

The Art of Managing Everyday Conflict

Understanding Emotions and
Power Struggles

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Introduction

Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac.

—Henry Kissinger

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

- Provide a framework for understanding power issues
- Explain relationship between power and emotion
- Discuss historical basis of power struggles
- Increase self-awareness to personal power issues

It was late in March when Suzanne came home with a shopping bag and Glen, her husband, greeted her coolly. After five years of marriage, Suzanne knew when he was unhappy and she was sure that the shopping bag had a lot to do with his reaction to her. Glen kept a tight rein on the finances since taking the job over after she'd allowed a couple of checks to bounce because of oversights. "Anyone can make a mistake," she told herself, and it bothered her that he took the responsibility of managing the finances away from her. However, she felt embarrassed and ashamed over her mistake and did not fight to keep the job.

She knew money was always tight around the end of the month, but with his company banquet approaching, she felt she needed a new dress. Glen looked at the bag and then glared at her. He slowly shook his head and walked away. Without saying a word, he could somehow incite her pulse to race, her cheeks to flush, and summon a feeling of rage that she sometimes felt pressed to control. They often argued over money; matters as seemingly trivial as whether to buy ground round or

ground chuck could lead to a shouting match. "He's just a greedy, selfish man," Suzanne sometimes told her friends after one of their bouts. "She just goes through money without a care in the world," Glen told his friends when the topic of their wives' spending habits arose. However, is the situation just that simple?

Since the dawn of time, life has been about a struggle for power. Our ancestors fought for survival. History shows this, and we can look at the animal kingdom to see that this is true. As time passed, we fought battles over such issues as arrogance, ignorance, and bigotry. Charles Darwin has helped advance our understanding of the struggle for power. Darwin's theories on natural selection assert that strength and power are two attributes that can often ensure a species' survival. To a human's way of thinking, animals are brutal in their process of selection. However, are we willing to look closely at ourselves to see how we self-select and determine our power? If we were to look as closely at the world as it "really" is, what would we feel, and would we want to change our ways?

How often do we hear, "history repeats itself"? If we look through the fabric of time, it is likely that we would see that the same conflicts cease to end; there are only different players. A struggle for power causes conflict. This conflict is often born out of a fear of someone overpowering us. We may sense that this struggle happens between people, but it often happens within each person.

If we choose to view situations so that we learn about our power, we must see ourselves with a fair and honest eye. We must also be willing to accept whatever truth we find. We can look to the past for answers, but how would we react to the truth if we found it? Would these current patterns continue, or would they end? It is our collective choice to continue these power struggles, even though they cause pain. These patterns continue in the history of the human race and in the history of each of us.

While not wanting to admit it to ourselves, we often feel powerless to change the path of our life. What seems to shape the course of our lives? Most of us would say our parents, spouses, friends, money, and the government hold key roles. We feel unable to alter the way our parents, spouse or friends treat us. We cannot change the price of the food we eat or the amount of taxes we pay. Some feel that we live in a world of crime and evil. They no longer feel safe going out at night or walking through a darkened parking lot alone. We do not even feel we can trust the candy given to our kids by the neighbors on Halloween. This perspective creates an image of an unkind world filled with cruel and evil people who control us and make us victims.

Even when we see others living in a world like the one we "dream" of, we choose not to move forward. But why? What holds us back? Do

politicians, bad parents, troubled teens, criminals, or terrorists stop us from having the life we want? We give so many others the power to affect our worldview, when, for each of us, we live in a world that we have created. Yet, we may still feel powerless to change it.

WHAT IS POWER?

What is this thing we call “power,” and where do we find it? Does it come from others, or from within us? To determine where we get our power, we must first define it. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* provides the following definitions:

1. ability to do, act, or produce
2. a specific ability or faculty
3. great ability to act or affect strongly; vigor; force; strength
4. the ability to control others; authority; sway; influence
5. the capacity to exert physical force or energy
6. a person or thing having great influence, force or authority.

Many see power as being strong, successful, or victorious over a person, people or thing. We often associate it with strength. *Powerful* is a word we use to convey that a person has strength or authority over other people. The word *power* describes a range of feelings from weak and *powerless* to strong and *powerful*.

In short, power consists of a range of feelings, perceptions, or emotions. In order to feel or perceive power, we have to experience life. To gain the perception of a level of power at any moment, we have to feel. You may say, “I am powerful.” or you may say, “I feel powerful!” and come closer to the truth. Power is a state of feeling at a moment in time that can change in an instant. The feeling of power can ebb and flow with other feelings, circumstances, and situations. If I state that I *am* powerful, then I should always be powerful. States of being are much more constant than states of feeling, which can fluctuate rapidly and often. When you look at power this way, you can see that all experiences of power must involve emotion of some sort.

Clearly, there is a close relationship between power, feelings, and emotion. We call our feelings different things: thoughts, attitudes, and/or perceptions; we learn to ignore them. Many people think of emotions as a pointless and unneeded part of life. Whether we want to believe it or not, our power and our emotions are connected. The sooner we recognize this relationship, the sooner we can understand why we act as we do.

WHERE DO WE GET POWER?

At the instant of birth—and likely before—we begin our search for power. Some argue that the unborn child feels the emotions of the

parents, and may even feel his own emotions; we begin to feel our power from these emotions. The power we attribute to each emotion is often learned through society and, most importantly, through the family.

We are animals that learn through our behaviors and their consequences. As early as birth, we may experience rewards and/or consequences from the act of being born. One such reward may take the form of having a warm, caring environment. A newborn may sense that warmth and affection are a reward for a difficult journey that involved cold metal tools and stern voices. We are unable to remember the events of being born. Nevertheless, some argue that memories of birth are often rooted within our subconscious, which may set the stage for power struggles throughout our life.

After birth, we gain rewards from our environment. We receive food, love, physical touch, a clean body and clean clothes, smells, sounds, warmth, soothing voices; and we often feel punished if we do not receive these things. Either an infant enjoys the rewards of feeling safe, secure and comfortable or is unrewarded and feels sadness, fear, loneliness, anger, and neglect. During or following his expression of emotion, in whatever form, the child receives a response from the environment. The response may be one the child wants, such as being held, fed, or spoken to, or one that is unwanted such as being ignored, struck, or shouted at.

We continue to develop our sense of personal power from these early experiences. From these experiences, we begin to think that we are empowered by others.¹ Other people must notice our power for it to exist. This is why kids (and some adults) will do just about anything to get attention. Kids often like to gain attention by "making a big splash." When we give a child attention, we acknowledge his power. Our beliefs that we get our power from others form the beginning of dependency. If we feel we only gain power through other people, we may develop defiant and avoidant behaviors and attitudes to resist this need. There is also likely some genetic influence on our behaviors and search for power, but no one knows how much.

HISTORY OF POWER

What does history teach us about power? Consider the statement, "those who have won the wars have written the histories." History has been written (or re-written for that matter) by those who were in political power. In this vein, history is not so much about recording the truth, but a means of recording the perceptions, ideas, and beliefs of the victor. History shows us that it is impossible for one person to hold all the power, and the greedy often lose in the end. People we think of,

historically, as being powerful are often associated with emotions such as confidence, arrogance and pride. Terms like determination, anger, defiance, rage, sarcasm, humor, humility, and peace also describe emotions we often associate with powerful people. Besides these emotions, we see powerful people using logic as a tool to manipulate their power and influence others. Powerful people avoid showing emotions that others may view as weak. People of power shy away from outward displays of vulnerability, failure, frustration, guilt, shame, doubt, jealousy, or envy. We see, from history, that society views people who show these emotions as being weak.

Over time, we have learned another interpretation of the “golden rule”: “He who has the gold makes the rules.” Sometimes power comes from what a person has. If I am thirsty, the person who has water has more power than I. However, there is a flaw in this philosophy because we often do not see what gives us power. I have the power to choose to drink their water or to search for other sources. When people have things that we want, we often feel that they abuse their power and take advantage. They may misuse their power by either hoarding what they have, or by raising the cost of what they have if they are willing to part with it.

As an example, let’s consider a conflict between two neighbors, Jack and Ted. Jack has an apple tree close to his property line. When the apples are ripe, some fall to the ground. Ted grabs a few apples from the ground to take home. Jack sees Ted take the apples and accuses him of stealing. Ted explains that apples left on the ground rot very quickly and that he did not think Jack would miss a few. But Jack argues that they are not Ted’s to take. Jack takes the apples from Ted’s hands and walks away. This incident begins a conflict that lasts for years. The neighbors stop talking, and they forbid their children from playing with each other. Jack builds a fence between the two properties. They continue to argue and fight until Ted’s family moves away, taking their anger, hatred and hurt with them.

Such conflicts can exist in various magnitudes. Some of these have worldwide implications. Throughout time, wars have erupted over many things such as land, water, food, gold, oil, religion, beliefs, etc. In each of these situations, the object (land, religion, water, oil...) served as the source of power, not the owner of the “thing”; however, each individual collectively fought the war. Without the belief in the power of the object we are fighting for, there would be no cause for the conflict.

Think back to Suzanne and Glen and the hard feelings surrounding her purchase of a new dress. Glen wants to share his fear and concern over not being able to pay bills with his wife. He may not want to tell her what is going on because of certain thoughts or feelings he has. Glen may feel the stress of being the “breadwinner” or arrogance in his

ability to “fix” everything. Still, what if he fails in his role of breadwinner? Maybe he has never failed at providing for his family, but what if he does now? Glen risks facing his fear of feeling vulnerable, stupid, and weak. Providing for his family gives him a strong source of power. Suzanne may lose confidence in him if he admits his feelings to her. He might fear that if she lost faith in his ability to provide, she would leave him (fear of rejection), because he could not meet their needs and offer a sense of security.

This inner conflict causes a feeling of guilt, shame, fear, sadness, and remorse to overcome him. Glen then feels more insecure about sharing these emotions. He feels the need to show his strength by reassuring Suzanne of his competence in handling the finances. If she pressures him, he may resort to sarcasm, anger, and rage. These outbursts are reactions to his effort to protect his feelings of vulnerability. Glen ignores the building emotions and continues to struggle. Fear may cause him to resort to unprofessional and/or illegal means to pay the bills. This ill-gotten money can cause him more problems. He fears capture and feels guilt, shame, sadness, failure, etc. Logic is his main defense. Therefore, he tries to rationalize and justify his actions. The outcome may vary, but these emotional patterns are common. Expressions of emotions and defenses create struggles for power; these occur within the emotions that we feel. There are also power issues between Glen and Suzanne.

I often tell clients and audiences, “The existence of all emotions in humans is universal; it is what we do with the emotions that makes us different.” Although we all have the capacity to feel all emotions, there are individuals (such as sociopaths) who can effectively mask certain emotions to the point of near non-existence. In other words, we all have the same emotions, but our experiences in life teach us to use and show the emotions differently, or not at all. There is no good, bad, right, or wrong about it. It just is the way it is.

SUMMARY

The common threads of emotion run through conflict and this book explains these relationships. It is often easier to understand our conflicts with others than our inner conflicts. Being able to recognize the conflicts within ourselves enables us to resolve the conflicts occurring on the outside. Often, conflicts arise when we give our power away in some form. It is worth mentioning that I do not believe that others can forcefully take our power.

If we grew up in a society where everyone learned that they were equally empowered, why would there be conflict? At the root of all

conflict is a perceived inequity in power. When involved in a conflict, we only see things through our own eyes, often not realizing the other person's point of view. We each have the power to continue a conflict for as long as we feel there is an inequity. We all know the cliché that says, "Knowledge is power." I hope you choose to use the knowledge provided by this book with care and wisdom.

QUESTIONS

1. How do you feel about your personal power? Do you wish you had more?
2. Do you often feel motivated to succeed in order to hold onto your current level of power?
3. In hindsight, can you think of times when you might have put your emotions to better or more productive use instead of the way you actually utilized them?

Consider your responses to these questions and make a note of them in your journal.

Hierarchical Power Systems and How They Cause Conflict

Power never takes a step back—only in the face of more power.

—*Malcolm X*

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

- Explain hierarchical model of power
- Provide examples of hierarchical power issues
- Inform on the nature of conflict and inequity
- Explain the nature of status power versus internal perceptions of power

Consider the differences in the power structure of a corporate office and that of a therapy group. In a corporate office, there is a pecking order wherein everyone has a clear place. Each person has a position that may give him or her authority over others, but they must be accountable to those higher in the power structure. In a group therapy environment, all participants are equal. They all have thoughts and experiences to relate, and the intent is to have a situation wherein everyone benefits mutually from the sharing of thoughts and experiences offered by each member. These two separate power models form the basis for the ones we will examine in this book: the hierarchical system and the equity system. The hierarchical system maintains that everyone has a different level of power. This “status power” may change depending on the system they are in (for example, family, school, work, friends). A hierarchical system is what has been imposed on most of the world in which we live. What do I mean by “imposed”? The people who created the

hierarchy are commonly the most powerful in the hierarchy. Through manipulation, position, or status, they have been able to manipulate the system.

The concept of the hierarchical system in our society comes from the idea that each person in the hierarchy has a different status and a different amount of power. When you put each person in order in terms of their level of power, you have built a hierarchy. The person at the top of the hierarchy often determines the amount of power that each person in the hierarchy will receive. The goal of most people is to figure out how to get the most power possible.

Perhaps it is best to think of personal power as a ball of energy. In many ways, each of us is made of energy that we can choose to expend, save, or give away. In most cases, however, we believe that we have only limited energy. Thinking this way may lead us to try to hold on to it or try to find ways to obtain more energy from others.

In Figure 2.1, a different circle or ball of energy represents a person. The size of each circle shows the level of their feelings of status power. In most hierarchical systems, each person is supposed to maintain status in the system. If a person's power is threatened, they will likely resist. As such, a change in a person's status is not generally voluntary. Instead, power changes when someone with more power alters the power of one or more members of the system. For example, Chris tells

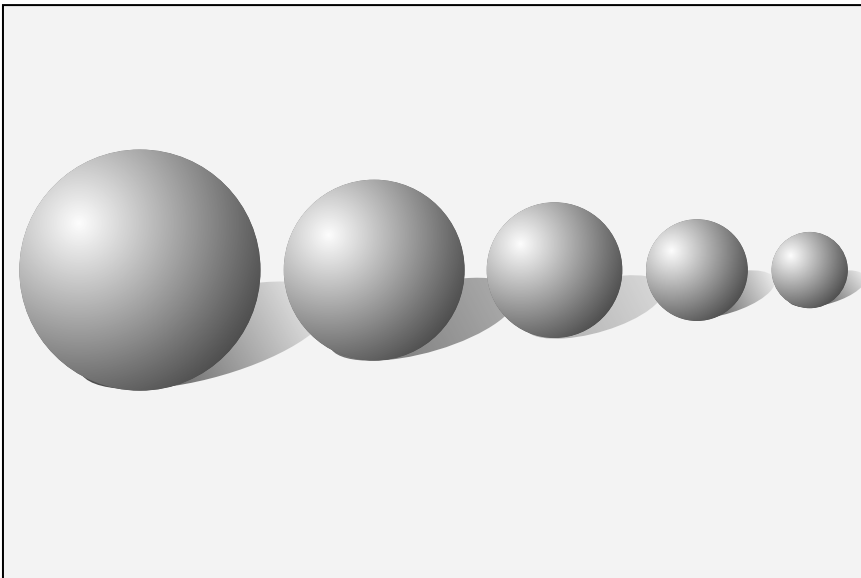


Figure 2.1 Hierarchical Power Model Conceptualization

Joan, her second-oldest child, that she is “in charge” to watch the younger children while she and the eldest child run an errand. Another example occurs when a boss promotes someone and that person goes from being a worker to supervising her former coworkers. As such, people learn to search their external environment for recognition of power instead of looking within and trusting their own internal belief in their power.

STATUS IN HIERARCHIES

If we want higher status, but we have no support for this increase, we may try to reduce other people’s perception of power. Joan, in the previous example, calls her big brother names the next time he is in charge of them because she feels she lost her power. She resents her brother for assuming the power she enjoyed.

In the examples, most families provide ideal models of hierarchies based on imposed status. Children see parents as the two highest spheres of power in the family. The mother and father’s status may change depending on the task; the children’s status normally depends on birth order, and sometimes gender. Parents impose a new status with the older children at the time of the new child’s birth, or with the younger children when the eldest leaves home. A child’s sense of internal power may change radically; this is especially true after the birth of a new child. In this case, each child attempts to preserve external perceptions of power and status to other children in the family. These roles may be different depending on family dynamics, but status related to birth order is very common.

As we have seen, hierarchical systems do not encourage individuals to believe in their own power to advance. Instead, it often teaches us to manipulate the power of others to gain perceived power. Thus we feel a gained sense of power when we subvert or undermine the power of others and alter the perception of our power. Consider our current system of politics. We often elect the candidate with the least amount of “mud” instead of the most qualified. In political races, candidates often try to deflect scrutiny by pointing out supposed failings of their opponents.

We can find this mudslinging tactic in many segments of society. A childhood form of mudslinging is namecalling. Our society tends to focus on dichotomies or two-sided splits between good and bad, right and wrong, strong and weak, winning and losing, and we often favor the individual who is less bad, less wrong, or less weak.

Figure 2.2 shows how a person may attempt to climb the hierarchy by usurping or “jumping over” someone above them. We could think

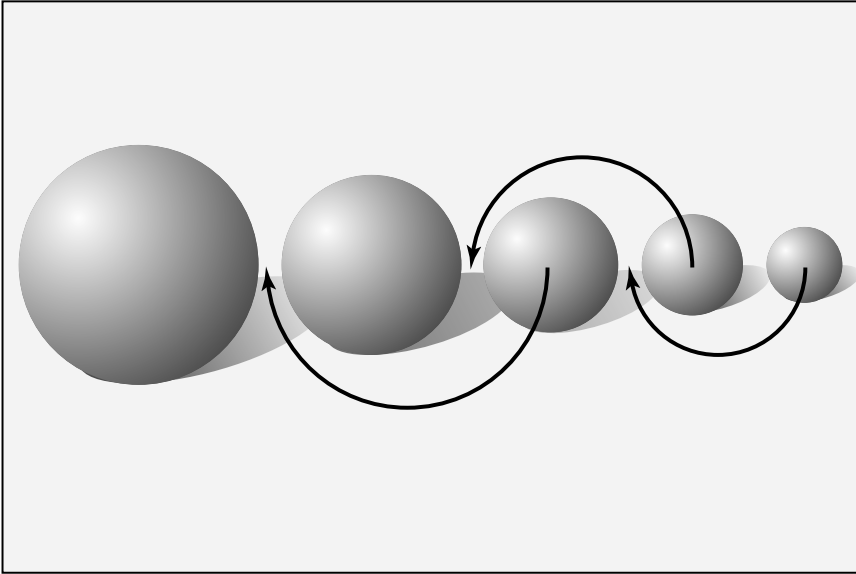


Figure 2.2 Attempts to Gain Power through Undermining and Usurping Others

of it like a race wherein we must overtake someone ahead of us in order to move up in the standings. We base our culture on preserving external perceptions of status power (while internal perceptions may vary depending on the situation). Most people realize that they can affect the power of others very easily. At some level, most of us are aware that if we keep pushing someone's buttons, we will get the reaction we want. We see that others can manipulate our power and so we know it is possible to do the same to them. Yes, you read it correctly; people manipulate your power and you allow it. Sometimes it is almost impossible to avoid our emotional reactions. With this realization, relinquishing power becomes a choice; it is a voluntary act.

Figure 2.3 illustrates an example of subverting or undermining someone's power. Let's say that we have a mutual friend named Fred. Let's also say that you are much closer friends with Fred than I am, but I want to improve my friendship with Fred. So, I invite Fred to come and play cards with me and a few other friends. I feel somewhat rejected when he tells me that he already has plans to eat dinner at your house. This leads me to feel unpopular and that I need more friends. How might I try to gain Fred as my good friend? The first order of business is to lead him to prefer spending time with me to spending it with you. I could choose several ways to set about subverting your power. I might tell Fred that you talk about him behind his back or that you make fun

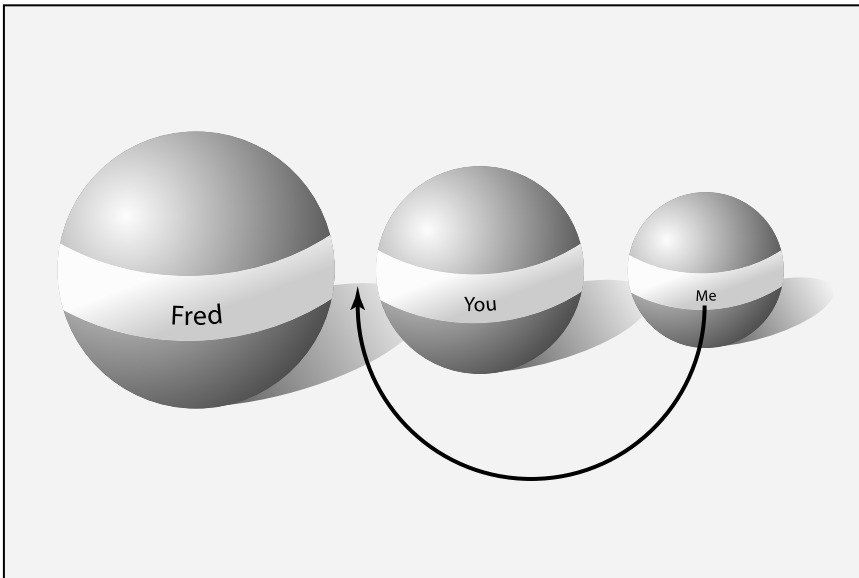


Figure 2.3 Example of Gaining Power through Undermining

of him. In doing so, I might spawn some mistrust toward you and incite him to avoid associating with you. As an added bonus, I could offer to rally to his aid, present myself as his ally, and portray you as a common enemy. In addition, I might do favors for him or otherwise try to make it seem more advantageous to him to be my friend than yours. In doing these things, I try to reduce your power and clear the way to create a situation that makes the odds more favorable for me to have a better friendship with Fred.

I did not gain any personal power in either approach. On the surface, it may seem that if I am successful in my efforts that I increased my power, but I did not. I simply tried to decrease the influence you had with Fred so I could exploit the weakening of his relationship with you and thereby increase my chances of bolstering my friendship with him. In short, I do not need to try to increase my power; I only need to undermine yours. Aside from directing all of my efforts at Fred, I could also approach you and lead you to believe that Fred speaks ill of you or that he may not be a very true friend to you.

The sample hierarchy in the illustration reflects my perceptions, since in the example, I view myself as being disadvantaged, and we are focusing on my vantage point right now. In a sense, it does not matter what you or Fred perceive in this situation, because my reality comes from my perceptions. The success of my scheme depends upon you and

Fred not speaking to each other about what I said. If you and Fred discuss my assertions, you'll likely find that I behave as a manipulative liar, and both of you will probably avoid me. However, due to fear, shame, and possible rejection, you and Fred may not speak to each other and thereby allow my plan to work.

On a brief note, in a hierarchical system, we may sometimes gain power by maintaining the lowest amount of power. A person (or group) may take the role of "victim," in anticipation of being "rescued" or given power by others. I will discuss this point in greater depth later in the book. The key issue to understand for now is that power is an illusion, and there are many ways to manipulate it. In this example with Fred, you, and me, if you catch me at my plan to manipulate, I can play innocent and pretend that I knew nothing about the situation. In doing so, I can make it look as though you were simply trying to make me look bad. Therefore, I look like the weaker party and may "win" Fred's friendship by appearing more honorable than you.

MULTIPLE HIERARCHIES

A person in one hierarchical system may belong to many others as well. The primary hierarchy exists within the family; many people are striving, throughout their lives, to outgrow their perceived status in the family. Hierarchies exist in schools and even in different class subjects at school. A student's place in this hierarchy depends on all the students' perceived abilities in each subject. However, many other aspects enter into the equation. These things include peers, sports, religions and churches, income, level of education, political affiliation and even status within the party, job, or club . . . and the list goes on. Some argue that individuals within a hierarchy struggle to attain power and status to gain recognition and a sense of control.

It seems that most individuals will identify most closely with the hierarchy where they sense the most power or feel the safest, especially if they doubt their abilities to make decisions for themselves. Many times, as children mature and want to express more power, conflict increases between parents and children. At this time, primarily when their children are in their early teens, parents often fear that their child may make unwise choices, and they seek to gain more control over their child. As parents seek more control, their children continue to seek more power. When a child feels that his/her power is ignored in the home, they may steer their energy toward their peer group. Within this group, they feel more powerful, and/or the differences in power in the hierarchy are not as pronounced. Many teens are also able to pool their power together against the common foe, the parents, especially if the parents

appear to be abusing their power. In this manner, the child plays the victim role with their peers and describes the parent as being the oppressor. In a peer group, teens can justify their victimization by their parents and defiance of them to each other, and feel understood by their peers. Similar scenarios exist in school and job settings. There are many groups and organizations with hierarchies and sub-hierarchies where the same situations can occur.

We now have a basic understanding of power hierarchies and sub-hierarchies. It may seem that the answer to solving conflict involves eliminating sub-hierarchies and seeking to maintain one hierarchy. First, seeking control of this type often stems from fear of lack of control and fear of losing power or status. Additionally, striving for this type of control will always meet with frustration and resistance; it is within the will of the individual to maximize their personal power.²

FEARING THE POWERFUL

In a hierarchical system, sometimes the individual with the highest status power stands to feel the most threatened. Others in the group may fear that the “strongest” group member may abuse their power. Because people fear the strongest person’s potential for abuse of power, the group may feel that they have to remain on guard and cut down the power of the highest. A perfect example of this scenario is what happens with the president of the United States. Politics aside, many view the president of the United States as the world’s most powerful person. Although a system of checks and balances in our government limits the power of the president, there is still a great deal of fear and mistrust of what he could do. As we all know, fear and mistrust are emotions. We understand this element of human behavior that seeks to maximize personal power, based on a hierarchical power model, and we have seen abuses of power by past world leaders. This combination may cause a sense of fear and mistrust toward political leaders. Additionally, a common perception of politicians is that they hide their true agendas from the public.

We know of many past presidential scandals. Was a leader guilty of wrongdoing? We often do not know; the media and others make assertions and allegations that can include various and sundry proposed and actual illegal actions. The public, however, does not know the whole story. Whether involved in wrongdoing or not, many attempts have been made to disempower these individuals through bringing up their “questionable” actions.

For example, Bill Clinton was the focal point of many scandals during his tenure as president. Was he involved in Whitewater? Did he and

Monica Lewinsky have an affair? His accusers said he avoided the draft and committed several other illegal acts. Regardless of the truth or extent of his involvement in these events, some of his political opponents attempted to disempower him by publicizing these actions.

Some comedians earn a living by making fun of political leaders' flaws and human frailties. We often hold these leaders up to inhuman standards of reproach. This type of humor humanizes and disempowers our leaders. When a leader's credibility is undermined, we lose faith in their vision and guidance. Does the current state of our society deter the most qualified candidates? Many believe that the most qualified presidential candidates will not run; it is felt that they avoid the emotional turmoil associated with the role of being the most powerful. We will look more closely at the power and emotional implications later.

Who benefits if the person at the top of the hierarchy is disempowered? If the "top dog" falls from power, the person in the next position may gain more perceived power. In the earlier example, we looked at why the president must often defend himself from media attacks. The vice president's power may survive the controversy unharmed, if he has kept his political distance. This permits him to be in place to run for the presidency when the president's term is complete. In families, a similar scenario occurs when the parent who asserts more control is the subject of conflict. This situation could allow the other parent to quietly direct and guide. A wise but manipulative individual in this second position could detect this tendency and may use it to his or her advantage. These actions may or may not be in the best interest of those involved; however, the outcome depends upon the situation and their actions.

People often want to become the most powerful person in a hierarchical structure. I ask children, whom I counsel and teach, which position of power they would choose. In their own way, even children want to have the most power. They often feel that they wish no one could tell them what to do. For many of these children, growing up does not change this underlying belief that it is best to be the most powerful. These beliefs commonly become sublimated (placed within the subconscious) but are acted out in people's personal and professional lives.

Many feel that the desire to become powerful feeds the success of capitalism. If we look more closely, such a belief system often promotes abuse of power, corruption and lying. The belief system becomes, "Win at any cost." The belief that the end justifies the means is dangerous to a society. Many empires throughout history fell because of this arrogant attitude, and it may prove to be the downfall of our society, as we know it, if the belief does not change. Although there are many who wish to change their view, they do not feel that there are options. Furthermore,

the fear behind changing the belief system is, "If I am not still competing to keep ahead, then I will fall behind, and I cannot afford to fall behind."

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

What happens if someone feels that he cannot compete or succeed? We looked at a scenario where others may sacrifice their power to gain favor with others. For those, however, who feel stuck at the bottom of the ranks, they may flounder emotionally at the bottom of the hierarchies and can feel like the proverbial whipping boy. These people feel a lack of direction, or fear of change, underlying depression, and often both a fear of failure and a fear of success. These people feel that they will never reach their highest aspirations because the system, by design, will beat them. We call this behavior "learned helplessness."

In the research lab, we can show learned helplessness by repeatedly shocking an animal that has no means of escape. After the animal realizes that it cannot avoid the shock, it gives up and takes the shock, in spite of the pain. Additionally, when the animal can escape (the door to the cage is open), it will not do so. The dog will still lie in its cage and take the shock. This animal does not "play" the victim. The dog does not anticipate outside help and does not believe that it can do anything to rescue itself. Therefore, the dog just gives up.

People in all factions of our society are stuck in a similar learned-helplessness belief system, which limits their learning and growth. It is true we are limited in what we can truly change in our lives. However, if we are a passive captain on a ship sailing nowhere, then we must hold ourselves responsible when our ship remains lost at sea.

An interesting aspect of a hierarchical model of power lies in the fact that there is often much conflict between the two bottom positions. There are two lines of thinking for people in these positions. One is that of trying to gain more power to avoid being last. The other is trying to remain disempowered and remain the victim. When these two groups are struggling with each other, it often allows those higher in the hierarchy to remain unthreatened.

As do most conspiracy theories, this one makes sense as it attempts to divert the attention of the masses away from those with higher levels of status power. Regardless of the truth, which we may never know, it behooves each individual to believe in their own sense of power; only then can we make choices that are in our best interest. While conspiracies do exist, when we surrender energy to them, they can affect our lives more profoundly. Fabricating conspiracy theories often serves a purpose. Inventing such a theory allows the creator to assert his power

in a passive-aggressive manner. Fear of losing power or status is often a strong motivating factor for these people. Some in government positions may fabricate conspiracy theories or commit other abuses of power to serve a questionable agenda. However, there are many others whose purpose is to serve the public interest and who behave in a very conscientious and responsible manner.

SUMMARY

You may have surmised from this discussion that I do not believe that a hierarchical model is in the best interest of all; this system often breeds conflict since it implies inequity. If we continue to accept a belief system marked by differing levels of power and status, we fall into playing the power game. This system distracts a person from finding understanding within our world and us. It is in our best interest to question why we are here and what we want from our lives, as well as what life is trying to offer us.

The survival of the hierarchical model of power depends, in part, in belief in scarcity. Yes, many things in our world exist in limited supply. However, it is often not in our best interest to indulge ourselves in possessions. Two reasons people overindulge are to mask their insecurities and/or to assert importance and value.

Often the fear of relinquishing this hierarchical model is due to the fear of anarchy and that those who gain power will abuse it. It is true that if someone has been held in shackles for much of their lives, they may make some unwise choices once released from their chains. The question is, where did the shackles come from?

Yes, by virtue of being human, we will make mistakes, some larger than others. However, it may serve us well to guide and support people in the wake of their mistakes. We should learn from mistakes, rather than withdraw our affection and punish those who make mistakes. After all, what does a child learn when he is spanked for hitting someone else? I believe that he learns that anger and force cause fear in the people it is directed toward and gives power to the person who delivers it. He also learns that someone bigger and older has the power to hit, so when he gets older, he can hit too.

QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of instances when someone abused their power over you? Can you identify some cases where you abused your power over other people? In your journal, jot down your ideas on the reasons why others may have manipulated you with their

power, and the reasons you may have chosen to manipulate others with your power.

2. Have there been times you can identify when you played the role of a victim or gave away your power to gain power from someone else?
3. Can you think of instances in your life when you (and others) would benefit if we all could treat each other as equals instead of vying for more power?

Think about your responses and jot them down in your journal.