



Power

Why Some People Have It — and Others Don't

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Over decades of consulting with corporations and teaching MBA students the nuances of organizational power, Jeffrey Pfeffer has watched numerous people suffer career reversals even as others prevail despite the odds.

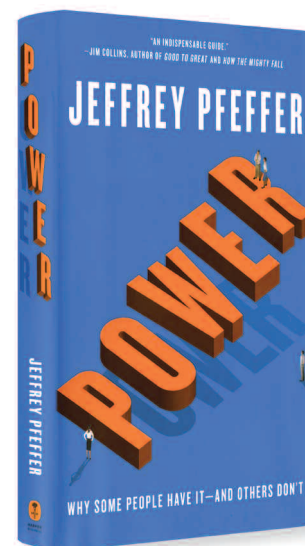
He explains that our most common mistake is not having a realistic understanding of what makes some people more successful than others. By believing that life is fair, he writes, we tend to subscribe to the “just-world phenomenon,” which leaves us unprepared for the challenges and competition of the real world.

In *Power* Pfeffer brings decades of insights to a wider audience. Brimming with counterintuitive advice, examples from various countries and surprising findings based on his research, this groundbreaking guide reveals the strategies and tactics that separate winners from losers.

Power, Pfeffer explains, is not something that can be learned from those in charge: Their advice often puts a rosy spin on their ascent and focuses on what should have worked, rather than what actually did. Instead, *Power* reveals the true paths to power and career success. Iconoclastic and grounded in real human interaction, this summary is an essential organizational survival manual and a new standard in the field of leadership.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How working in underexploited niches can help you develop leverage.
- How power can be used and harnessed not only for individual gain but also for the benefit of others.
- How well-established principles can help you obtain more influence.
- How to succeed and wield power in the real world.



by Jeffrey Pfeffer

CONTENTS

It Takes More Than Performance

Page 2

Choosing Where to Start

Page 3

Getting In: Standing Out and Breaking Some Rules

Page 4

Acting and Speaking with Power

Page 5

Overcoming Opposition and Setbacks

Page 6

The Price of Power

Page 7

It's Easier Than You Think

Page 8

THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: POWER

by Jeffrey Pfeffer

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For additional information on the author, go to <http://www.summary.com>.

Introduction: Be Prepared for Power

Being politically savvy and seeking power are related to career success and even to managerial performance. For instance, one study investigated the primary motivations of managers and their professional success. One group of managers was primarily motivated by a need for affiliation — they were more interested in being liked than getting things done. A second group was primarily motivated by a need for achievement — goal attainment for themselves. And a third group was primarily interested in power. The evidence showed that this third group, the managers primarily interested in power, was the most effective, not only in achieving positions of influence inside companies but also in accomplishing their jobs.

In another example, Gerald Ferris of Florida State University and colleagues have developed an 18-item political skills inventory. Research on 35 school administrators in the Midwestern United States and 474 branch managers of a national financial services firm showed that people who had more political skill received higher performance evaluations and were rated as more effective leaders.

The Real World

So welcome to the real world — not necessarily the world we want, but the world that exists. It can be a tough world out there and building and using power are useful organizational survival skills. There is a lot of zero-sum competition for status and jobs. Most organizations have only one CEO. There is only one managing partner in professional services firms, only one

school superintendent in each district, only one prime minister or president at a time — you get the picture. With more well-qualified people competing for each step on the organizational ladder all the time, rivalry is intense and only getting more so as there are fewer and fewer management positions.

Some of the individuals competing for advancement bend the rules of fair play or ignore them completely. Don't complain about this or wish the world were different. You can compete and even triumph in organizations of all types, large and small, public or private sector, if you understand the principles of power and are willing to use them. Your task is to know how to prevail in the political battles you will face. ●

It Takes More Than Performance

People in power are busy with their own agendas and jobs. Such people, including those higher up in your own organization, probably aren't paying that much attention to you and what you are doing. You should not assume that your boss knows or notices everything about your job performance or has perfect information about your activities. Therefore, your first responsibility is to ensure that those at higher levels in your company know what you are accomplishing. And the best way to ensure they know what you are achieving is to tell them.

For you to attain a position of power, those in power have to choose you for a senior role. If you blend into the woodwork, no one will care about you, even if you are doing a great job.

Beyond Visibility



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Summary: POWER

In advertising, one of the most prominent measures of effectiveness is ad recall — not taste, logic or artistry — simply, do you remember the ad and the product? The same holds true for you and your path to power. That's because of the importance of what is called “the mere exposure effect.” As originally described by the late social psychologist Robert Zajonc, the effect refers to the fact that people, other things being equal, prefer and choose what is familiar to them — what they have seen or experienced before. Research shows that repeated exposure increases positive affect and reduces negative feelings, that people prefer the familiar because this preference reduces uncertainty and that the effect of exposure on liking and decision making is a robust phenomenon that occurs in different cultures and in a variety of different domains of choice.

The simple fact is that people like what they remember — and that includes you. In order for your great performance to be appreciated, it needs to be visible. But beyond visibility, the mere exposure research teaches us that familiarity produces preference. Simply put, in many cases, being memorable equals getting chosen. ●

The Personal Qualities That Bring Influence

Ron Meyer, the president and chief operating officer of Universal Studios since 1995, is the longest serving head of a major motion picture company. A powerful figure in the film industry, he also provides an example of a life transformed. Meyer dropped out of high school when he was 15 and a couple of years later he joined the U.S. Marines. After leaving the Marines he got a job at a talent agency as a chauffeur, a position that permitted him to learn a lot about the entertainment business as he listened to the conversations of clients. After working as an agent for the William Morris Agency, Meyer and some friends founded the Creative Artists Agency, a position that helped establish him as a power broker in Hollywood.

Meyer, like many successful people, profoundly changed over the course of his life. He developed qualities that permitted him to obtain and hold on to influence. If you are going to do likewise, you need to successfully surmount three obstacles:

- First, you must come to believe that personal change is possible. Otherwise, you won't even try to develop the attributes that bring power — you will just accept that you are who you are rather than embarking on a sometimes difficult path of personal growth

and development.

- Second, you need to see yourself and your strengths and weaknesses as objectively as possible. This is difficult because in our desire to self-enhance — to think good things about ourselves — we avoid negative information and overemphasize any positive feedback we receive.
- And third, you need to understand the most important qualities for building a power base so you can focus your inevitably limited time and attention on developing those.

Change Is Always Possible

People often think that whatever qualities are needed for building a path to power, either you have them or you don't, at least by the time you're an adult. But the biographies of Meyer and scores of other figures in political and business life belie that idea. ●

Choosing Where to Start

Where you begin your career affects your rate of progress as well as how far you go. At two University of California campuses, the speed with which professors moved up a civil service-type salary ladder reflected the power of their academic department — those in more powerful departments moved up the salary scale more quickly. A study of 338 managers who began their career in a 3,500-employee public utility found that the power of the unit where people began their careers affected the rate of salary growth, with people starting in more powerful units moving up more rapidly. That study also found that managers who began their careers in higher-power departments, such as operations, distribution and customer service, were more likely to remain in high-power units as they changed jobs.

Prior to its breakup by the government, the road to the CEO position at AT&T was through the Illinois Bell subsidiary. If you wanted to be CEO at Pacific Gas and Electric, the legal department was the best place to build your career. The shift in power from engineers to lawyers was visible over time: In 1950, only three of the company's most senior positions were occupied by attorneys; by 1980, the comparable number was 18. For many years, finance was the route to the top at General Motors. At the University of Illinois, senior university positions were often filled with people from the physics department.

Path to Power

We intuitively know that not all career platforms are

Summary: POWER

equal in value as a path to power, and research supports that intuition. But people often err in choosing where to start building their power base. The most common mistake is to locate in the department dealing with the organization's current core activity, skill or product — the unit that is the most powerful at the moment. This turns out to not always be a good idea because the organization's most central work is where you are going to encounter the most talented competition and also the most well-established career paths and processes. Moreover, what is the most important function or product today may not be in the future.

So if you want to move up quickly, go to underexploited niches where you can develop leverage with less resistance and build a power base in activities that are going to be more important in the near future than they are today. ●

Getting In: Standing Out and Breaking Some Rules

The late Reginald Lewis was a successful African American corporate lawyer and founder of a buyout firm, TLC Group. TLC bought the McCall Pattern Co. in the early 1980s and, under Lewis' turnaround efforts, returned investors 90 times back their money. TLC later bought Beatrice Foods, creating the first black-owned company with revenues of over \$1 billion and making Lewis one of the wealthiest people in the United States.

But back in 1965, Lewis wasn't someone with a prominent place in African American business history. He didn't have an international law program at Harvard and an African American history museum in Maryland named after him. He was just a young man from a tough Baltimore neighborhood who was graduating from Virginia State University and had set his sights on going to Harvard Law School. During that summer he was in a Rockefeller Foundation-funded program at Harvard Law School for high-potential black college students designed to interest them in careers in the law and help them prepare for the application process. There was just one problem — one of the rules of the program was that no one who participated could even be considered for admission to Harvard Law School. Moreover, Lewis had not taken the Law School Aptitude Test, or even applied to Harvard Law, and he wanted to start the program that fall.

Even as he was doing well in the summer program by expending enormous effort and standing out in the mock court trial to such an extent that 30 years later

professors still talked about his performance, Lewis met with a Harvard Law professor and then with the dean of admissions. With these faculty members he pressed his case by forcefully arguing "the myriad ways an association between Reginald Lewis and the law school would be mutually beneficial." At the end of the summer, Lewis matriculated at Harvard Law School, becoming the only person in the history of the school who was admitted before he filled out an application.

What's the Worst That Could Happen?

Lewis understood that the worst that could happen from asking for something would be getting turned down. And if he were turned down, so what? People who don't ask would not be any worse off than if they had not asked in the first place. If they didn't ask or if they were refused, they would not receive what they sought, but at least with asking, there was some hope. Some people do believe that worse things could occur: that their bold behavior could offend those exposed to it and they could develop a "bad reputation." Probably not, and the risk of standing out is well worth taking. ●

Making Something Out of Nothing: Creating Resources

Resources are great because once you have them, maintaining power becomes a self-reinforcing process.

There are two simple but important implications of resources as a source of power. The first is that in choosing among jobs, choose positions that have greater direct resource control of more budget or staff. That generally means preferring line to staff positions, since line positions typically control more staff hiring and more budgetary authority.

Most headhunters will tell you that when they seek candidates for senior general management positions, including the CEO job, they look to people who have had responsibility running operations, and the larger the division or operation the potential candidate has run, the better, other things being equal. Job analyses such as the Hay system used to determine salary ranges consider the number of direct and indirect reports you have, as well as the amount of budget you can spend without higher-level authorization, as measures of your responsibility and consequently the economic value of your job. Getting control of resources is an important step on your path to power.

Self-Enhancement

The second straightforward implication is that your

Summary: POWER

power comes in large measure from the position you hold and the resources and other things you control as a consequence of holding that position. It is easy for people, motivated by self-enhancement, to believe that the deference and flattery of others is due to their inherent intelligence, experience and charm. This may be the case, but not often. When you retire or otherwise leave a position in which you once had control over substantial amounts of resources, people will pay you much less heed and give you less attention. ●

Building Efficient and Effective Social Networks

Two German professors, Hans-Georg Wolff and Klaus Moser, offer a good definition of networking:

“Behaviors that are aimed at building, maintaining and using informal relationships that possess the (potential) benefit of facilitating work-related activities of individuals by voluntarily gaining access to resources and maximizing ... advantages.” Their study of more than 200 people in Germany developed some scales of networking behaviors that demonstrate what actions are required. These included:

1. Building internal contacts (e.g., “I use company events to make new contacts.”)
2. Maintaining internal contacts (e.g., “I catch up with colleagues from other departments about what they are working on.”)
3. Using internal contacts (e.g., “I use my contacts with colleagues in other departments in order to get confidential advice in business matters.”)
4. Building external contacts (e.g., “I accept invitations to official functions or festivities out of professional interest.”)
5. Maintaining external contacts (e.g., “I ask others to give my regards to business acquaintances outside of our company.”)
6. Using external contacts (e.g., “I exchange professional tips and hints with acquaintances from other organizations.”)

The networking behaviors they describe entail making some incremental effort to build, maintain and use social ties with people. The people targeted are not necessarily in your sights if you are focused just on your immediate job and company.

In general, jobs high in networking content require bridging separate organizations, brokering deals and relationship building to influence decision making. ●

Jack Valenti's Political Power

When in 1966 Jack Valenti left his position as a White House aide to become head of the Motion Picture Association of America, he could provide political access to the movie studios that needed help staving off censorship and dealing with foreign governments on commercial issues, including the repatriation of funds. At the same time, he could provide an entrée to Hollywood and its enormous fundraising potential for the Democratic Party and Valenti's patron, Lyndon Johnson.

Acting and Speaking with Power

We choose how we will act and talk, and those decisions are consequential for acquiring and holding on to power. Harriet Rubin was, for 11 years, the editor of a line of books called *Currency* devoted to understanding leadership. During that time she at once occupied a position of leadership and published leaders' autobiographies and books on leadership. Her experience suggested that the secret of leadership was the ability to play a role, to pretend, to be skilled in the theatrical arts. Rubin is right. Differences in the ability to convey power through how we talk, appear and act matter in our everyday interactions, from seeking a job to attempting to win a vital contract to presenting a company's growth prospects before investment analysts.

Speaking Powerfully

The language people use and how they construct presentations and arguments help determine their power. Great orators move masses — Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous “I Have a Dream” speech and the speeches of Barack Obama in his campaign for the presidency being two notable examples. But power gets created in private interactions and small meetings, not just on a huge stage. There are some well-established principles that can help you subtly obtain more influence as you speak with power:

- **Interruption.** One source of power in every interaction is interruption. Those with power interrupt, those with less power get interrupted. In conversation, interrupting others, although not polite, can indicate power and be an effective power move.
- **Contest the premises of the discussion.** In most companies, the strategy and market dynamics are taken for granted. If someone challenges these assumptions — such as how the company is compet-

ing, how it is measuring success, what the strategy is, who the real competitors are now and in the future — this can be a very potent power play.

- **Persuasive language.** Language that influences is able to create powerful images and emotions that overwhelm reason. Such language is evocative, specific and filled with strong language and visual imagery. ●

Building a Reputation: Perception Is Reality

For more than a decade, John Browne served as CEO of British Petroleum; under his aegis, BP bought Amoco and Arco as well as making numerous smaller acquisitions. Browne was named to the British House of Lords and was voted the country's most admired business leader numerous times. But as many observers point out, Browne is not necessarily the most obvious leader: He is short, less than 5 feet 6 inches tall; soft-spoken and awkward in social settings, essentially an introvert; and an intellectual in an industry known for brash, bold leaders who take big chances. Browne's rise to power and his consolidation of his position were based in part on his ability to build an image that served him well.

Three Dimensions of John Browne's Reputation

Although Browne's reputation is multifaceted, three dimensions stand out: hard work and dedication, intelligence and intimidation of others. Browne was at BP throughout his working life, spending over 30 years in the company. He moved around the world including Anchorage, Alaska, New York, Cleveland and London, among others. He worked enormous hours. It is helpful to be seen as someone devoted to the company.

Browne's intelligence is legendary. Trained in physics, Browne always emphasized first principles and asked inquisitive questions. His analytical training permitted him to do well in his jobs both in finance and in exploration. But what comes across is how he used his intelligence and memory to build his reputation as being super smart.

The specifics of a useful reputation will obviously vary depending on the context and your own personal strengths and weaknesses. What is important is that you think carefully about the dimensions of the reputation you want to build, and then do everything in your power, from how you spend your time to what organizations and people you associate with, to ensure that is the image that you project. ●

Overcoming Opposition and Setbacks

Because people come from different backgrounds, face different rewards and see different information, they are going to see the world differently. Consequently, disagreements are inevitable in organizations. Unfortunately, many people are conflict-averse, finding disagreement disagreeable and avoiding surfacing differences of opinion and engaging in difficult conversations with their adversaries.

As school leader Rudy Crew has said, "Conflict is just an opportunity for another person's education," for exploring why people think the way they do, and for sharing perspectives so the parties to the conflict can learn about and from each other.

Here are some ideas to make you more successful in surmounting opposition:

- **Try a little tenderness and leave people a graceful out.** One way to deal with opponents is to treat them well and leave them a nice way to retreat.
- **Don't get emotionally entangled.** Conflict arouses strong emotions, including anger, and these strong feelings interfere with our ability to think strategically about what we are really trying to do.
- **Don't take things personally — make important relationships work.**
- **Be persistent.** Persistence works because it wears down the opposition.
- **Advance on multiple fronts.** Leverage power from one setting to get influence in another.
- **Move first — seize the initiative.** If you move quickly, you can often catch your opponents off guard and secure victory before they even know what is happening.

Coping With Setbacks

Most successful people have encountered setbacks along the way and survived. Reed Hastings, the highly successful founder and CEO of Netflix, had a much less successful experience with his first software startup, Pure Software, where he tried to fire himself twice. Bad things sometimes happen to good people. The issue becomes how and if they recover.

If you are going to persevere and recover, you need to stop blaming yourself, letting your opponents dominate the discussion of what happened and feeling bad about your complicity in your demise.

The best way to overcome any possible embarrassment is to talk about what happened to as many people as

possible. Making what happened less emotionally fraught is absolutely essential for your being able to think strategically about your next moves. ●

The Price of Power

It was the late Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman who famously said, “There is no free lunch.” Nothing comes without cost, and that is certainly true of power.

As you chart your course and make decisions about what you will and will not do to acquire power, consider carefully what you are striving for and if you really want it.

People who seek and attain power often pay some price for the quest, for holding on to their positions and confronting the difficult but inevitable transitions out of powerful roles. Here are some of the costs incurred by those who successfully pursue a path to power:

Cost 1: Visibility and Public Scrutiny.

An important lesson: If you are going to misbehave in any way, do so before you achieve a high-level position that makes you the object of constant attention by peers, subordinates, superiors and the media.

Cost 2: The Loss of Autonomy.

Many CEOs and other senior leaders block out time for themselves and the activities that they want to do. But all of them talk about the loss of control over how they spend their time as one of the big costs of being in a position of power.

Cost 3: The Time and Effort Required.

Building and maintaining power requires time and effort, there are no two ways about it. Time spent on your quest for power and status is time that you cannot spend on other things, such as hobbies or personal relationships and families. The quest for power often exacts a high toll on people’s personal lives.

Cost 4: Trust Dilemmas.

The higher you rise and the more powerful the position you occupy, the greater the number of people who will want your job. The constant vigilance required by those in power — to ensure they are hearing the truth and to maintain their position vis-à-vis rivals — is yet another cost of occupying a job that many others want.

Cost 5: Power as an Addictive Drug.

The addictive quality of power makes it tough to leave powerful positions. But everyone eventually has to step down, and the drug-like nature of power makes leaving a powerful position a truly wrenching experience for some. ●

How — and Why — People Lose Power

Studies of the effects of power on the power holder consistently find that power produces overconfidence and risk taking, insensitivity to others, stereotyping and a tendency to see other people as a means to the power holder’s gratification.

In a study all too reminiscent of what goes on in workplaces every day, David Kipnis put research participants in a simulated work situation with a subordinate. Some people in the managerial role had little formal control over resources and had to influence through persuasion, while others were given the power to reward and punish those working for them. The more control participants had over levers of power such as pay increases or decreases, the more attempts they made to influence their subordinates. Moreover, those with more power came to see their subordinates’ job performance as resulting from their control and less from the efforts or motivation of those they were supervising. And because the supervisors with power saw themselves as superior to those they were supervising, they evidenced less desire to spend time with their subordinates and wanted to distance themselves from those less powerful — even though in this experimental study who was a supervisor and how much power that person had was randomly determined and temporary.

A Power Mindset

One lesson from the growing number of studies on the effects of power is how little it takes to get people into a power mindset were they engage in all kinds of disrespectful and rude behavior. Just giving them even modest control over meaningless rewards in temporary groups of strangers seems to be sufficient.

Overconfidence and insensitivity lead to losing power, as people become so full of themselves that they fail to attend to the needs of those whose enmity can cause them problems. Conversely, not letting power go to your head and acting as if you were all-powerful can help you maintain your position. ●

Power Dynamics: Good for Organizations, Good for You?

Research shows what common sense suggests is true: Political struggles are more likely to occur and to be more fierce and power is used more often when resources are scarcer and therefore there is more struggle over their allocation. Studies of budget allocations in

Summary: POWER

universities found that when money was tighter, the relationship between departmental power and amount of the budget obtained was stronger.

The lesson is clear: You should always watch your back, but be particularly wary and sensitive to what is occurring during times of economic stress. That is when political turmoil and the use of power are likely to be at their peak.

The employer–employee relationship has profoundly changed over the past several decades, not just in the United States but in many countries. In ways big and small, both implicitly and explicitly, employers and their leaders have told their employees that they themselves are responsible for their own careers and, in many instances, their own health care and retirement.

So don't worry about how your efforts to build your path to power are affecting your employer, because your employer is probably not worrying about you. Neither are your co-workers or "partners," if you happen to have any — they are undoubtedly thinking about your usefulness to them, and you will be gone, if they can manage it, when you are no longer of use. You need to take care of yourself and use whatever means you have to do so — after all, that has been the message of companies and business pundits for years. Take those admonitions seriously. ●

It's Easier Than You Think

It's important for you to find the right place given your aptitude and interests.

Although it is possible and desirable to develop your power skills, few people are comfortable changing their likes and dislikes. Yes, you can evolve and change, but only within limits. Therefore, the first step in building a path to power is to pick an environment that fits your aptitudes and interests — one where you can be successful in both the technical and political aspects, if any, of the work.

Finding the right place for you requires several steps.

- First, you must be brutally honest about your strengths, weaknesses and preferences — and because of the self-enhancement motive, not many people are as objective about themselves as they need to be.
- Second, you can't get trapped into following the crowd and doing something just because everyone else is.
- Third, to pick the right place for yourself, you must be objective not only about yourself but about the job and its risks and opportunities.

The Dark Side of Politics

One dominant perspective in the research literature on organizations is that "politics is associated with the 'dark side' of workplace behavior and researchers have described political behavior as inherently divisive, stressful and a cause of dissent and reduced performance." The empirical evidence supports this view. Higher levels of perceived politics inside organizations are associated with reduced job satisfaction, morale and organizational commitment and higher levels of perceived politics are also correlated with higher intentions to quit.

Take Care of Yourself — Don't Expect Justice

It's not just that the world is not always fair so you should stop counting on the triumph of your merit. People align with who they think is going to win. If you don't stand up for yourself and actively promote your own interests, few will be willing to be on your side. Since observers will see you as not trying to triumph and therefore losing, they will either not join your side or desert you, making your organizational demise more certain. Therefore, although self-promotion and fighting for your interests can seem unattractive, the alternative scenario is invariably much worse.

Not only can you survive, but you can even succeed if you learn the principles and the rules and are willing to implement them in your daily organizational life.

So don't complain about how life isn't fair, or that your organizational culture isn't healthy or that your boss is a jerk. You have both the responsibility and the potential to change your situation, either in your present job or in some new place. Stop waiting for things to get better or for other people to acquire power and use it in a benevolent fashion to improve the situation. It's up to you to find — or create — a better place for yourself. And it's up to you to build your own path to power. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Power*, you'll also like:

1. ***Talent Is Overrated* by Geoff Colvin.** What's the real solution to the mystery of high performance? According to journalist Geoff Colvin, it is a highly specific kind of effort, what he calls "deliberate practice."
2. ***Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott.** Learn the effective ways to transform everyday conversations to get your message across.
3. ***MOJO* by Marshall Goldsmith.** Mojo comes from the moment we do something that is purposeful, powerful, and positive, and the rest of the world recognizes it. Executive coach Marshall Goldsmith lays out the ways that we can get and keep our professional and personal Mojo.