Leadership and power are closely linked. People tend to follow those who are powerful. And because others follow, the person with power leads.

But leaders have power for different reasons. Some are powerful because they alone have the ability to give you a bonus or a raise. Others are powerful because they can fire you, or assign you tasks you don't like. Yet, while leaders of this type have formal, official power, their teams are unlikely to be enthusiastic about their approach to leadership, if this is all they rely on.

On the more positive side, leaders may have power because they're experts in their fields, or because their team members admire them. People with these types of power don't necessarily have formal leadership roles, but they influence others effectively because of their skills and personal qualities. And when a leadership position opens up, they'll probably be the first to be considered for promotion.

Do you recognize these types of power in those around you – or in yourself? And how does power influence the way you work and live your life?

Understanding Power

One of the most notable studies on power was conducted by social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven, in 1959. They identified five bases of power:

1. **Legitimate** – This comes from the belief that a person has the formal right to make demands, and to expect compliance and obedience from others.
2. **Reward** – This results from one person's ability to compensate another for compliance.
3. **Expert** – This is based on a person's superior skill and knowledge.
4. **Referent** – This is the result of a person's perceived attractiveness, worthiness, and right to respect from others.
5. **Coercive** – This comes from the belief that a person can punish others for noncompliance.

If you're aware of these sources of power, you can…

- Better understand why you're influenced by someone, and decide whether you want to accept the base of power being used.
- Recognize your own sources of power.
- Build your leadership skills by using and developing your own sources of power, appropriately, and for best effect.

The most effective leaders use mainly referent and expert power. To develop your leadership abilities, learn how to build these types of power, so that you can have a positive influence on your colleagues, your team, and your organization.

The Five Bases of Power

Let's explore French and Raven's bases of power according to these sources.

Positional Power Sources

**Legitimate Power**

A president, prime minister, or monarch has legitimate power. So does a CEO, a minister, or a fire chief. Electoral mandates, social hierarchies, cultural norms, and organizational structure all provide the basis for legitimate power.

This type of power, however, can be unpredictable and unstable. If you lose the title or position, legitimate power can instantly disappear – since others were influenced by the position, not by you. Also, your scope of power is limited to situations that others believe you have a right to control. If the fire chief tells people to stay
away from a burning building, they’ll probably listen. But if he tries to make people stay away from a street fight, people may well ignore him.

Therefore, relying on legitimate power as your only way to influence others isn’t enough. To be a leader, you need more than this – in fact, you may not need legitimate power at all.

Reward Power
People in power are often able to give out rewards. Raises, promotions, desirable assignments, training opportunities, and even simple compliments – these are all examples of rewards controlled by people “in power.” If others expect that you’ll reward them for doing what you want, there’s a high probability that they’ll do it.

The problem with this power base is that you may not have as much control over rewards as you need. Supervisors probably don’t have complete control over salary increases, and managers often can’t control promotions, all by themselves. And even a CEO needs permission from the board of directors for some actions.

So, when you use up available rewards, or when the rewards don’t have enough perceived value to others, your power weakens. (One of the frustrations of using rewards is that they often need to be bigger each time if they’re to have the same motivational impact. Even then, if rewards are given frequently, people can become satiated by the reward, so that it loses its effectiveness.)

Coercive Power
This source of power is also problematic, and can be subject to abuse. What’s more, it can cause unhealthy behavior and dissatisfaction in the workplace.

Threats and punishment are common tools of coercion. Implying or threatening that someone will be fired, demoted, denied privileges, or given undesirable assignments – these are examples of using coercive power. While your position may give you the capability to coerce others, it doesn’t automatically mean that you have the will or the justification to do so. As a last resort, you may sometimes need to punish people. However, extensive use of coercive power is rarely appropriate in an organizational setting.

Clearly, relying on these forms of power alone will result in a very cold, technocratic, impoverished style of leadership. To be a true leader, you need a more robust source of power than can be supplied by a title, an ability to reward, or an ability to punish.

Personal Power Sources
Expert Power
When you have knowledge and skills that enable you to understand a situation, suggest solutions, use solid judgment, and generally outperform others, people will probably listen to you. When you demonstrate expertise, people tend to trust you and respect what you say. As a subject matter expert, your ideas will have more value, and others will look to you for leadership in that area.

What’s more, you can take your confidence, decisiveness, and reputation for rational thinking – and expand them to other subjects and issues. This is a good way to build and maintain expert power. It doesn’t require positional power, so you can use it to go beyond that. This is one of the best ways to improve your leadership skills.

read more about building expert power below and using it as an effective foundation for leadership.

Referent Power
This is sometimes thought of as charisma, charm, admiration, or appeal. Referent power comes from one person liking and respecting another, and strongly identifying with that person in some way. Celebrities have referent power, which is why they can influence everything from what people buy to whom they elect to office. In a workplace, a person with charm often makes everyone feel good, so he or she tends to have a lot of influence.

Referent power can be a big responsibility, because you don’t necessarily have to do anything to earn it. Therefore, it can be abused quite easily. Someone who is likable, but lacks integrity and honesty, may rise to power – and use that power to hurt and alienate people as well as gain personal advantage.

Relying on referent power alone is not a good strategy for a leader who wants longevity and respect. When combined with expert power, however, it can help you to be very successful.

Key Points
Anyone is capable of holding power and influencing others: you don’t need to have an important job title or a big office. But if you recognize the different forms of power, you can avoid being influenced by those who use the less effective types of power – and you can focus on developing expert and referent power for yourself. This
will help you become an influential and positive leader.

Apply This to Your Life

1. Go through each of the power bases, and write down when and how you've used that source of power in the past.
2. Ask yourself if you used the power appropriately, consider the expected and unexpected consequences of it, and decide what you'll do differently next time.
3. Think about the people who have power and influence over you. What sources of power do they use? Do they use their power appropriately? Where necessary, develop a strategy to reduce someone else’s use of illegitimate power over you.
4. When you feel powerless or overly influenced, stop and think about what you can do to regain your own power and control. After all: you’re never without power. Make an effort to be more aware of the power you have, and use it to get what you need, confidently and effectively.

Building Expert Power

Lead From the Front, at Work

There are many different power bases that a leader can use and exploit.

These include problematic ones such as the power of position, the power to give rewards, the power to punish and the power to control information. While these types of power do have some strength, they put the person being lead in an unhealthy position of weakness, and can leave leaders using these power bases looking autocratic and out of touch.

More than this, society has changed hugely over the last 50 years. Citizens are individually more powerful, and employees are more able to shift jobs. Few of us enjoy having power exerted over us, and many will do what they can to undermine people who use these sorts of power.

However there are three types of positive power that effective leaders use: charismatic power, expert power and referent power.

This article teaches the technique of building expert power.

Using the Tool

Expert power is essential because as a leader, your team looks to you for direction and guidance. Team members need to believe in your ability to set a worthwhile direction, give sound guidance and co-ordinate a good result.

If your team perceives you as a true expert, they will listen to you when you try to persuade them or inspire them. And if your team sees you as an expert, you will find it much easier to energize and motivate them:

- If your team members respect your expertise, they’ll know that you can show them how to work effectively.
- If your team members trust your judgment, they’ll trust you to guide their good efforts and hard work in such a way that you'll make the most of their hard work.
- If they can see your expertise, team members will believe that you have the wisdom to direct their efforts towards a goal that is genuinely worthwhile.

Taken together, if your team sees you as an expert, you will find it much easier to motivate team members to perform at their best.

So how do you build expert power?

The first step is fairly obvious (if time consuming) – build expertise. And, if you are already using tools like the information gathering tool, chances are that you have already progressed well ahead in this direction.

But just being an expert isn't enough, it is also necessary for your team members to recognize your expertise and see you to be a credible source of information and advice. Gary A. Yukl, in his book "Leadership in
Organizations,” details some steps to build expert power. These are:

- **Promote an image of expertise**: Since perceived expertise in many occupations is associated with a person's education and experience, a leader should (subtly) make sure that subordinates, peers, and superiors are aware of his or her formal education, relevant work experience, and significant accomplishments.

- One common tactic to make this information known is to display diplomas, licenses, awards, and other evidence of expertise in a prominent location in one's office – after all, if you've worked hard to gain knowledge, it's fair that you get credit for it. Another tactic is to make subtle references to prior education or experience (e.g., “When I was chief engineer at GE, we had a problem similar to this one”). Beware, however, this tactic can easily be overdone.

- **Maintain credibility**: Once established, one’s image of expertise should be carefully protected. The leader should avoid making careless comments about subjects on which he or she is poorly informed, and should avoid being associated with projects with a low likelihood of success.

- **Act confidently and decisively in a crisis**: In a crisis or emergency, subordinates prefer a “take charge” leader who appears to know how to direct the group in coping with the problem. In this kind of situation, subordinates tend to associate confident, firm leadership with expert knowledge. Even if the leader is not sure of the best way to deal with a crisis, to express doubts or appear confused risks the loss of influence over subordinates.

- **Keep informed**: Expert power is exercised through rational persuasion and demonstration of expertise. Rational persuasion depends on a firm grasp of up-to-date facts. It is therefore essential for a leader to keep well-informed of developments within the team, within the organization, and in the outside world.

- **Recognize subordinate concerns**: Use of rational persuasion should not be seen as a form of one-way communication from the leader to subordinates. Effective leaders listen carefully to the concerns and uncertainties of their team members, and make sure that they address these.

- **Avoid threatening the self-esteem of subordinates**: Expert power is based on a knowledge differential between leader and team members. Unfortunately, the very existence of such a differential can cause problems if the leader is not careful about the way he exercises expert power.

- Team members can dislike unfavorable status comparisons where the gap is very large and obvious. They are likely to be upset by a leader who acts in a superior way, and arrogantly flaunts his greater expertise.

- In the process of presenting rational arguments, some leaders lecture their team members in a condescending manner and convey the impression that the other team members are “ignorant.” Guard against this.