The Alternative: Personal Power

Personal power is different from coercive power. Personal power comes from a different source. It is rooted in our authenticity and wholeness, not in a role or position. It is based on our competence and character and integrity. It accrues to us as we become our self, our true self, and when we engage in leadership as authentic and whole men and women. We are seen as being more powerful, not less, as we become vulnerable enough to acknowledge our gifts and limits, own that we cast shadow, and learn to say, “I don’t know.” We have power because of who we are more than for what we do.

There is yet another way that personal power is different from coercive power. Coercive power comes with a position in an organization or family or community; not everyone has it. But everyone has personal power. In the Four-Fold Way, a book that is dog-eared because I have read it so often, author and cultural anthropologist Angles Arrien says, “Many indigenous societies believe that we all possess ‘original medicine’: personal power duplicated nowhere else on the planet. No two individuals carry the same combination of talents and challenges” (1993, p. 21). While everyone can have personal power, power based on our talents and challenges, not everyone appears to know this or act on it. Even when I grant you personal power or authority—I acknowledge that you have original medicine—you may not believe you have it, or you may not claim it. Both verbs are important: I grant, you claim. And they may not always be in this order.

Our task is to discern and embrace the original medicine that is ours and that is duplicated nowhere else on the planet. As we embrace our personal power—and acknowledge gifts and challenges related to that power—we also identify the particular contributions we can make to the accomplishment of leadership tasks.

Here are several other differences in coercive and personal power: coercive power is “power over”; personal power is “power with.” Coercive power can be used to force others to act in ways not in their self-interests or the best interest of the organization. Personal power is not used to force but is used to influence, to impact and to persuade; it is about showing up, having a position, and speaking our truth. Power is still an important dynamic in a relationship, but it is used differently and its
use has different consequences—no more fight or flight by the other, no more need to commercialize commitment, no more ratcheting up the conflict through the use of bigger sticks or carrots. Here is a chart that describes the differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coercive Power</th>
<th>Personal Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power based on sticks and carrots</td>
<td>Power based on integrity, authenticity, and character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source is external to self</td>
<td>Source is internal to self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be given or taken away</td>
<td>Is granted and claimed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position-centered</td>
<td>Person-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used to control</td>
<td>Used to influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works when other is afraid or dependent</td>
<td>Works when other is respected and respectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on fear</td>
<td>Based on love</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a difference between claiming personal power and empowerment. In recent years empowerment has entered our lexicon and it suggests that one person—the manager, the boss, the principal, or the parent—shares his or her power with others, as in “she empowered him,” or “he gave us the power to decide.” The assumption underlying the language of empowerment is that power is a currency that can be given or taken away. But I have found that waiting to be empowered is like waiting for Santa Claus to come. It is waiting to be given a gift that cannot be gotten any other way. Authority to make a certain decision may be given, responsibility for certain tasks may be assigned, but personal power, I argue, cannot be given or taken away.

There is also a difference between empowering another person and granting them personal power or authority. When I grant you personal power I am not giving you something you do not have; I am acknowledging something that has accrued to you because of who you are. This is a subtle but important difference.

You and I act differently in our leadership roles and activities when we are granted, and have claimed, our personal power:

- We walk the talk. We are authentic and whole and trustworthy people, and who we are is reflected in what we do and how we act in our leadership roles. We are congruent and transparent. We lead with a deep sense of identity and integrity.
- We find our voice and use it. No more saying yes when we
want to say no; no more remaining silent when we think the
team or organization is going in the wrong direction; no more
hiding the values we cherish; no more agreeing with the boss
in the public meeting only to criticize her afterwards. In other
words, no more collusion.

• We are proactive, less reactive. No more waiting on the
sidelines for someone else to send us into the game. Now we
think of “leadership as everyone’s vocation” and find
appropriate ways to be involved. No more throwing verbal
hand grenades at “them” for the stupid things they do after
refusing their offer to have a seat at the table. Now we think of
ourselves as having distinct gifts to offer to the
accomplishment of leadership tasks and we offer them freely.

• We use our power (or our authority, if you prefer) to influence,
to persuade, to have impact. We use our original medicine and
power that has accrued to us to make a difference, hopefully a
positive one. But we do not force or coerce or engage in “pay-
for-play.”

• We do not blame others for our internal realities. Blaming
others for our fears, or insecurities, or dependency needs, is
giving away our power; it says someone else is responsible and
we are not. So, no more, “I did not speak my truth because he
couldn’t take it,” or “I did not blow the whistle because around
here they really do shoot the messenger,” or even “He made
me mad.” Rather, the message might be, “I did not speak my
truth because I was afraid.” Even though it may not always
true, it is better when we act as if we are 100 percent
responsible for our thoughts and feelings. When we do, we
embrace our personal power.

• We no longer swap freedom for safety and security, at least not
without it being a conscious choice, a choice for which we
accept full responsibility. This is not to say that there will not
be times when we want someone or some organization to take
care of us, to provide us a sense of safety, but even when we
want this we know that it is an illusion, one that will not serve
us well over the long haul.

• We assume responsibility and accountability for the whole
even when we don’t have authority. No more waiting for change to start at the top. No more “we can’t do it because they won’t let us” before we have even tried. Peter Block calls the person who proactively assumes responsibility a citizen. “A citizen,” he writes, “is one who is willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole … a citizen is one who produces the future, someone who does not wait, beg, or dream for the future” [2008, p. 63].

**Power, Ego Self and True Self**

There is often a very real arrogance associated with the use coercive power. It seems clear that I—or anyone—must feel some sense of superiority, some exaggerated sense of worth, to be willing to use a stick or carrot to force someone else to behave the way I want them to. And arrogance, I have learned, is what happens when healthy egos gets over-inflated, when self-confidence is taken to an extreme.

As noted earlier, healthy egos are a necessary strength that individuals must have if they are to contribute to the accomplishment of leadership tasks. We simply cannot be riddled with self-doubt and be effective. But when healthy egos become over-inflated, the asset becomes a liability.

Arrogance often has a surprising source: insecurity. I know this is true for me. The more insecure I am feeling, the more anxious I am about my place in the order of things, the more I want to have power over you. It is when I am insecure that I create one-up, one-down relationships. It is when I am not in touch with my own “original medicine” that I try to force you into behaving in certain ways. It is true for me; it was true for Milton, the executive I described at the beginning of this chapter; I suspect it is also true for you.

In contrast, individuals who engage in leadership tasks as their whole and authentic self have healthy, strong egos, know and embrace their personal power, and use it effectively to influence, persuade, advocate for, stand up to, represent the needs of the whole, and to serve the common good. And importantly, they have enough humility to know their gifts are not always sufficient, their insights are not always the