

Personal Power

Power is a force humans have reckoned with from day one. For as long as people have formed groups, our world is one structured by power.

Life can be told as a quest for power, whether it's social status, wealth, strength, position, expertise, legal rights, or recognition from others. For some, gaining power is a matter of basic survival and for others, an obsession with clicks, likes, and follows on their social media platform.

Yet of all the powers we chase, there is one kind of power that outperforms all the others. It is a power that yields the most in the long term and results in the very best outcomes in life. In fact, this power is a total game changer, because without it, leveraging any of your other powers is nearly impossible.

This power is personal power.

While your positional power gives you a license to lead, it doesn't give you the ability to lead. Your personal power does that. You could say that positional power puts you in the driver's seat. But it's your personal power that makes you a good driver.

Personal power comes from within. It's based on your inner skills, qualities, and personality traits, such as your ability to get along with people, to set and reach your goals, and to handle challenges. It's what you need to get buy-in from others, to bounce back from defeat, stay connected to your values, and maintain a sense of autonomy and self-determination.

To paraphrase Viktor Frankl, personal power is the ability to change ourselves to get along with even impossible situations.

The case for developing your personal power

No matter how much power you accrue, it's surprisingly easy to experience powerlessness. The reason for this is that positional power is limited in what it can achieve without a solid sense of personal power. Anyone promoted or elected to a high position of power can relate.

It's a common trope to hear high-ranking leaders bemoan all the obstacles standing in the way of their agendas: the media, bureaucracy, other leaders.

People perceived by others to possess high degrees of power can and do complain of feeling marginalized, persecuted, and disempowered. This has adverse consequences.

The feeling of powerlessness can make us choose behaviors that are inconsistent with the responsibilities of our role. John Adams, the second President of the United States, famously said, "It is weakness rather than wickedness which renders men unfit to be trusted with unlimited power."

This is the trap a leader can fall into, *feeling* weak in a leadership role, often expressed by:

- Poor decision-making, being too caught up in their own feelings, and failing to think of what's best for others
- Hiding their mistakes, faking knowledge out of fear of being found out
- Feeling cornered and defenseless, and therefore lashing out and attacking others
- Failing to hold people accountable or intervene in a dispute, paralyzed by fear of conflict.

Researchers have found in numerous studies that feeling weak in a powerful role can result in [aggressive](#), [self-serving](#), and even [sexually harassing](#) behavior towards subordinates.

Personal power enables us to withstand threats to our rank, status, and ego, to challenges to our competency and expertise. We have the inner resilience, self-regulation, and insight to manage these threats, and are therefore less likely to misuse our other powers to protect and defend our sense of self



Three Features of Personal Power

Personal power has three features that make it so effective:

1. It's inalienable.
2. It's portable.
3. It's not conferred by others.

A closer look at each of these features reveals why personal power is so critical to one's success and ability to relate healthily with others.

Personal power is inalienable.

Personal power comes from within: personality traits, character, skills, and abilities such as self-awareness, emotional self-regulation, and insight into and empathy for others' experience.

It is also the wisdom we've accrued through our experiences and the skills and expertise we've gained over time.

In short, it's everything inside of us that we use to successfully get by in life.

Thus, it's inalienable—incapable of being taken away from us because it resides within. It's an inner resource that we can dip into whenever we need it.

Personal power is portable.

Personal power, because it resides within, comes with us wherever we go. When we take a new job, change social groups, move to a new city, or face new challenges—our personal power is always there for us.

In a crisis, we can call upon it, like an old friend, or better yet, like calling upon a Superhero. And this is in stark contrast to our other powers.

Even the power that comes via social identity—race, gender, age, class—is limited to certain contexts. It doesn't help us have good relationships, build friendships, get respect for our talents, cope with the loss of a loved one, or fight a life-threatening illness.

This is why personal power is so robust. You can use your power and influence with people and in places where you don't have rank, authority, or expertise. You can use your gifts to your advantage no matter where you are.

Personal power is not conferred by others.

No one grants us personal power. If no one gives it to us, that means no one can take it away from us, either.

Whereas social power is conferred. It is not alienable, but acquired. It's a power that is based on the social context – the organization, society, our social group. A power that is given to us by others needs to be ratified by those others in order to be effective.

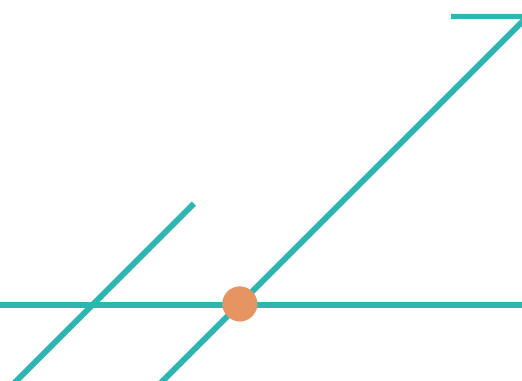
And this makes it—and us—very fragile. A power that is externally granted needs to be continually ratified by others. Yet all it takes is a change of management, of our financial standing, of our social status, or fashion trend for us to lose power. Depending on others for our sense of power can make us anxious and depressed, counting the number of likes or followers we have, or it can make us devious and manipulative, trying to control others or the environment in an attempt to cling to our positional power.

Personal Power Can Be Developed

Personal power is not finite, but can be continually developed. By investing in ourselves, doing the rigorous work of self-development, and learning new skills, we can grow our personal power.

Because personal power comes from within, we don't so much grow it, as we cultivate it. We take the raw material of our personality and or life experiences, and cultivate them, like a garden. Because *any* personality trait can be an asset or liability—it all depends on how you use it. Any life experience can be a source of wisdom or a source of trauma. It depends on how you reflect on it, what meaning you make of it, what lessons you derive from it.

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1. Be Yourself ... Sort Of.

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Developing your personal power starts by turning your gaze inward. Since personal power stems, first and foremost, from your personality traits and characteristics, if you don't recognize these traits and know how to cultivate them, you can't turn them into personal power.

When we seek the approval of others, we become their prisoner.

- Lao Tzu

As we've seen, a trait can be an asset or liability. It can be used for noble purposes or misused or abused. It completely depends on whether you are aware of these qualities, and how you use them!

So being yourself is just a start. Your personality can derail your efforts when it's not under your control. So we have to learn how to wield those traits skillfully.

Your trait of self-assuredness is a wonderful asset. It allows you to take on challenges, stretch yourself, and grow. It makes you optimistic, and able to inspire others.

But, it can also be a liability.

Because without awareness, that same self-assuredness can make you close-minded, overly fond of your own opinion, and averse to learning new things.

Your easygoing and relaxed nature?

It's perfect for thriving under stressful situations and can make you fun to be around.

But lacking direction, this trait can also evolve into laziness and apathy, causing you to miss opportunities that require effort or struggle to follow through with difficult tasks.

Whether your traits are assets or liabilities completely depends on how you view and use them.

If you are comfortable with your introversion, others will be too. But if you think you're 'too reserved,' or 'too passive,' then others will likely agree.

In other words, when we understand our traits, and develop them skillfully, by knowing when, how, and for what purpose to use them, they become assets that others will also view favorably.

But, be careful! Don't play favorites with yourself.

All of our traits are the raw materials of our personal power. No one trait is better, or more powerful than another. It depends entirely on how we cultivate and use them.

But here's the thing: you can't pick and choose which parts of yourself to use and develop.

Unfortunately, we have internalized a ranking system of personality traits. We've always had to fit in—to adapt to societal norms, family values, and the customs and requirements of school, community, and work—so we've learned to prize some of our traits and hide others.

So to properly cultivate our traits, and grow our personal power, we have to fight the cultural programming to fit in. Be mindful of hiding some of your traits, and embracing others.

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.

- Alice Walker

They all need the light of day to develop into something useful. What's more, when we feel we have something to hide, when we try to fit or act out the persona we think others want to see, we become vulnerable to criticism. We become dependent on others' perceptions, putting our self-esteem into the other's hands. And we allow our sense of self-worth to rise and fall at the whim of their opinions.

Don't live for the approval of others.

To paraphrase Lao Tzu: when we seek the approval of others, we become their prisoner.

As social animals, we walk a fine line between belonging and independence—between seeking the love of others and betraying ourselves to please them.

We want and need to be loved by our community, but doing so at the expense of our personality or our uniqueness weakens us. The more we care what others think, the more we abandon the very things that give us power: our distinctive traits, tendencies, and talents.

Furthermore, we place our sense of self-esteem, the building block of personal power, in the hands of others.

To grow your personal power, you need to be more self-interested. Not self-absorbed, not narcissistic—but introspective. Self-curious. In tune with your deepest and most genuine values. And you need to learn to endure the tension between following your own path and following others.

Self-interest, becoming independent from others' opinions and expectations, is an increasingly rare commodity in this day and age of social media.

So, in addition to cultivating your traits, and not playing favorites, be sure to set your own benchmarks for success!

What someone else thinks about you reflects their values, not yours. And a key to growing personal power is to wean yourself off the praise (and criticism) of others.

Be open to feedback, but don't forget to set your own benchmarks for success as well as failure.

Work towards the goals, praise, and outcomes that you define yourself and that best serve you in accomplishing your goals.

2. Tame Your Triggers

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

You lose power when you let your emotions get the best of you, and as a result, allow outer situations to direct your behavior.

Being able to respond — and not just react — comes from knowledge of and comfort with your emotions, being open to your feelings instead of judging them.

Keep a close eye on your triggers. If you get easily insulted, provoked, or threatened, and prone to emotional outbursts, you're more likely to fall into feelings of powerlessness.

And you're then at the mercy of your feelings, of other people, and the events around you.

Work on your emotional intelligence — gaining more self-regulation, control, and insight into your emotions so you are not tempted to use power to protect, defend, and elevate your own ego or self-image.

We can't avoid challenges. But the ability to respond to them thoughtfully, intentionally, and constructively is a critical element of personal power.

When challenging situations arise, try these tactics to respond intelligently:

- **Breathe.** Take a step back, breathe, and give yourself a moment to respond
- **Be curious.** Asking questions (about yourself and about the other) helps prevent reaction and deepens understanding.
- **Be flexible.** Imagine how someone else might respond. Or how the person you'd like to be might respond. Alternative points of view can provide new possibilities.
- **Be empathic.** Accept your feelings. Don't judge yourself for struggling. Accept that tough things are tough. This doesn't mean you can't challenge things; it means you see things as they are, not as you wish them to be.



Watch Your Self-Talk

As we've seen, feeling powerful is a key to using power well. And how you feel is connected to your inner dialogue—your self-talk.

Do you narrate your experiences in a way that sets you up for success? Or does your self-talk create anxiety, fear, or self-doubt?

How you frame what happens to you has a profound and decisive influence on everything from your health and well-being to your ability to bounce back from defeat.

Become aware of the stories you tell yourself about yourself, about what's happening, and about the challenges you face. And make sure the stories you tell are ones that help you become more effective at what you do.

You can tell yourself a story that puts you in a low rank state: *"I'll never make it."* *"They're out to get me."*

Or you can tell a story that elevates you, one that's characterized by positivity, curiosity, and a willingness to learn: *"This might be hard but think of all the things I'll learn by going through it."*

To develop healthy self-talk, a good start is to get a 'reality check' from others on how they see things. Get a variety of perspectives on the challenges you're facing, so you can more accurately assess the situation and your capacities, rather than letting your fear and doubt define the challenge.

3. Don't Give Away Your Focus

The one thing completely under our control is our focus. And nothing saps our personal power more than losing focus, being distracted, and letting our attention get hijacked.

Being focused means having the presence of mind to respond thoughtfully to the moment, even when things go awry.

Focus allows you to prioritize what has to be done and allows you to concentrate your actions and mental effort to get the results you want.

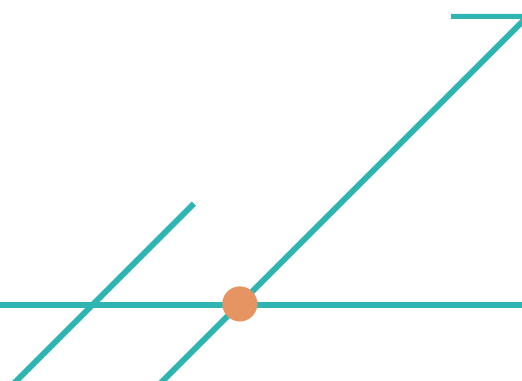
Harnessing focus gives you momentum. And without it, you risk doing a little bit of everything, but accomplishing nothing.

But it's up to you to make focus a priority. And that means setting boundaries.

It means watching out for inner and outer distractions: moods and annoyances that suck up your time and energy. As well as people, social media, emails, and other demands for your attention.

Try these ideas to give your focus a boost:

- **Just Say No.** Focus doesn't just mean being clear about your goals; it means being clear about what your goals are not. Your focus is limited. And if your attention is constantly split between tasks and contexts, you risk stretching your focus too thin to focus deeply on any one thing. Being able to say no to things that are not critical to where you want to go is key to developing your focus.
- **Make time to think.** Thinking is work. It requires energy and effort. And yet we rarely dedicate time to do so. We measure productivity by actions, forgetting that thinking is also an action. And that constant motion doesn't necessarily mean we're getting things done. So, to give your focus a boost, unplug, disconnect, and schedule regular time to think—alone and undisturbed.
- **Build in buffers.** Many cultures have ritual ways of dividing up the day: tea time, coffee breaks, and siestas. And there's intelligence in this. Because when we lurch from activity to activity, without time to gather our thoughts, make notes, or determine what actions need to be followed up, we end up using our brain as a to-do list, hindering deep thought and our ability to concentrate. End the meeting, the task, or the day by taking a moment to reflect, jot down key points, clear your desk (and your mind), or make a list of what needs following up.
- **Remove distractions.** Put your phone in another room, use app-blocking software, and close your inbox. The less convenient it is to distract yourself, the less likely you'll get distracted. Keep your momentum by closing the tasks and tabs you don't need to complete the project at hand.
- **Quiet the inner voice.** Our moods, worries, and fears are also forms of distraction. And by fretting over things outside our control — the tone of someone's voice, a curt email, a change of deadlines— we get stuck in a loop of unproductive, unhelpful thoughts. Acknowledge your thoughts, feelings, and concerns, make a note, and move on.



- **Reflect and Review.** We learn from experiences only when we give ourselves time to reflect upon them. So always take time to reflect and review. What were your wins? What challenges cropped up? Where can you improve? How can you plan to address something similar in the future? However, and whenever, always take time to reflect.

The more you develop your focus and attention, the more empowered you'll feel. It'll help you respond more thoughtfully and deeply and stay connected to what's most important to you.

4. Embrace Vulnerability

Nothing makes you more vulnerable than the inability to be vulnerable.

If you can't lose an argument, walk away from a disagreement, admit defeat, or apologize for a mistake, you are putting your sense of well-being in the hands of another and are completely open to manipulation.

Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change.

— Brene Brown

Like being triggered, fear of vulnerability leads us to use power poorly: we hide mistakes, don't ask for help, and push forward without knowledge or resources.

We would rather drive in circles than stop and ask for directions.

While bad leaders abhor vulnerability for fear of appearing weak, good managers use vulnerability as a tool to build trust and meaningful relationships.

We all have low-rank moments. Learning something new, needing help, or not knowing what to do are all low-rank experiences ... and they are a necessary facet in the equation of personal development.

You have to embrace the hard things as they're happening — the low moments, challenges, crises of confidence — because they also bring unparalleled rewards.

We source much of our personal power from the most difficult times in life. And if we turn against these experiences of low rank, we lose that precious superpower.

Discover and embrace the power in a low-rank experience. It could be the source of some of your greatest strengths and powers.



5. Don't Feed Your Opponent

Conventional wisdom dictates that you should never underestimate your opponent. But overestimating your opponent can be far worse.

When you focus too much on your enemy or opponent, whether person or obstacle, they become bigger and more significant. You begin to lose your personal power because the larger they loom, the smaller you feel. Your rank drops, relative to how big you've made them in your mind. And this triggers a limbic state.

We get embroiled in a power struggle, feeling we have to fight back or gain the upper hand. But power struggles don't give us power; they sap our strength. So, we actually feed our opponents by over-focusing on them.

It can be more powerful to just let it go. Pick and choose your battles. When you stay in touch with your sense of personal power, you don't fear the other. You trust you'll find a way forward.

And this also enables you to act with more benevolence and generosity. Your mind is at ease, and you're acting in alignment with the qualities that matter most to you, and you feel more relaxed and empowered as a result.

I don't focus on what I'm up against. I focus on my goals and I try to ignore the rest.

Venus Williams

Conclusion

To use power well, we must feel powerful. Because when we wield power from a powerless state of mind, we do so poorly.

True feelings of power come from our sense of personal power, an inalienable and portable power, one that is not conferred by others.

Like anything else, we can grow and develop our personal power.

But to do so, we need to first and foremost learn to recognize and use our personality traits—the source of our personal power.

We need to manage our own emotional states and remain prepared for the inevitable moment when we feel the limits of our own power.

We need to stay focused and present, and not let our focus and attention get hijacked by trivial things, moods, and distractions that sap our presence.

And we must also embrace our vulnerability, find the strength and wisdom in our low-rank moments, and learn to walk away without being drawn into petty power struggles.

If that sounds like a lot of work, you're right. But it's more energizing and empowering than placing our sense of self-worth in the hands of another. It's also not an overstatement to say that developing personal power is one of the most beneficial self-investments of your life—paying long-term dividends in your professional and personal development, your relationships, and your physical and emotional well-being.