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A U T H E N T I C  
L E A D E R S H I P

*Courage in Action*



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## Framing Issues of Power

When leadership addresses what is really going on, it must inevitably address power, either because power is the presenting issue or because eventually, each generic feature of action must be examined as it appears in relation to the presenting issue. Power is often unequally shared; ups can impose their will on downs more easily than downs can on ups. Leadership's first task when power is unevenly shared is to frame the power issue more specifically. Even though one group may hold more power than another, this imbalance does not mean that one group is authentic and the other inauthentic. Let a parable and three examples set the stage for this discussion:

### The Parable of Ups and Downs

What makes an up an up and a down a down? An up can do more to a down than a down can do to an up. That's what keeps an up up and a down down. Ups tend to talk to each other and study the

downs, asking the downs what's up, or what's coming down, for that matter.

The downs spend a lot of time taking the ups out to lunch and dinner to explain their downness. The ups listen attentively, often amazed about the lives of downs. They contrast one down's experience with another down's experience. At times they don't worry too much about what the downs are up to because the ups know that the downs never seem to get it together. If they did, the ups would have to shape up.

After a while, the downs weary of talking to the ups. They think, "If I have to explain my downness one more time to an up, I'll throw up." So downs form networks and form support groups. This makes some ups nervous, for ups know three ups standing together is a board meeting; three downs, pre-revolutionary activity.

In order to cope with this rising up of downness, some ups hire downs, dress them up, and send them down to see what the downs are up to. These downs are often called personnel or affirmative action officers. This creates a serious problem for the down who is dressed up. That down doesn't know whether he or she is up or down and that's why downs in the middle often burn up.

Sometimes ups, to smarten up, ask downs to come into a program created by ups to explain and justify their downness. The ups call this "human relations training." Of course, ups never have to explain their upness; that's why they're ups.

There's good news and bad news in this parable. The good news is that there is no such thing as a perfect up or a perfect down. If people were perfect ups, they wouldn't be able to stand up, they would be so heavily burdened with downness.

The bad news is that when ups are up, it often makes them stupid. I call this *dumb-upness*. Dumb-upness occurs because ups do not have to pay attention to downs the way downs have to pay attention to ups. The only time ups worry about downs is when downs get uppity, at which time they are put down by the ups. The ups' perception is that downs are overly sensitive; they have an attitude problem. It is never understood that the ups are "underly sensitive" and have an attitude problem.

I used to think that when downs became ups they would carry over their insight from their downness to their upness. Not so.

Smart down, dumb up! One can be smart one minute, dumb the next.

### *Three Examples Illustrating the Parable*

The first example involves work that I did with a group of black and white men at a power company in the East. During the morning the blacks played a game they called "watch the honkey run" in which downs take cultural advantage of the ups. Because the ups did not really know what was going on, the downs could embarrass, cajole, and belittle the ups. It was a power game that was not particularly noble yet very dramatic. A white man would respond to black cajoling with stereotyped responses: "I live in a mixed racial neighborhood, some of my best friends are. . . ."

In the afternoon, a white female lawyer came to speak to this group of men about sexual harassment. In an amazing transformation, these men locked arms and went dumb up in unison! They said this woman had an attitude problem, that she was out to get them, that she didn't understand them. Color was not mentioned again all afternoon. The issue was now gender—men versus women. In her presentation on sexual harassment, the lawyer said that 95 percent of sexual crimes were perpetrated by men and only 5 percent by women. "That's what we want to deal with," exclaimed the men in unison. The woman shook her head. "These men are incorrigible," she muttered on the way out.

A second example is more personal. A colleague and I had formed a partnership, resulting in a solid collaborative relationship, and she had landed us consulting work in a large urban school district. Knowing she was only going to be in that city for another year because she had decided to pursue a theological education, I was called into a meeting with the superintendent of schools to plot a strategy and develop a comprehensive year-long plan. Here we were, two white males figuring what would be best to do in the district, never considering the participation of my new partner. At three o'clock the next morning, I got a call from my partner, who was absolutely irate that I had not represented her interests along with mine at the meeting. After all, she said, she was not leaving for a whole year.

Of course, she was right. I had fallen into dumb-upness and had inappropriately excluded a cherished colleague from authentic participation in shared work. There was no point in denying the truth. I admitted my own stupidity and luckily, she believed in forgiveness. I corrected the error and our partnership continued to deepen and grow.

Finally, here's a military example focusing on the debate about women in combat. General Colin Powell, chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest ranking U.S. military officer who is also black, was asked whether there are too many minorities in the military. "No, not at all," he replied on an NBC television interview with David Brinkley on January 14, 1990. "All people who are qualified should be able to serve." Later, in the same interview, he was asked to comment on the role of women in combat. "The restrictions of women in combat dictated by U.S. policy are fine," he said. With the controversy swirling around the issue, his answer seemed too facile. He was either simply stating U.S. policy or not recognizing the dumb-upness of his male response. More recently, Powell's comments on gays and lesbians in the military have continued his headlong slide into dumb-upness.

These three examples illustrate how downs know a lot more about ups than ups know about themselves. This view is supported by the thought of both Reinhold Niebuhr and contemporary liberation theologians, all of whom orient their thought within an up-down metaphor. They all affirm the "epistemological privilege" of the downs (see Lebacqz, 1986). The reasons downs know more about ups than ups know about downs is that downs experience the oppression, whereas ups rationalize it.

Ironically, it is ups who are frequently and popularly labeled as leaders. If we focus on dumb-upness, such a traditional view of leadership falls into serious disrepair—one does not want to follow a dumb-up leader. Both ups and downs can be authentically powerful and inauthentically powerful. Neither has a stranglehold on leadership or on the denial of leadership. Ups shift from authentic to inauthentic power by aggression; downs resort to deviousness. Ups go overt; downs covert. Fear of the other, perceived or real, acknowledged or unacknowledged, pushes and entices ups and downs into inauthentic behavior.

Table 9.1, which displays the Action Wheel in a power grid, outlines the actions leadership will investigate when framing issues of power. Each use of power by ups and downs is linked first to one of the generic features of action. (Even though power itself is a generic feature of action, when we examine it, we ask the questions posed by power's own subset of these actions.) Second, each use of power is linked to a generic expression of power—a broad category of power, or energy expenditure—that also helps us to understand the kind of power we are really facing.

However, let me stress that this discussion of power is in no way meant to justify the perpetuation of inauthentic up-down relationships. The ultimate goal is for individuals and groups to stand side by side in a caring journey. My discussion is intended to help leadership deal with the actual situations we face today, which must be addressed by leadership if we are to build new partnerships.

#### Power as Exploding Physical Force

At the existence level of action, power explodes as raw energy. Experienced as overwhelming force and might, it divides people into controller and controlled. Ups are entitled to command compliance and appropriately punish those who are disobedient if the purpose is publicly known, noble in intent, and legitimated by public consent. Forcefully clearing traffic to make way for fire trucks, trying alleged criminals, and defending against personal attacks are typical legitimate coercive activities. Lively debates, of course, occur over exact definitions of legitimate uses of coercive power.

When ups subvert or compromise shared public purposes, the ups' power is experienced by downs as arbitrary and capricious violence. Downs often retaliate with unorganized sporadic violence, such as stealing, shoplifting, or leaking damaging information.

#### Power as Personal Volition

On the resource dimension of action, power is the expenditure of energy by multiple exchanges, trade-offs, and bargains. The market metaphor is active, and power appears in the form of personal

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Table 9.1. How Leadership Frames Issues of Power.

<i>Generic Features of Action</i>	<i>Generic Expressions of Power</i>	<i>Inauthentic Power by Ups (Aggression)</i>	<i>Authentic Power by Ups</i>	<i>Authentic Power by Downs</i>	<i>Inauthentic Power by Downs (Deviousness)</i>
Meaning (for which)	Creating and interpreting	Denying	Discovering and revealing	Acknowledging and admitting	Minimizing
Mission (toward which)	Aligning	Propagandizing	Persuading	Educating and offering	Disguising
Power (by which)	Collective volition	State-sponsored terrorizing	Pursuing legitimate interests	Claiming interests	Insurgent terrorizing
Structure (through which)	Growing and developing systems	Assimilating	Active including	Networking and supporting	Pretending
Resources (with which)	Personal volition	Exploiting	Selling and exchanging	Buying and exchanging	Sabotaging
Existence (from which)	Exploding physical force	Arbitrarily coercing	Commanding compliance	Voluntary and non-voluntary complying	Random resisting

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volition as people choose how they will compete in the market. Because individuals make their own decisions, power and freedom are equated. In this view, power tends to be quantified. It is assumed there is only so much to go around.

In millions of these exchanges there is parity. People who are equals under the conditions of exchange come together, and both parties are satisfied. Up-down expressions of power occur when one actor accrues disproportionate decision-making power, leaving others unorganized and dispersed. Producers, for example, organized into large firms, exert more power than diffusely unorganized consumers. Witness the difficulty in organizing a product boycott. A highly organized government can exert its unified will on citizens' everyday affairs more easily than can unorganized individuals. Nevertheless, in the longer term, consumers can directly impact producers, and citizens can throw out elected rascals.

However, if the trade-offs are believed satisfactory to all parties, the exchange relationships go unchallenged. Abuse of power occurs when ups become aggressive, form monopolies, and exploit downs. Downs frustrated by exploitation resort to numerous forms of sabotage inside the work place. Politically, their deviance expresses itself as refusal to vote, or even withdrawal of any public participation. Deviousness is not viewed as morally reprehensible but rationalized as an appropriate response to blatant exploitation.

#### Power as Growing and Developing the System

The power that develops systems and is manifested in growth must be cumulative. Thus, government intervention to ensure active inclusion of all citizens is necessary. Cooperation between government and citizens, based on mutual obligations, provides the essential conditions for social growth. On this structural level, large corporations are not necessarily a problem if they are also good community citizens.

Downs take full advantage of opportunities to enter the mainstream using support structures like networking for their own and community benefit. Ups actively include downs in socially beneficial programs. Downs use these programs and the whole system benefits. Freedom expresses itself as socialized conformity. Peo-

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ple have real choices; however, those real choices are constrained by cultural, political, and social structures.

However, ups can be inauthentic, saying one thing and practicing another. For example, the legal defense program of the War on Poverty was dismantled when power was claimed by downs who threatened the status quo of ups. When ups are inauthentic, downs may then revert to acting one way in public and another way in private, in order to accomplish their own silently stated goals, and the ups are often fooled into believing real cooperation is present.

#### Power as Collective Volition

When people see power's own power (rather than its meaning, mission, structure, resources, or existence) as its most important aspect, collective self-determination is active, and freedom is again equated with power. Organized social and political movements are important. Revolutionary politics are adopted by downs, establishment politics by ups. Ups and downs are locked in a struggle, seeking a transfer of power from one to the other. Ups, be they political or corporate, who pursue their own legitimate interests often believe their own actions benefit downs as well as ups. In contrast, downs perceive ups' interests as inimical to their own and perpetually claim their own interests. Conflict is inherent at this level. At its most intense, the conflict results in revolution. Prior to revolutionary action, negotiation of differences is always possible.

Ups resort to aggression and downs to deviousness when each group ceases to pursue its legitimate interests and turns to oppressing or overthrowing contrary interests.

#### Power as Aligning

Vision quickens power; conviction focuses it. People are preoccupied with movement toward the common good. Ups share their vision by persuading downs that the vision is viable and trustworthy. Downs, knowing that ups can deliver on the vision, educate ups to make the vision more responsive to diverse concerns.

Parents advise children on what is best for them. Children teach their parents about what they need and want. Top manage-

ment articulates a corporate vision; middle management and workers recommend changes that better serve all parties. First World countries propose international policy for economic development; Third World countries suggest individualized alternatives.

When they believe they are threatened, ups resort to propaganda, downs resort to disguising their real interests. Ups brandish self-serving studies about welfare fraud and cheaters; downs lie to welfare worker ups about what is really happening for fear of retaliation. Men exaggerate women's weakness; women exaggerate their own strengths. Real interests lose out to defensive posturing because neither ups nor downs can align on a shared vision.

### Power as Creating and Interpreting

When meaning is the issue and art is the metaphor for life, power is expressed as the creating and interpreting of reality, and freedom is understood as transcending power. Play is at the heart of this experience of power, since it is through play that energy is released from the constraints of old visions and enabled to test the authenticity of new visions. It is no wonder that artists are often seen to create a political threat. They constantly challenge traditional authority through their choices of what to create.

On this level, power discerns what is hidden in all personal and societal visions. It inspires authentic inquiry of both the delightful and the despicable in life. It brings to consciousness the fearful, the humorous, the ignoble, the paradoxical, and the ambiguous.

Ups' authentic power uncovers abuse, addiction, and denial. It creates alternative perspectives so that people can take responsibility for and transcend those denials. Downs' authentic power admits secret fears of victimization, abdication, inauthenticity, and denial. And it creates alternative prospects in order that people can take responsibility for and transcend those abuses. There is a clear mutual understanding that ups' and downs' experiences of power disparities are true and real.

When threatened, ups deny the severity of their aggression, in order to cushion and protect their own identity. In response, downs likewise minimize the impact of the ups' action, thereby

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cushioning and protecting their own identity. The courage to face what is really going on is lost. Inauthenticity and counterfeit identities emerge. In each expression of power, whether it be control or creativity, inauthenticity only creates more inauthenticity.

### Applying the Action Wheel to Power

Leadership diagnoses and acts one dimension or more clockwise from where a presenting issue is initially discerned on the Action Wheel. This rule also applies to reframing power. If a previously healthy system resorts to expressing power through assimilation, the Action Wheel guides leadership toward collective volition as a solution. By pressing each group to claim its own collective self-determination, assimilation is challenged, and systems growth is reclaimed as an authentic possibility. Many positional white leaders missed this signal during the early days of the civil rights movement. Downs experienced assimilation; ups touted inclusion. The result was the uprising of black power, brown power, and red power, groups led by people of color. Furthermore, as movements take hold, the power issues shift. Leadership anticipates this shift by framing upward on the power grid.

Leadership resists aggression and deviousness. Neither is legitimate. When either exists, leadership's long-term credibility and viability are eroded. Therefore, leadership's calling is clear—re-establish authentic action. Name abuses of power by both ups and downs; admit abuses and act courageously.

What sounds ethically upright is, of course, not simple. Serious wrestling with power for many of us is difficult. However, I can suggest two bases for hope. Since we have all been both ups and downs, at different times, we have all been both the doers and the receivers of the abuse of power. We know both aggression and deviousness firsthand. As we understand them in ourselves, we can understand them in others. Thus, we have the possibility of transcending the abuse of power, based on our own experience and how we allow that experience to play itself out in our lives.

The second basis for hope is the action of the downs under duress. When ups become aggressive and downs resist, the downs often remain authentic far beyond what might reasonably be ex-

pected under the circumstances. Deviousness is a last resort. For example, what have people of color done to deserve the scorn of whites? People of color have authentic reasons for their anger at white-dominated societies, yet by and large, they remain faithful to authenticity, committed to creating an enduring future.

Not all inauthenticity is of equal magnitude and deserving of equal scorn and condemnation. In the matter of racism, at least, aggression is more heinous than deviousness. This interpretation rests on a moral judgment: Who's more noble, those with superior power aggressively overreacting to a nonexistent threat, or the ones fighting back with whatever means are available?

### Summary

The parable of ups and downs illustrated how downs know a lot more about ups than ups know about themselves or about downs. Both ups and downs can be authentic or inauthentic in their expression of power.

Leadership frames issues of power two ways. First, it links power to one of the generic features of action; second, it links power to a generic expression of power. Depending on which generic feature of action is applied, power can be seen as exploding physical force, as personal volition, as cooperation within the system, as collective volition, as vision, or as creation.

The underlying fact in these reflections is that no one person or group is totally powerful or powerless. No one can act, therefore, with total impunity. There are always options and consequences. Downs do not exist totally at the mercy of ups. And ups can and do fight abuse in their own ranks. Without leadership on all sides, the spiral of revenge will destroy whatever blocks its path. Authenticity is always at work resisting that destruction and seeking to build a viable human future.