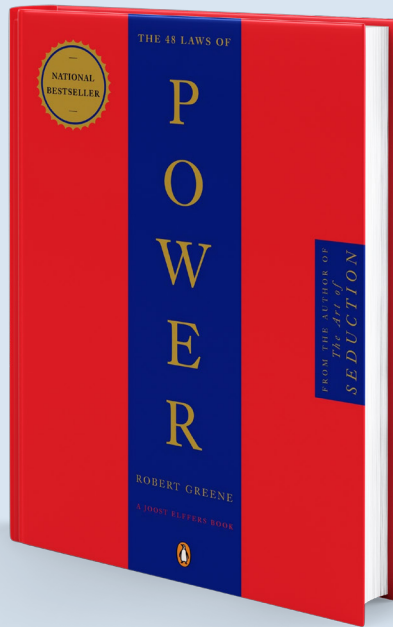


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The 48 Laws of Power

By Robert Greene

Robert Greene is the author of the New York Times bestsellers *The 48 Laws of Power*, *The Art of Seduction*, *The 33 Strategies of War*, *The 50th Law*, *Mastery*, *The Laws of Human Nature*, and *The Daily Laws*. In addition to having a strong following within the business world and a deep following in Washington, DC, Greene's books are hailed by everyone from war historians to the biggest musicians in the industry (including Jay-Z, Drake, and 50 Cent).

A Book Review by Soundview

Learning the Game of Power

In his book, *The 48 Laws of Power*, author Robert Greene attempts to help his reader gain power in the world. It is power, he believes, that most people aspire to and that they find its acquisition alluring. In the 48 laws he gives in this book, it becomes apparent that Greene is most concerned with power; not with morality or loyalty. High on his list of people to emulate in the acquisition of power are the courtiers of days past. After all courtiers spend their time getting as close to power as they can all while keeping up appearances and bolstering the ego of the ruler. Greene relies on lessons of the courtiers as well as those of powerful men and women throughout history to help explain his 48 laws. In doing so, he does not focus solely on those who were successful in the acquisition of power. He also focuses on those who transgress his laws and who suffer as a result of this. Greene also lets his reader know when reversals of the law are possible in certain circumstances although with some of his laws, he does not believe that anyone can reverse them and be successful.

Outshining the Master

Greene's first law dictates the relationship one should have with power as he states, "never outshine the master." In order to illustrate what happens when someone transgresses this law, Greene tells the story of Nicolas Fouquet who was the finance minister for Louis XIV. Fouquet had a grand taste for the finer things in life. It was suspected that he would become Prime Minister when the former Prime Minister died. This was not to be the case, however, as Louis XIV instead got rid of the position. This bothered Fouquet who started to worry that he was losing his position of favor with the king. To rectify this, he threw an elaborate party, inviting all the most powerful people in Europe as a way to honor Louis XIV. His plan did not work out as suspected as he was arrested the next day and spent the rest of his life in solitary confinement. While Fouquet was trying to honor the king, he did not understand the king's psychological needs. Louis XIV could not stand being upstaged, and he felt upstaged by this grand event that Fouquet managed. Greene, therefore, warns his reader to avoid Fouquet's fate by making sure that the master and leader always shines most brightly in all circumstances.

Greene believes, in fact, that “when it comes to power, outshining the master is perhaps the worst mistake of all” as he warns his reader that when it comes to power, not much has changed over the centuries. He then goes on to warn his reader against believing that they have free reign to do what it is they want just because the person in power favors them. This is too risky. He suggests people engage in flattery of the ruler, and he also recommends that his reader make him or herself seem less capable than the leader by purposefully making mistakes which the leader can then correct. These are ways to bolster the ego of the ruler.

Greene believes that power can actually be granted “by letting others outshine you.” The exception to this is when a leader is falling in power. In such cases, Greene believes that it is okay not only to outshine the master but to hasten his or her downfall. He warns his reader against scruples in such regards by telling readers that the master does not have these scruples him or herself. He ends this law by saying, “your master will fall someday, and if you play it right, you will outlive and someday outshine him.”

Associating with Infectors

Greene’s tenth law warns his reader to “avoid the unhappy and unlucky” as he discusses infection. He tells a story of a nut told by Leonardo Da Vinci. In this story, a crow carries away a nut to a bell tower. The nut was never eaten by the crow, however, because it fell into a crevice. The nut then flatters the wall it fell into and asks the wall to shelter it. The wall obliges, but within a short amount of time, the nut opens up and its roots grow into the crevices, eventually tearing the wall apart. By this time, it was too late for the wall to do anything about its misfortune. Greene uses this story as an interlude to discuss those who bring destruction upon themselves. He believes that when people face hardships due to forces they cannot control, people should help them. He does not feel the same way about those who bring destruction upon themselves. He believes that it is unlikely that people can help those who face their own ruin of their own accord. He believes it is far more likely that those negative patterns will begin to infect those who try to help them, bringing on even more ruin.

Greene says, “The incurably unhappy and unstable have a particularly strong infecting power because their characters and emotions are so intense. They often present themselves as victims making it difficult, at first, to see their miseries are self-inflicted.” He also believes that those who are constantly dissatisfied are also to be avoided. Greene believes that as well as being infected by negative attitudes, people can also suffer in the eyes of others if they are seen in the company of those who bring misery on themselves. Because of this, it is best not to be seen with those who suffer misfortune.

To avoid the pitfall of falling into an infector’s trap, he suggests carefully judging people by the fruits of their actions rather than by what they attribute these fruits to. He believes “infectors can be recognized by the misfortune they draw on themselves, their turbulent path, their long line of broken relationships, their unstable careers, and the very force of their character, which sweeps you up and makes you lose your

reason.” Not all infections are negative, however. Good qualities and success can be contagious as well. He believes people should take advantage of this trait and focus on associating with people who have positive traits that counteract their own negative traits. This is much better than associating with people who have the same faults as you do because your own fault will only be exaggerated in such cases. He does not believe there is any exception to this rule. Much can be gained by associating with the successful, but associating with the less successful can be dangerous.

Creating Spectacles

While in his first law Greene advises against creating spectacles that can outshine a master, that does not mean that he despises spectacles in and of themselves. In fact, he believes they can be a powerful tool. He tells of the spectacle created by Dr. Weisleder and his wife in 1780s Berlin. They had many people coming to them to heal illnesses and maladies great and small. These were traditionally maladies that medicine could not cure. He claimed to use the power of the moon to heal people, and as such, he became known as The Moon Doctor of Berlin. Both he and his wife would claim to cure people in this manner. They would each take people into a room and bring them to a window and rub the exposed injured or defective area of the body while mumbling some words. People had great faith in this husband and wife team, despite the fact that the arrangement of the rooms and the layout of the house made it impossible for multiple people to experience the moon’s rays at the same time.

Greene credits the success of the Weisleders to their understanding of human nature. They understood, Greene contends, that people often rely on their emotions and do not need or want explanations for the way things work. Therefore, appealing to people’s emotions can be powerful. Greene actually believes that giving an explanation would have hurt the credibility of the Weisleders because it could have decreased people’s belief in the power of the moon to heal. He believes “the moon was strong enough – it was a magnet for fantasies, as it has been throughout history.” The illusion they created is what convinced people they were healed.

Greene goes on to state that shortcuts must be taken in the quest for power, and visual spectacles are a great shortcut because they bypass people’s suspicions. Ever since the Renaissance, out of all of the senses, people have relied the most on the sense of sight. Therefore, appealing to what people can see is a powerful tool. People can argue with words, but visuals and symbols are powerful in getting people’s attention and convincing them of your messages. He mentions former Roman emperor Constantine. Constantine worshiped the sun until one day he saw an image of the Christian cross superimposed across the sun. This proved to Constantinople that Christianity was the superior religion, and he converted the entire Roman Empire to Christianity because of this one visual symbol. This demonstrates just how powerful symbols and images can be in attracting people to a message.



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Playing the Courtier

Throughout his book, it is evident that Greene looks to courtiers and their behavior to help inform his laws to acquiring power. In his twenty-fourth law, Greene turns directly to courtiers as he advises his reader to employ courtesan tactics in the pursuit of power. Courtiers are his perfect example because they “thrive in a world where everything revolves around power and political dexterity.”

Court society was set up to both amuse the ruler as well as to keep the nobility in line. Greene says, “The court serves power in many ways, but most of all it glorifies the ruler, providing him with a microcosmic world that must struggle to please him.” This was not always an easy job. For example, in 19th century Darfur, courtiers were obligated to do whatever it was the sultan did, going so far as being forced to injure themselves if the sultan injured himself. While staying close to the ruler could prove dangerous to one’s health should the ruler himself be injured, straying from the ruler could be even more dangerous and often ended in death. Being a courtier required one to be a master of appearances and to never step out of line. Their very lives sometimes depended upon mastering this skill.

Greene then moves into a discussion of court politics and some of the guidelines those at court had to follow. The first of these guidelines that Greene mentions is that of avoiding ostentation. Courtiers had to be careful to avoid too much or the wrong attention to themselves. This could cause jealousy among other courtiers which could lead to one’s ruin. Along similar lines, today it is important to avoid employing too much flattery because this can wear itself out while also drawing negative attention from peers. Paradoxically, while too much ostentation is a dangerous thing, it is also important to stand out to some degree. Otherwise there is no opportunity for advancement. Part of standing apart involves cultivating a distinctive style. The road to power can require a delicate balance.

Courtiers, according to Greene, matched their language and mannerisms with the people they were speaking with. Equality was not to be sought after and, indeed, is not to be sought after today either. Greene believes that talking as equals to people below oneself sounds condescending while talking equally with those above oneself appears offensive. Greene considers this sort of acting to be an art form. Along similar lines, he warns his reader “never affect friendliness and intimacy with your master.” A superior can approach an inferior with an attitude of friendliness, but this is always the superior’s decision. An inferior should never approach their superior in a similar manner. In addition, one should avoid directly criticizing a superior: When advice needs to be given, it should be both polite and indirect.

To express how too much honesty can prove dangerous, Greene tells the story of Callisthenes. Aristotle was a tutor to Alexander the Great, and Alexander complained that he had no one to talk about philosophy with when Alexander was out on his campaigns. Aristotle recommended that Alexander talk to Callisthenes on such occasions who Aristotle had schooled on court life. Callisthenes respected speaking truth bluntly and believed that Alexander would be able to handle this directness if he respected learning as he professed to. Unfortunately this was not the case for Callisthenes, and Alexander had him killed.

More successful were the courtiers during the Han Dynasty in China. Greene explains how during that time Chinese emperors were seen as forces of nature who everything revolved around. It would not be prudent for anybody to tell any of these emperors what to do. Because these emperors were not infallible, however, it was sometimes necessary for people to point out their errors. In order to do so without risking their own lives, courtiers would insert strange natural phenomena that they falsely reported seeing into their reports. Emperors would take these strange phenomena as signs that things were not as they should be, and they would change their behavior accordingly. This method avoided the pitfalls of criticism but still allowed for courtiers to point out errors when necessary. Greene recommends using similar approaches to “use symbols and other indirect methods to paint a picture of the problems to come, without putting your neck on the line.” Sometimes it is necessary to speak out, but Greene recommends these roundabout ways to give feedback without bringing negative repercussions on the person speaking out.

Matching Behavior

In his thirty-eighth law, Greene encourages his readers to keep their minds independent and free but to match their behavior to those around them. He does not believe that this will get a person labeled a hypocrite because nobody will really know what it is they think in the first place. In other words, if you keep your opinions to yourself but match the outward behaviors of others, no one will really know what you think or believe.

Like with his other laws, Greene goes back in history to demonstrate how this both has and has not worked for others. He tells the story of Pausanias from Sparta who went out to conquer part of Persia. He was successful in becoming the leader of a portion of Persia, but this is where things started to go wrong for Pausanias because he fell in love with the opulence of the Persians which contrasted greatly with the austerity of the Greeks. He eventually developed a plan to work with Persia’s King Xerxes to rule over all of Greece. Despite breaking with

Greek customs, when Pausanias is captured by the Greeks for transgressions, he is eventually let free because he was of noble birth, and they did not want to punish him too greatly. He ended up getting captured again immediately after being let go, however, when the Greeks learned that he still wanted to work with Xerxes to gain power. He went into a temple to hide from the Greeks. The Greeks did not go in to capture him, but they also did not leave. Eventually Pausanias died in the temple, refusing to meet his fate at the hands of the Greeks.

Greene notes that many people fall in love with other cultures, and this turns people from their own culture away because it generally involves a rejection of one's own culture and ways. This offends those who remain loyal to their ways as the person who deviates from their home culture generally places themselves above those who remain loyal. Therefore, Greene believes it is important to match outward appearances and language to that of those around you.

Greene goes on to discuss the Spanish persecution of Jewish people in the fourteenth century. Many of these people were forced to convert to Catholicism. They did so outwardly, and for three hundred years they gained access to the highest levels of Spanish society, displaying the outward signs of Christianity while retaining their Jewish beliefs privately. Greene writes, "if you stick to conventional appearances in public few will believe you think differently in private." He makes mention of a black sheep who is ultimately killed by wolves because it is shunned for looking different from the rest of the herd. Greene uses this as a warning about the importance of blending into one's surroundings. He does, however, admit that in very limited circumstances standing out can be beneficial, but this is only when a person already stands above those around them. As an example, he gives the fact that President Lyndon Johnson would sit on the toilet during meetings. Very few people have this level of power, however, and as such, the majority of people are best off allowing themselves to blend in.

This is only a selection of Greene's forty-eight laws. Included among the others are seemingly morally neutral suggestions such as "always say less than is necessary" and "use absence to increase respect and honor." Also included are rules that many people would consider to be morally suspect including "get others to do the work for you, but always take the credit," "pose as a friend, work as a spy," and "keep others suspended in terror." It is important to note that Greene does not try to make his readers morally admirable people or even happy people. He does not focus on living a well-rounded life or living with integrity. His purpose is to teach his reader how to get power and to keep power at all costs. Through delving deep into history as well as by looking at more recent examples of powerful people, Greene is able to exemplify his rules and show why they can lead one to power if that is where a person wants to find themselves.