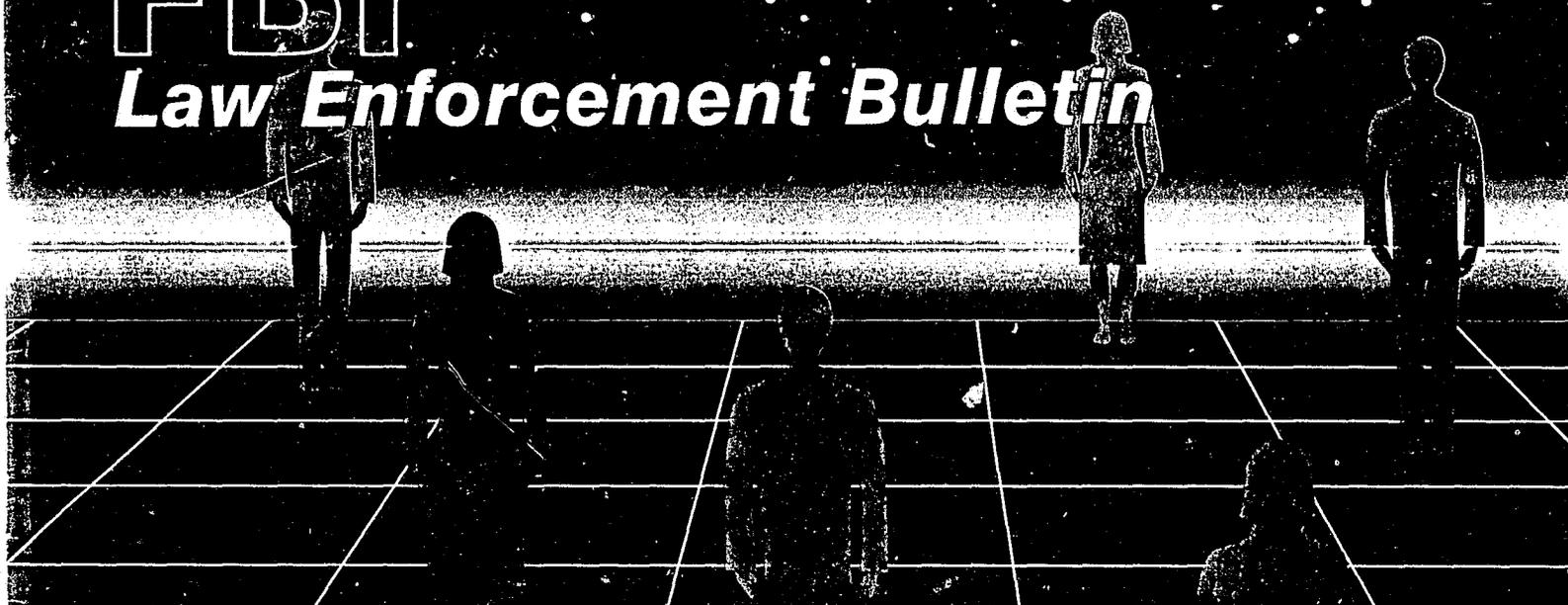




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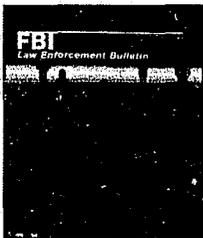
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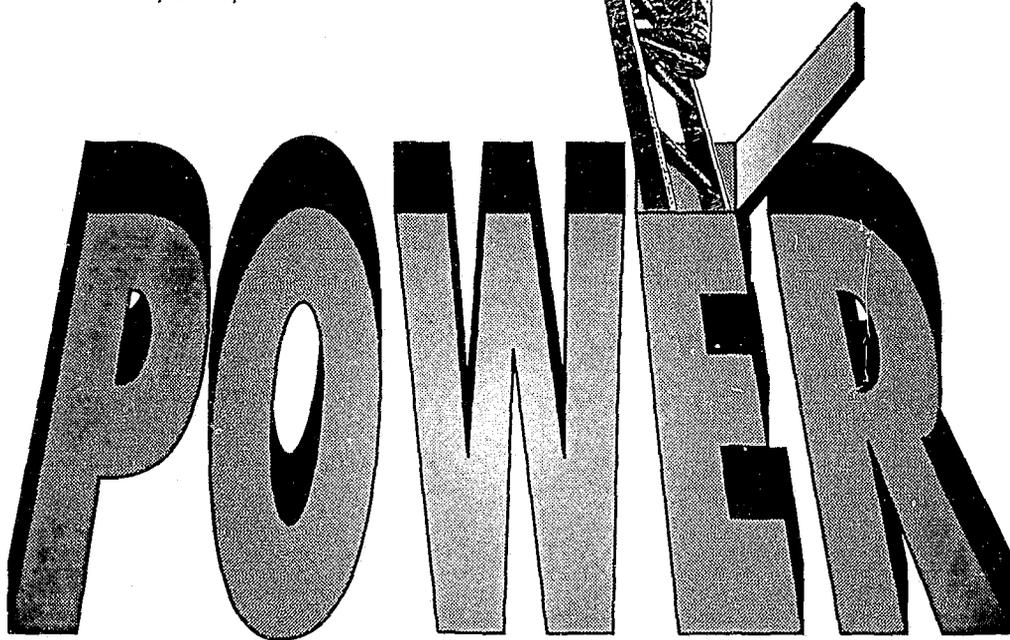
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Power Dynamics

By
JOHN M. TURNER, J.D., LL.M.



Power as a management and survival tool is finally being openly analyzed in academic and professional forums. It is now recognized that all employees—from top management to individual employees—in an organization must comprehend the need to acquire and maintain a power base in order to accomplish their goals and objectives successfully. Management consultant Marilyn Moats Kennedy concludes:

“An independent powerbase in the organization is critical to survival. Being able to build and use power is always part of getting the job done.

Depend entirely on the position that power comes with the job, and you could be out. Build your own base, and you are likely to move up or hold on. At least you will have choices.”¹

The need for police administrators to become more sophisticated about the acquisition and use of power is the result of many complex influences that exist in today's workplace. Modern police organizations tend to be rigid bureaucracies, as well as socially intricate organizations. Top police administrators need power to overcome bureaucratic infighting, resistance to

policy mandates, and political manipulations, all of which tend to destroy morale. Middle managers need to develop a powerbase in order to manage their subordinates properly and to avoid having their careers sidetracked by becoming pawns in power wars. Patrol officers and other police professionals need power in order to overcome bureaucratic obstacles and to “manage” their superiors successfully.

An additional reason for police administrators and officials to become more sophisticated about the dynamics of power is to avoid the trap of “power failure.” Power failures occur when police officials

must depend upon people over whom they have little or no explicit control to accomplish a goal or task. This is a consistent problem in police organizations, because the nature of police work requires officials to depend upon many external forces over which they have no formal control.

This article articulates the need to acquire and to maintain an individual powerbase that uses formal and informal sources in the organizational environment. Police administrators and officials who develop a powerbase can personally survive, can achieve goals, can overcome or avoid conflicts, and can gain the cooperation and support needed from superiors, peers, subordinates, and people outside the organization. Failure to do this results in personal frustration, an inability to perform work responsibilities properly, and the loss of control over career decisions.

Understanding Power Dynamics

Power dynamics in most police organizations requires that individuals develop a personal powerbase in order to perform their duties and responsibilities. However, before they can start to acquire individual power in police organizations, they must first analyze and assess the power dynamics within the structure.² This includes not only an understanding of both the formal and informal nature of power that exists within the organization but also a sensitivity to the degree of energy needed to reduce or to overcome the amount of conflict and resistance that occurs in the process of implementing decisions. By un-

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Recognizing the social complexity of an organization is the key to understand and properly evaluate the nature of power struggles....

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Mr. Turner is an Assistant District Attorney with the Atlanta Judicial Circuit, Atlanta, Georgia.

derstanding the power dynamics found within an organization, an individual can initially assess and plan for the amount of time and effort that must go into power-building activities.³

John Kotter of the Harvard Business School states that "...in complex organizations today, it is a rare decision issue or implementation issue that is devoid of at least the potential for conflict."⁴ He theorizes that conflict in such organizations as police departments is the result of diversity and interdependence.

Power in Police Organizations

Police organizations represent a highly complex social and working environment with a heterogeneous workforce that includes men, women, Blacks, Spanish-speaking Americans, and other minorities. The environment is made more complex by the educational and technical skill differences among police officials and employees.

The diversity found in police organizations causes conflicts, and

resistance arises because of the different priorities, goals, values, and self-interests, as well as a lack of trust. Recognizing the social complexity of an organization is the key to understand and properly evaluate the nature of power struggles in that group.

Another aspect of understanding power dynamics within an organization, according to Kotter, concerns the management of complex interdependent relationships with superiors, subordinates, peers, and outsiders. Along with the fact that diversity exists, to some degree, within all police organizations, police officials are also very interdependent upon others to perform their duties properly.⁵ In addition to other police personnel, police officials must also work with and depend on organized citizen groups, politicians, unions, and media groups, who sometimes attempt to influence the policy and behavior of police departments.

This existing interdependence requires that police officials have a powerbase that sometimes exceeds

the formal authority granted to them through their positions in the organization. This is necessary in order to avoid a power failure and to gain a desired response from others upon whom police officials are dependent. The amount of interdependence officials encounter is directly related to their need for an individual powerbase in order to avoid power failures.

That is, top police administrators delegate certain power and responsibility to individuals who occupy positions of authority within the chain of command on a descending scale.

In addition, the formal power system is a rigid structure that depends on people knowing and accepting their places in an organizational hierarchy. And, although this

move up the ladder (that is, supervisors cannot give managers power). Therein lies the weakness that creates and sustains the informal system.”⁸

In the informal power system, all relations are fluid, are created deliberately, and are based on negotiation. As a result of these factors, things get done *across* organizational lines rather than *within* them. Ultimately, it is the informal system that makes an organization work.

However, even though those who participate in the informal power system do so as equals—despite any formal position they may occupy within an organization—the informal power system becomes harder to penetrate as individuals move up the organizational ladder. This phenomenon is caused by both the inflexibility of formal chain-of-command positions and the reluctance of subordinates to accept superiors within their system. A major test of any police administrator’s effectiveness is the ability to penetrate these barriers and use the informal system.

The linchpin of the informal power system is the office grapevine, which is an informal intelligence network that is tapped into the body of information that constantly flows within an organization.⁹ In addition to its informational use, the grapevine can also be instrumental to either consensus building or the destruction of policies before they become formalized. Participation in the informal power system is necessary before a person can develop an individual powerbase.

“

Whenever possible, a power builder should also attempt to develop a mentor-mentee relationship with a respected superior.

”

Nature and Form of Power

Power, in any context, can be used as either a sword or a shield. When used offensively, power can coerce, persuade, or influence behavior. Defensively, power allows its users to avoid compliance with the mandates of others. However, whether used offensively or defensively, power is the ability to control circumstances, events, and people in order to achieve a desired result.⁶

Every organization has two power systems—formal and informal. The formal power system in a police organization works much like a quasi-military chain of command. Under this system, ultimate power is situated at the top of a pyramid-like organizational structure and power always moves downward from the top to the bottom.

system delegates authority to those in certain positions, the power that accompanies such authority is sometimes insufficient to meet organizational requirements. Accordingly, “real power is very different from command or position power.”⁷ Therefore, in building effective powerbases, individuals must acquire power sources beyond the formal level.

Those who wish to develop an individual powerbase must first participate in an informal power system. In contrast to the formal system of power, Marilyn Moats Kennedy observed:

“The informal system is always the stronger, more inclusive and more efficient one. Formal power flows only in one direction. It does not

Power Sources

Power never exists in a vacuum. In order for power to be acquired and maintained, it must be plugged into a generating source. According to Kennedy, "Power rests on a three-legged base, the legs of which are research, relations and resources."¹⁰ Research as a power source is centered on the ability to gather and analyze organizational data and intelligence. Good research skills are a prerequisite to meaningful participation on the informal system. Kennedy also believes that "people with good research skills can plan, predict events accurately, form alliances, and trade information."¹¹

Through research, one can recognize powerful people within an organization and identify their power source, as well as their relevant personal values and goals.¹² This is important, Kennedy states, because, "if you speak and act in a manner that expresses the 'spirit' and sentiments of others, they tend to identify with you and elevate you. They will almost always bestow a greater amount of power on you than you deserve."¹³

Kennedy also notes, "Power rests on relationships with others.... This is the most important leg of your power base."¹⁴ Before relational power will be effective, however, it must be based on genuine mutual interests between the parties. By creating successful relationships with others, a cooperative spirit for present and future interaction is ensured. This good relationship with superiors, peers, subordinates, and others will effectively overcome conflict and resistance when they arise.

Power builders can create good personal relationships with others in several simple ways. They can:

- Sincerely offer compliments to others
- Ask others for their assistance
- Help others to perform tasks.

J. Robert Parkinson suggests that good personal relationships may also be maintained in the following manner:

"Send a note to everyone once in awhile, or make a phone call 'just to keep in touch.'

When there is such an ongoing series of contacts over time, a

specific request for assistance or reference is not seen as being out of the ordinary, and it will be responded to positively. It will be welcomed if it is actually just one more in a continuing series of friendly contacts. If you do this over time, you will be pleasantly surprised about how many people you can call or refer to for assistance in a wide variety of areas, businesses, and professions."¹⁵

Whenever possible, a power builder should also attempt to develop a mentor-mentee relationship

10 Commandments for Acquiring Power In a Police Organization

- 1) Develop, maintain, and increase technical competency and proficiency in work assignments
- 2) Increase personal knowledge and expertise
- 3) Develop personal influence and negotiation skills
- 4) Develop and maintain the esteem of superiors, peers, subordinates, and significant others
- 5) Accumulate relevant information about the power dynamics of the organization and its power players
- 6) Develop cooperative relationships within the organization
- 7) Gain control of organizational resources or seek progressively more important job assignments
- 8) Establish a positive track record by reinvesting power back into the organization in order to achieve an organizational benefit
- 9) Develop a plan or agenda to accomplish the objectives set forth above
- 10) Maintain continuity in the pursuit of a powerbase and do not become discouraged or give up when confronted with conflict or resistance

with a respected superior. This type of relationship is of tremendous personal and professional benefit to the individual. Most successful, powerful individuals within an organization have enjoyed a mentor relationship at some point in their careers.¹⁶

And, in order to obtain information and build relationships, personal or organizational resources are needed. Resources that may be given to administrators and employees by an organization include:

- Job title and positional power
- Information or the control of information channels
- Control of money or credit
- Control of personnel or equipment.

Personal power resources refer to characteristics and traits that are totally dependent on an individual's personality and skill level. Personality power may be based upon charisma, special knowledge or expertise, negotiating skills, influence skills, reputation, and credibility or work record.

Conclusion

Many people fear power and are uncomfortable with its use. They believe that once power is acquired, it will automatically lead to corruption. Lord Acton summarized this point of view when he wrote, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."¹⁷ In contrast to this point of view, George Bernard Shaw observed, "Power does not corrupt men; but fools, if they get into a position of power, corrupt power."¹⁸

However power is viewed, the acquisition of power in order to survive or perform job responsibilities adequately in today's socially complex organizations is unavoidable. According to Early, "...whatever the risks of power may be, the risks of not having power are greater."¹⁹

Police administrators and officials should seek to enhance or build a powerbase whenever possible. By doing so, they will experience professional satisfaction and fulfillment. In addition, they will benefit personally by feeling more in control of their work environment. ■

Endnotes

¹ Marilyn Moats Kennedy, *Powerbase: How to Build It/How to Keep It* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1984), p. 2.

² John P. Kotter, *Power and Influence* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), p. 17.

³ *Supra* note 1, p. xi.

⁴ *Supra* note 2, p. 29.

⁵ Mitchell J. Posner, *Executive Essentials* (New York: Avon Books, New York, 1982), p. 263.

⁶ *Supra* note 1, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹³ *Supra* note 5.

¹⁴ *Supra* note 1, p. 12.

¹⁵ J. Robert Parkinson, *How to Get People to Do Things Your Way* (Illinois: NTC Business Books, 1986, p. 84.

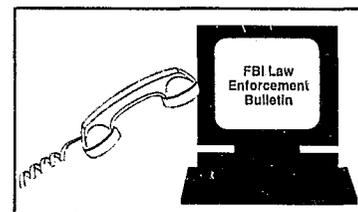
¹⁶ Kenneth A. Jolemore, "The Mentor: More Than a Teacher, More Than a Coach," *Military Review*, July 1986, pp. 5-17.

¹⁷ Lord Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power* (Boston, Massachusetts: The Beacon Press, 1949), p. 364.

¹⁸ *Supra* note 5, p. 263.

¹⁹ Edward M. Early, *Foundations for World Order* (Denver, Colorado: University of Denver Press, Co., 1949), pp. 145-146.

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