Chapter Two:
Motive:
What Makes People Corruptible?

It is weakness rather than wickedness
which renders men unfit to be trusted with unlimited power.
–John Adams

At 7:45am I looked out on a sea of yawning, bored 10th graders and reconsidered my career choice. It was 1979. I was 20 years old and starting my first day as a student teacher. The four years between my age and my students', a chasm that had felt lengthy enough the day before, seemed to have dramatically shrunk. Now, looking into those skeptical faces, I started to wonder if fifth graders would have been less intimidating. I caught a few of the students sneaking looks at each other, and I knew they thought the same.

That morning was one of my biggest lessons in the laws of power. I saw, or rather, felt what my hard-earned teaching degree really meant in the classroom. That piece of paper for which I had paid—and was paying—a fortune didn't translate into the power to enact my role. To make it through that first hour, and win them over, I had to draw on every trait, trick, and instinct I had. That was when I realized the inherent frailty of *positional power*. Positional power put me in front of the class.

But I needed something else, something like my own *personal power*, if I were to survive that hour.

Three months later, at the end of my student teaching stint, I learned my second lesson in power: on my last day, I retrieved from my mailbox a manila envelope filled with feedback forms my students had filled out. I stuffed the envelope in my bag and walked back to campus. I had a meeting that afternoon with my advisor. While I waited outside his office, I leafed through the forms, and as I read each one, a smile spread over my face: lots of nice feedback, lots of comments appreciating my friendly and open style. Then, suddenly, the smile evaporated—I felt like I had been punched in the stomach.

I think you played favorites, one student wrote. I can still see the small, scrawling handwriting to this day. Though no one else could see me, my face grew hot. I turned beet-red, feeling ashamed and embarrassed.

I knew exactly who had written the comment.

Way in the back, in the far right corner of the classroom, had sat the only two African American girls in the school. They always sat together, and they seldom participated in class. When I called on them, they rarely responded with more than an “I dunno.” I felt daunted and inept. I didn’t know how to engage them. Whenever the class worked alone at their desks, I would walk over to the two and check in. I would ask each how it was going, but neither looked up or said anything. I was at a loss—I didn’t know what to do.

So I did something that shames me to this day. I did nothing. I let the issue slide by. As the semester progressed, I would call on them less and less. I never sought help from my advisor, never talked to the classroom teacher about it, and never asked to speak with them privately or offer support in private. I failed to move beyond my own limitations. Of course I knew about racial inequity at the time, and of the challenge these students must have been facing. I knew I had to do something, but I didn’t. I was caught off-guard by my feelings of inadequacy and I abdicated my higher rank and its responsibilities. I succumbed to feeling weak, and didn’t challenge myself to put the students’ needs and rights ahead of my feelings.

When we think about the abuse of power, what often comes to mind are the atrocities that horrify us: the genocides of Hitler, Stalin, or Pol Pot; the cold indifference of an institution that covers up sexual abuse; the extravagant excess of corporate fraud; the hypocritical corruption of politicians. But most abuses of power don’t make it to the headlines. Most are the inadvertent acts, or corrupt uses of our power. Corruption implies a breach of the law, an illegal act. But it also refers to non-conscious, unintended, unpremeditated acts that break or stretch social and relational bonds, and in so doing, inflict harm. A better way to describe them might be “rank fouls.” By and large, these are unconscious actions carried out by someone with high rank, good intentions, and benign neglect.

Since Freud first wrote about the superego, ego, and id, we've known of the gap between thought and action, between our espoused values and motives and what we actually manifest. We are far less conscious of ourselves than we like to admit. Back then, in the classroom, if you had asked me if I was deliberately ignoring my responsibilities, I would have acted defensively. I would have justified myself by describing my countless attempts to reach the girls and my genuine concern for their welfare. But my self-awareness was insufficient to close the gap between what I thought I was doing and what I actually did—and how it impacted them.

What I did as a 20-year-old student teacher was a misuse of power. At least, to me, it was a misuse. Whether it was a *misuse* or an *abuse*, however, is not for me—the one with higher rank—to decide. From the perspective of those 16-year-olds, the only two racial minorities in that class in a small Ohio town, trying to get an education, it was probably, truly, an abuse of power.

And so it happens: average people misuse power daily in what appears to be trivial ways, and yet their actions can leave harmful, lasting effects on the target of their behavior.

This is the everyday misuse of power that makes our lives difficult. They are "rank fouls," like foul plays in sports, behaviors that are often unconscious or unintended—the results of a lapse in judgment, or anxiety, or fear, or ineptitude, or impetuousness. Sometimes they are also deliberate behaviors, such as neglecting duties, covering up inadequacies, or serving our self-interests.

The Trap of Feeling Powerless

Of all the misuses of power I've witnessed, almost all typically stem from a feeling of *powerlessness*. Like me, in that classroom, allowing my inadequacy get the better of me, most people in power are quick to admit to a *lack of power*.

I see this everywhere:

- Senior Vice Presidents complain about how difficult it is to talk to the CEO.
- CEOs struggle to work with their executive teams.
- Executive Directors feel thwarted by their boards, or by regulatory agencies.

- Teachers struggle to control the classroom.
- A doctor rushes through informing her patient of bad news because she's afraid of his emotional response.
- The mayor complains the media unfairly portrays her.
- A boss avoids intervening in a staff dispute, paralyzed by his fear of conflict.

It's not only leaders who fail to connect with their power. Parents feel overwhelmed and harried. The oldest child protests her unfair punishment for fighting, while her younger sibling (who started it) gets away without reprimand.

Those born into great social privilege complain the inequities and hardships they face don't receive nearly as much attention as those inequities faced by people with less social privilege. A white person will dispute the existence of racism by pointing to the gains made by people of color. A man will disavow feminism by equating it with "man-hating," or citing instances of underreported sexual violence perpetuated against men. In each instance, one group disavows their advantage, and doubles down on their sense of powerlessness.

John Adams famously said, "It is weakness rather than wickedness which renders men unfit to be trusted with unlimited power." Weakness is a chief motive for misusing power. Feeling weak or fraudulent makes us hide our incompetence, fake our knowledge, or go into denial. Or, feeling cornered and defenseless, we lash out and attack. This is the fatal mismatch that accounts for a great deal of power misuse: the gap between the power we feel and the power we have, between our self-perceived sense of power and our objective power.

The gap is the focus of this chapter, for it is the distance between what others see and what we feel that creates the complexity and conflicts underlying how we use power. Specifically, *our inner sense of weakness or low rank results in ineffective and poor uses of power*.

Allow me to repeat that, because it is a fundamental and seemingly illogical truth about power. Our inner sense of weakness or low rank results in ineffective and poor uses of power. *Power is only powerful when we feel it.*

Throughout my career, it's always puzzled me: If power is so highly valued, how can it be that when we are in a high-ranking role we still feel weak—even powerless? Why do my executive coaching clients feel thwarted, fearful, and frustrated? Why don't people of privilege gratefully and happily admit their good fortune? Why did I feel so weak in front of that classroom, given my positional authority? This is the million-dollar question we need to explore: If high power is what we chase, why doesn't the powerful role protect us from the feelings of low rank?

Power and Context

A client of mine, Chandra, is the Chief Marketing Officer for a Fortune 500 technology company. She loves public speaking, and is a sought-after keynote speaker at the top technology conferences in the world. But whenever she's around her boss, the CEO, Chandra becomes tongue-tied. She feels much more comfortable speaking to a room of five hundred strangers than to her boss in a one-on-one meeting. Something about his style makes her feel stupid, and she has trouble presenting her ideas with force and confidence. He is a "numbers guy" and no matter how much she prepares the numbers, she still gets rattled and feels incompetent. She does much better speaking extemporaneously, but that style doesn't cut it when it comes to data.

I once had a colleague, let's call him, Luis. Luis was an assistant professor of political science and was extremely popular with students. Most students. He also had more complaints lodged against him than other professors. As the child of migrant workers, Luis was highly sensitive to topics regarding immigration. When something hit close to home, his voice rose, his face turned red, and he pounded his fist on the lectern. He once kicked a student out of his class after she said she thought immigrants should speak English as a precondition to entering the country.

Chandra and Luis have high positional power, but in certain situations, they lose their *feelings* of power. The two situations—speaking with the boss, the topic of immigration—lower Luis' and Chandra's self-perceived power. This is the problem with social power, the power that comes from our position or social status: the power of your role doesn't transfer into a feeling of power in every situation. *Social power doesn't always feel powerful*.

How and why can situations change our sense of power? Think of each situation, or context, as a country. In every country, there is a local "currency" based on what's valued. In a country with no printed money, currency would be the goods people traded. For instance, in my local "country" of Oregon, if I wanted to trade water for food, well, here in the rain-soaked Pacific Northwest, I wouldn't have much bargaining power. There's too much water here for it to be highly valued. But if I had a tanning booth and others traded food for hours in the booth, well, I'd have plenty to eat! In fact, I might be rich. The context, the rainy Pacific Northwest in this case, determines what is of value—what we value.

The same holds true for power. Each context has a different set of values, determined by the constellation of people, customs, issues, and dynamics present. Chandra's boss is a "numbers" guy; he values data, numbers, and metrics. Chandra is more of a "big picture" people person; she values ideas, communication, and relationships. But he's the boss, so she has to use his "currency," a currency of which she has less.

Context is determined by topic and task, not just people. For Luis, for instance, the topic of immigration changes the context to an extent: from classroom to political debate. I can relate. In the classroom, for me as a student teacher, the different tasks changed the context and rendered me unable. As long as the task required me to speak about facts and knowledge, I felt powerful. I had the skills that were valued for that task. But when the task changed from imparting knowledge to one-to-one advising, across a gulf of race, as I needed to do with those girls, so too did the context. At the age of twenty, I possessed fewer of the skills needed for the more emotionally challenging task of advising. Hence, my sense of power dropped.

Changing context changes something in us. Every environment contains different people, different topics, and different norms that determine valued resources, styles, and behavior.

Many years ago, I was part of a team working with trade union leaders on an enterprise development project in the former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia. It had only been a few years since the collapse of communism in the country, and our project was to support the transition to a free market economy.

My task during this phase of the project was to facilitate a series of day-long seminars with the trade union presidents, helping them design the enterprise development programs for their workers. That was the designated topic, but in the background simmered other issues—issues that began to obstruct our progress.

Early one morning, as we tried to tackle the topic of program trainers' per diem rates, the simmering issues came to full boil. They balked at our proposed rates. I should have known better, but I got annoyed. It was the 1990s, and the economy of Macedonia had contributed to the highest unemployment rate in Europe. There were precious few opportunities for income, and the per diem rates we were offering were higher than their daily salary. How could they not be happy with this opportunity?

Conflict erupted. My colleague and I were ill-prepared for it. The topic switched from program design to economic inequity, the power differential between Western Europe and former Communist countries in Eastern Europe, and the unconscious paternalism underlying development efforts and international aid.

The topic of money shifted the dynamics of our conversation, and so too our sense of power. Occupying our same roles, talking to the same people we had training, we were unable to successfully facilitate the conflict. We knew we could handle enterprise development, but not the topic of economic inequity between our countries. Imperceptibly, the context had shifted.

The topic of money switched the footing during that seminar, catching us off guard, and dropping our leadership abilities in that moment. The topic of immigration tripped a wire inside for Luis, and plunged him back to childhood, back to feelings of injustice. As the context changed, so too did his role, from professor to social activist. The topic trumped his higher social rank as his emotions took over. While his sense of power plummeted, his objective power remained the same. From the inside, he *felt* himself to be a member of an oppressed group, fighting injustice. From the outside however, his students perceived an angry, intimidating teacher berating them.

When the topic of economic inequity came to the surface during the seminar with labor leaders in Macedonia, my status as consultant dropped considerably, as I was unprepared and unable to facilitate the dialogue. When I was required to hold a difficult conversation as the student teacher, my self-perceived power dropped like a stone. My

unconsciousness of racism, my fear of making a mistake, and my desire to be liked all collided to freeze me in my tracks and deplete my feelings of power.

In these examples, Luis, Chandra, my colleague and I didn't lose our positional power; we lost access to our *feelings* of power. Power is more than an objective assignment of position, or the possession of status. *Power is a state of mind*.

Perhaps because it's difficult to see a person's complexity, perhaps because power tends to dazzle us, it's easy to forget that people with high rank also have emotions. They too feel vulnerable, hurt, defensive, or scared. Feelings are critical to our use of power, because how we feel drives our behavior.[1] When the role has power, but the person occupying the role doesn't feel it, for whatever reason, they are at risk of using their power poorly. They struggle to keep other people's or the organization's interests at heart, and instead, serve their own emotional interests.

The Threat of Low Rank

It's important, yet also amazing, how seriously feelings of weakness affect how we use our power. Some of my colleagues who work as diversity and inclusion educators joke about the "race to the margins," and the "Oppression Olympics": who can claim the lowest rank status? Whose oppression is "worse?" In various arenas, people more easily claim low-rank status than high-rank status. Even my executive coaching clients complain about their low rank and the seemingly insurmountable forces against which they have to contend.

Across the board, low rank is a stronger emotion than high rank. In fact, low rank is *limbic.*

The limbic system is the area of the brain in charge of managing emotion and forming memory. It's ground zero for our instinctual fears and motivations. Under threat, the limbic system—our emotional brain—kicks into gear. The amygdala sends signals that flood us with hormones, activating our response.

From an evolutionary standpoint, low rank is a matter of life and death: you're at the mercy of something or someone with greater power. You could be killed, hurt, or eaten. It's a classic fight, flight, or freeze moment. Even if we're not physically threatened, we still respond with the same surge of hormones. Our emotional brain

doesn't parse probabilities. A curt email or a demeaning look can trigger the same reaction as a charging tiger.

"Wait!" You may argue. "High rank is emotional too. It feels great! I feel proud, confident, and assertive!" But didn't I just explain, in the last chapter, how stepping into a high-status role makes us feel more confident, disinhibited, and in control? High rank certainly has an emotional charge, but those emotions are not *life threatening* ones. The emotions associated with low rank—fear, hurt, outrage, depression, and anger—signal danger, and thus take priority over anything else happening in that moment, including the positive emotions of your high-ranking role.

Across many domains, psychologists have demonstrated what they refer to as the *negativity bias*: negative events, emotions, and memories take precedent over positive ones, every time.[2] Negative memories last longer than positive ones; there are more words for negative emotional states than there are for positive feelings; people fear negative feedback far more than they anticipate positive feedback; and so on. The emotional impact and psychological effects of bad experiences far outweigh that of happy ones. As Roy Baumeister, Professor of Psychology at Florida State University, co-author of an article titled "Bad Is Stronger Than Good"[3] writes:

> [B]ad emotions, bad parents, and bad feedback have more impact than good ones, and bad information is processed more thoroughly than good. The self is more motivated to avoid bad self-definitions than to pursue good ones.[4]

Under stress, attack, or great pressure, the force of low rank clouds our ability to stay mindful of our high-ranking role. On April 20, 2010, when the Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling platform exploded, claiming eleven lives and spewing over two hundred million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, it caused massive environmental, economic, and social destruction. Speaking shortly after the event, Tony Hayward, then-CEO of British Petroleum—the company responsible for the tragedy—caused uproar when he said that while the event disrupted the lives of residents near the Gulf, it was also taking a toll on his personal life.

"I'd like my life back," he said, putting his discomfort on par with others, including those who had lost their lives or loved ones in the explosion.[5]

Hayward fell prey to the low-rank feelings right at the moment when he should have been most mindful of his high-ranking role. How could he have avoided this blunder? How can we stay mindful of high rank when the force of low rank is so great? Remember that motive is a *potential* factor—it's a catalyst. Whether we act on our feelings of low rank or not, whether that "amygdala hijack" takes over or not is up to us. Low rank is a motive, but not an all-powerful, inevitable one. It depends on our emotional self-management tools.

Robert Greene, author of *The 48 Laws of Power*, contends that managing your emotions is the prerequisite for successfully enacting the laws of power.[6] Before you can master power, you have to master your own emotional world.

Mastering Our Emotions and the Secret of Self-Sourced Power

We all are bound by painful life experiences: getting bullied, being abandoned, growing up in poverty, or living in a dysfunctional alcoholic home—all can create enough of a sense of insecurity to overshadow the effects of other, high ranks. Traumatic experiences can drop our self-perceived power, but they can also elevate it: we can transform our pain into powerful life lessons, fortifying a foundation of resilience and strength that will carry us through whatever challenges life serves us.

Developing ourselves through and beyond our early emotional experiences is the work of our emotional self-management system, a complex set of skills and tools we each start developing in infancy. We learn to soothe ourselves when we feel anxious or fearful and to manage our hurt and anger when others treat us unfairly. The skills of emotional maturity begin in childhood, but take a lifetime to fully develop. Even when we've equipped ourselves with the tools to live with our difficult emotions, life continually sends us greater challenges: losing a loved one, becoming ill, getting fired, being left by someone we love, being the target of discrimination or harassment, going bankrupt, being sent to combat, or being humiliated in public by our boss.

Our ability to deal with emotions is inconsistent. Sometimes coping is easy. When it's not, if we can't do it ourselves, we turn to something or someone else to help us feel

better. There are forms of healthy reliance: we talk to friends or counselors, take a walk, listen to music, meditate, or go to church. But there are also less healthy choices: taking drugs or alcohol to dampen the pain, or controlling, bullying, and manipulating the people and circumstances around us. When satisfying our needs depends on changing what's *outside* us rather than what's on the *inside*, we aren't managing ourselves—we are managing others.

High rank affords us an opportunity to satisfy personal needs by managing others instead of managing our emotions. Whenever you use your power to feel better about yourself, cover up insecurities, avoid a difficult conversation, or make life a little easier at someone else's expense, you've fixed a problem (briefly), but you've done so with the wrong set of tools.

High rank of any kind—be it position, strength of will, ability to gather allies and gossip about someone—can provide momentary relief or defense, but it comes at the cost of your development. If you hit someone who hurts your feelings, you might feel better temporarily, but you've become an aggressor and have done nothing to address why your self-worth depends on another's evaluation. If you gossip and spread rumors about someone who insulted you, you may feel a rush of satisfaction by getting revenge, but you've just diminished your reputation by identifying yourself as untrustworthy.

Power, like a substance, can be a shortcut to feeling better. If we feel weak, we can force compliance, gather allies, gossip, and form cliques. We can flatter people above us and bully those below. Or, like me in that 10th grade class, we can hide our deficiencies behind our role, and outwardly act competent and unruffled.

The motive to self-manage our emotions through our role is a temptation we face daily. Consider Charles, a recently divorced professor who, at the age of fifty-four, is afraid he'll never have another relationship. All day long he's surrounded by young, impressionable students. They admire his intelligence and, seeking his approval, act obsequious. What would stop him from crossing the line—from simply enjoying the attention, to encouraging it? What would stop you from assigning a few extra night shifts to someone on your team because he insulted you? Can you be certain the student who challenged you in class really deserves a C for her paper while the student who admires you deserves an A? Can you trust your objectivity, given your feelings?

With enough leeway, we grow dependent on shortcuts. Whenever we use something other than ourselves, something outside of ourselves, we have created a dependency, like with an addiction. Social power, by its nature, is outside of our control. Whether positional or by dint of our social identity, the rank we enjoy from our social role is defined and ratified by someone or something outside of ourselves: others' judgments, an organizational hierarchy, social norms and values, subordinates' compliance. If we rely on our social power for feelings of self-esteem, we lean on something we don't control, and, therefore, put ourselves in an unstable position. Like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, we grow weak internally through our dependency. Without an inner source of self-esteem, we become ever more dependent and desperate to maintain equilibrium.

We sense when someone's self-esteem depends on their social role. We get embroiled in propping up another's status. I felt this often with teachers. My 9th grade history teacher, Mr. Westwood, was renowned for his obsession with seating posture. We had to face front, feet on the floor, hands on our desk, books open. He made us read from our textbook, silently, for forty minutes every day. He was without a doubt the worst teacher I ever had. He spent the entire class focusing on managing our postures, and none of it teaching history.

Mrs. Baldini, my 11th grade political science teacher, was also renowned—but for another reason: her incredibly high standards. Unlike other teachers, she didn't spend time managing classroom dynamics. She didn't have to. No one ever, ever dared act up in her classroom.

Mr. Westwood taught from his position; Mrs. Baldini taught from her passion. They both had positional power. They both had authority. But Mr. Westwood's sense of authority depended on our discipline and compliance. Mrs. Baldini's authority, on the other hand, came from her knowledge and enthusiasm for the topic. When she entered the room, we could sense her authority was independent of our behavior. She knew her subject matter, and it didn't matter whether we thought so. With Mr. Westwood, we felt tangled up in his legitimacy. *He needed our behavior to ratify his authority*. His "teacherness" depended on what we did, not on what he felt about himself.

Just as energy derives from many sources (oil, solar, hydro, natural gas, nuclear, coal) so does human power. Power has many sources. Some sources are personal and internal, while others are social and external. Social power extracts its validity from other people. It's outsourced power. It only becomes real and valid when others legitimize it. And, just like energy, external or foreign sources create *entanglements*, messy and complicated relationships and dependencies on others, destabilizing over time.

While social power is based in the external, personal power is self-sourced. Its greatest value is that it doesn't depend on others for validity. Mrs. Baldini had personal power, because she relied on her knowledge, personality, life experience, ability to get along with people, and social skills. Personal power exists independently of others' endorsement.

All this leads back to motive. The motive for misusing high rank starts with having poor emotional self-management tools. You rely on outsourced, not in-sourced power. You use your social power, and not personal power, to soothe, protect, and defend yourself. Your sense of self hinges on what the other does or doesn't do. You gain your rank through external compliance or validation. You have motive to use your role for personal gain.

Personal power is the immunity from motive. It's an immunity we need. It's the rudder, the guiding compass in how well we use our power. The only power that can transfer from context to context, that can withstand the limbic threat of low rank, that isn't subject to emotional turmoil, is in-sourced power, that which comes from within: our personal power.

Yes, the solution to powerlessness is more power—more *personal* power, that is.