together to recognize their own defensive reactions and modify them.
3. Help them learn to avoid words and actions that trigger defensiveness in others.