



# ABUSE OF POWER

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## Principle-Centered Leadership

Read how adopting an imperial attitude after being elected to a position of authority is anathema to good governance.



# How Power is Abused: The Pitfalls of Imperial Leadership

By Dennis A. Mumble

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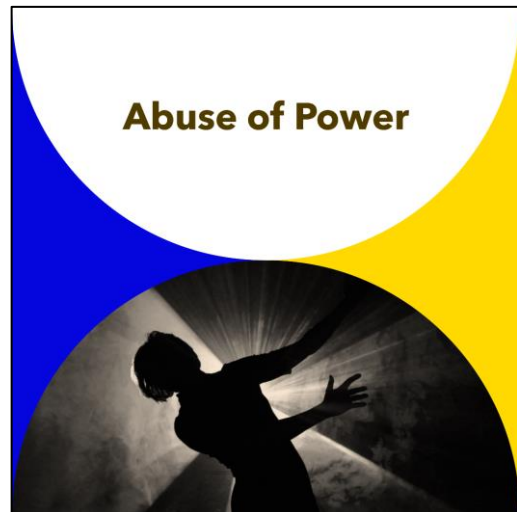
The dynamics of power within organisational leadership have long fascinated scholars across various disciplines. One recurring phenomenon that warrants attention is the tendency of leaders, once elected to positions of authority, to assume an imperial posture in their attitudes toward colleagues and subordinates, leading to the abuse of power.

Leadership, by definition, is the act of guiding and directing a group of people towards a common goal. This requires a certain level of authority and power in order for the leader to effectively execute their duties and to avoid assuming an imperial

posture in their attitudes toward others around them and thereby abusing their powers. This abuse of power is a well-documented phenomenon that has been studied extensively by psychologists, as well as philosophical and behavioural scientists.

Psychologists have extensively studied the impact of power on human behaviour, shedding light on the reasons behind leaders adopting imperial attitudes. Dacher Keltner<sup>1</sup>, a social psychologist and author of "The Power Paradox," argues that power can induce an individual's focus on their own desires, leading to a diminished concern for others. He states, "The very experience of power is inherently corrupting; it infects our brains and impairs our ability to empathize with others" (Keltner, 2016).<sup>2</sup>

Narcissism and hubris in leadership are psychological factors strongly associated with the abuse of power. Robert Hogan, a prominent psychologist in leadership studies, explains that narcissistic leaders often exhibit a grandiose sense of self-importance, seeking admiration and recognition from others. Hogan argues that this sense of entitlement can lead to an



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<sup>1</sup> Dacher Joseph Keltner is a Mexican-born American professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. He directs the Berkeley Social Interaction Lab and is also the founder and faculty director of the Greater Good Science Center. He is the host of the podcast The Science of Happiness and Chief Scientific Advisor of Hume AI. Keltner was born in Jalisco, Mexico to two early members of the counterculture. He received his B.A. in psychology and sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1984 and his Ph.D. from Stanford University in 1989. He completed three years of post-doctoral work with Paul Ekman at the University of California, San Francisco. Keltner's research focuses on the biological and evolutionary origins of compassion, awe, love, beauty, power, social class, and social inequality. He has published over 190 scientific articles and has written for several popular outlets such as The New York Times Magazine and The Wall Street Journal.

<sup>2</sup> Keltner, D. (2016). The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence. Penguin Books.

imperial posture and abusive behaviour towards colleagues and subordinates (Hogan, 2011).<sup>3</sup>

The abuse of power can take many forms, from micromanaging and controlling behaviour to outright verbal and physical abuse. This type of behaviour is not only detrimental to the individuals who suffer at the hands of their abusive leader but can also have a negative impact on the organisation or society as a whole. A leader who abuses power can foster a culture of fear and distrust, stifle creativity and innovation and ultimately hinder progress.

A landmark study in understanding the abuse of power is the Stanford Prison Experiment conducted by psychologist Philip Zimbardo. The experiment revealed how individuals placed in positions of authority, even temporarily, tend to adopt dominant roles and mistreat those in subordinate positions. Zimbardo argues that role identity plays a significant role, as individuals conform to the expectations and power dynamics associated with their position, often at the expense of ethical considerations (Zimbardo, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

Building upon the Stanford Prison Experiment, Zimbardo further explored the abuse of power in his book "The Lucifer Effect".<sup>5</sup> He discusses the concept of moral disengagement, whereby individuals psychologically distance themselves from their immoral actions by rationalizing and justifying them. Zimbardo suggests that this process allows leaders to perpetuate abusive behaviours without feeling a personal sense of guilt or responsibility (Zimbardo, 2007).

This practice is particularly prevalent in South African football leadership, where some leaders have convinced themselves that their path is the only path and that their actions are the only ones that matter. This sense of immunisation against responsibility and openness to criticism has stymied innovation in various aspects of football governance and administration.

One psychological theory that can explain the tendency of leaders to abuse their power is the concept of the "power paradox" proposed by psychologist Dacher Keltner. According to Keltner, people who are in positions of power often become disconnected from the needs and desires of those they lead. This can lead to a lack of empathy and concern for others, resulting in a focus on personal gain and a disregard for the well-being of others. In other words, the very traits that may have helped a person become a leader, such as assertiveness and confidence, can turn into negative behaviours when taken to excess.

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<sup>3</sup> Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. B. (2005). The Dark Side of Leadership. In J. Antonakis, A. T. Cianciolo, & R. J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The nature of leadership* (pp. 347-366). Sage Publications..

<sup>4</sup> The Stanford Prison Experiment was a social psychology study conducted at Stanford University in August 1971. The experiment was funded by the U.S. Office of Naval Research and was intended to measure the effect of role-playing, labelling, and social expectations on behaviour over a period of two weeks.

More than 70 young men responded to an advertisement about a "psychological study of prison life," and experimenters selected 24 applicants who were judged to be physically and mentally healthy. The paid subjects were divided randomly into equal numbers of guards and prisoners.

However, mistreatment of prisoners escalated so alarmingly that principal investigator Philip G. Zimbardo terminated the experiment after only six days. The Stanford Prison Experiment immediately came under attack on methodological and ethical grounds.

<sup>5</sup> Zimbardo, P. G. (2007). *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. Random House Trade Paperbacks.

Another theory put forth by philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli in his book "The Prince" is that leaders must be willing to use harsh and even cruel tactics in order to maintain their power and control. Machiavelli argues that leaders who are too kind or compassionate will be taken advantage of by their subordinates and not be able to maintain their authority. While this philosophy may seem extreme, it has been embraced by many leaders throughout history as a justification for ruthless behaviour.

However, not all leaders fall victim to the temptation of abusing their power. In his book "Principle-Centered Leadership," Stephen Covey proposes a principle-centered leadership style that is based on values, ethics, and integrity. A principle-centered leader focuses on developing a positive culture that promotes healthy relationships, open communication, and a sense of accountability for behaviour. This style of leadership emphasizes a balance between personal and organisational goals and holds leaders accountable for their actions.

Covey argues that a principle-centered leader must develop a strong sense of self-awareness and continually seek to improve their relationships with others. They must be willing to listen to feedback and make necessary changes in their behaviour, demonstrating humility and a willingness to learn. This approach requires leaders to acknowledge their own vulnerabilities and limitations and seek to grow and improve continually.

A key component of principle-centered leadership is the focus on serving others rather than exerting control or dominance. Covey advocates for a servant leadership approach, where leaders prioritize the needs of their team members and empower them to achieve their full potential. By sharing power, delegating responsibilities, and nurturing a culture of collaboration and growth, leaders can counterbalance the imperial posture that often leads to power abuse.

Principle-centered leaders base their decision-making on fundamental principles rather than personal interests or short-term gains. Covey encourages leaders to define their guiding principles and make decisions in alignment with these values. By doing so, leaders create a clear ethical framework that promotes fairness, justice, and compassion. This approach helps leaders resist the temptation to abuse power and ensures decisions are made in the best interests of the organization and its members.

Adopting a principle-centered leadership style can help prevent the abuse of power by ensuring that leaders are accountable for their actions and motivated by the best interests of the organisation and its members. When leaders prioritise building healthy relationships and promoting a positive culture, they can inspire trust and loyalty and foster a sense of community within the organisation. This, in turn, can lead to more productive and innovative teams and a stronger, more resilient organisation.

On the path to combating the abuse of power, ethical leadership and emotional intelligence play vital roles. Daniel Goleman, a psychologist known for his work on emotional intelligence, argues that leaders with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to recognize and regulate their emotions, fostering empathy, fairness, and cooperation. Goleman emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and empathy in countering the tendency towards an imperial posture and abusive behaviours (Goleman, 1998).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Goleman, D. (1998). What Makes a Leader? Harvard Business Review.

On the other hand, whilst we place most of the emphasis on the principal actor who abuses their power, those at the receiving end of the abuse should also be encouraged to resist the urge to blindly follow orders, especially if those orders have questionable moral and ethical consequences.

The Milgram experiment was a research study conducted by psychologist Stanley Milgram in the 1960s to examine how individuals obeyed orders from authority figures, even when these orders went against their conscience. Participants were tasked with administering electric shocks to a learner in another room when they made a mistake. The shocks increased in voltage with each mistake. Despite hearing the learner's screams of pain, many participants continued to administer shocks as instructed by the authority figure in the study. The experiment demonstrated how individuals can become complicit in abusive behavior when influenced by authority figures.

Milgram's experiment involved two states of obedience: the autonomous state and the agentic state. In the autonomous state, individuals take responsibility for their actions and recognize the consequences of their behaviour. In the agentic state, individuals do not take personal responsibility for their actions but instead become agents of authority, following orders unquestioningly. The agentic state is characterized by a sense of detachment from the consequences of one's actions and a loss of personal control over decision-making. Milgram's study demonstrated how individuals can be easily manipulated into entering the agentic state, leading them to engage in behaviours that go against their own moral compass.

Like in the Stanford Prison Experiment, the Milgram experiment also showed how people disengage morally from their actions whereby individuals psychologically distance themselves from their immoral actions by rationalizing and justifying them; in this case, simply using the excuse that they were merely following orders.

The abuse of power by leaders is a well-documented phenomenon that can have severe consequences for individuals and organisations. The power paradox and the Machiavellian philosophy of leadership can help explain why some leaders fall victim to this temptation. However, by adopting a principle-centered leadership style, leaders can focus on developing values and ethics that prioritize healthy relationships and accountability while preventing the abuse of power. As Covey notes, "Effective leadership is putting *first things first*. Effective management is discipline, carrying it out". Adopting a principle-centered leadership style can help leaders focus on doing the right things and promoting healthy relationships rather than wielding their power as a means of control.

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