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How to Keep Your Power as Leader from Destroying Your Character

You've no doubt heard the quote from Lord Acton, "*Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.*" Diametrically opposed to Acton is a quote from George Bernard Shaw, "*Power does not corrupt men; fools, however, if they get into a position of power, corrupt power.*" So who's right, Acton or Shaw?

According to Mr. Webster, power in human relationships means, "*possession of control, authority, or influence over others.*" Sounds pretty much like a definition of most supervisors, managers, and executives. They all possess control and authority over others, and whether good or bad, most bosses influence employee behavior.

There are lots of kinds of power in our modern world. There is the power of advertising. Most of us wouldn't have jobs without the ability to advertise a product in such a way that it influences someone's behavior so that they buy our products. There is the power of celebrity. People fawn over sports stars, TV and radio entertainers, and musicians and singers. There is the power of political office. People holding political office wield the power of a government bureaucracy. And of course, there is the power of money. Many people think that money is the ultimate power because if you have enough of it you can buy the other kinds of power.

Is power good or is it bad? God created the world with the power of free choice so power in and of itself isn't bad; it's how people choose to exercise power that can make it bad. A car can provide endless hours of enjoyment on vacation with the family, or in the hands of a drunk, the same car can be a deadly weapon. A pen can write hateful letters or love poems. It is how we choose to use power that really matters, not the power itself. Some people are preoccupied with the quest for power, and having once obtained it are ill prepared to handle it. Others have power thrust upon them and find that, even if reluctantly, they must manage the power.



One only needs to think of newspaper headlines from the last few years to see plenty of examples of power gone astray.

- A single man making investments for an English bank caused the bankruptcy of the institution.
- In a similar situation a single man in Orange County, California made investments that caused the bankruptcy of one of the wealthiest counties in the United States.
- A married pastor got involved in a relationship with another woman, and then used contributions to pay her to keep quiet. In a quest for money he over-sold time shares in resort hotels, and the whole empire collapsed in near bankruptcy.
- A congressman regularly harassed female employees, relying on special Federal statutes to protect him from prosecution for his outrageous behavior.
- A president mentioned to an aide that he wished he knew what preparations an election opponent was making. The aide enlisted the support of others, and hired people who broke into the opposition's office to steal strategy papers. As a result, several people went to jail, and a president resigned his office.
- A mayor regularly handed out lucrative contracts to friends and relatives in return for kickbacks. He even furnished much of his home with furniture paid for by taxpayers.
- An executive for a major car manufacturer regularly accepted payments from automobile dealerships in return for larger allocations of popular cars.

It's pretty clear some of our more public leaders have not learned how to handle power very well. Let's look at some Biblical characters to see how they handled power.

Abraham

Abraham was born of non-believing parents, yet he became known as the "friend of God" (Isa. 41:8). He was a wealthy man; the owner of many flocks of sheep. But when he was 75 years old God told him to go to another land. So he gathered up his family and moved some 400 miles because of God's promise; *"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* (Genesis 12:3).

Abraham had also taken his nephew, Lot, with him to the new land. At one point Lot's herdsman argued with Abraham's herdsman about who should get which land to graze on. Despite having the power to make a decision for his nephew, Abraham took Lot to the top of a hill and told him to pick which land he wanted. Lot picked the valley of Jordan, so Abraham moved off to the land of Canaan.

God had promised to make Abraham the father of many nations, yet he remained childless. In a desperate attempt to help God out Abraham had a child through his wife's maid, Hagar. God remembered his promise and eventually Abraham's wife, Sarah, gave birth to Isaac. Abraham's



faith had matured, and he believed God would fulfill his promise to make him the father of many nations. Even to the point that when God told him to sacrifice his son he was fully prepared to do so.

Abraham had some character flaws to be sure. He was deceitful when he told people his wife was really his sister. And he thought he could help God out by having a child through Hagar. He also allowed Sarah to drive Hagar out of his house because she was jealous. But one thing that is very important about Abraham, he did not misuse his considerable power. As his faith grew so did his character.

Job

Job, along with Noah and Daniel, are mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel as three of the most faithful men on earth (Ezekiel 14). Job was a wealthy man with thousands of sheep, camels and oxen. Job was a man of great reputation; he was described as, “*the greatest man of all the east*” (Job 1:3).

In one day Job’s family was killed, along with all his livestock. Despite this loss of family and possessions Job did not curse God but maintained his faith. Calamity struck Job physically as he was stricken with boils over his entire body. Job’s wife said, “*‘Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!’ He replied, ‘You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?’ In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.*” (Job 2:9-10). Job’s faith, while stretched, never faltered.

Phinehas and Hophni

Late in the 11th century B.C. the nation Israel was still governed by prophets and local judges. A Levite priest named Eli, who loved God, served for years as a judge and High Priest in Israel. His sons, Phinehas and Hophni, lacked their father’s character and love for God yet were installed into the priest’s office. People would come to the temple to make sacrifices to God, and it was the custom to give the priest a portion of the sacrifice. Phinehas and Hophni would take the best part of the sacrifices for themselves, and even threatened to take the sacrifices by force if people were reluctant to comply. These two even slept with women at the entrance to the tabernacle (1 Samuel 2)! Phinehas and Hophni were killed in battle together (1 Samuel 4) and the responsibility of priesthood was given to Samuel.

Saul

Saul was Israel’s first king. He was born into a wealthy farm family of the tribe of Benjamin. Despite having a wealthy father, Saul grew up working the land and caring for the animals. Saul was tall and handsome, yet he was also humble and even self-effacing. When Samuel first told Saul God wanted him to be Israel’s King Saul replied, “*But am I not a Benjamite, from the*



smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?" (1 Samuel).

Saul's popularity and power increased as he led armies in victory after victory against Israel's enemies. One day, Samuel the prophet, told Saul to wait for him in Gilgal before attacking the Philistines. On the seventh day, Saul got impatient waiting for Samuel to arrive. So Saul took matters into his own hands and offered a sacrifice to God himself. This was a major violation of God's law and ultimately cost Saul the kingship (1 Samuel 13:13-14), *"You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command."*

Saul took matters into his own hands again when he spared the life of Agag, and allowed his soldiers to bring home animals as spoils of war contrary to Samuel's instructions, *"Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king."* (1 Samuel 15:23). Samuel never spoke to Saul again after this transgression.

Saul brought young David into his household, and even gave David his daughter Michal in marriage. Saul became so fearful that David would overthrow him as king that he tried to kill David. Saul even went so far as to have all the priests at a sanctuary in Nob killed.

Saul, a humble young man from a small tribe, became Israel's first king. He became so addicted to the power and position that he violated God's laws regularly, and even murdered God's priests in a desperate attempt to hold onto his power.

David

David was the youngest son of Jesse, a prominent family in Bethlehem. He spent his youth tending sheep and playing a lyre. Samuel anointed him king of Israel while Saul was still alive. Rather than ascending the throne immediately David entered Saul's service as his personal musician after killing the giant, Goliath. David's popularity among the people grew as he led Saul's armies into many successful battles against the Philistines. In those days David regularly asked God for direction.

Eventually, David instructed his commander in chief, Joab, to take a census of the Israelite army, which was contrary to Israelite law. Joab objected, but David insisted. The plague that followed killed 70,000 people.

David decided to bring the ark of God back from Philistine territory to Jerusalem. The ark was mounted on a cart, pulled by oxen, and attended by non-Levites. Uzzah, one of the attendants,



died when an ox stumbled causing the cart to tip, and he reached out to steady the ark. David waited three months before he made another attempt. The next time he tried to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem he followed God's law by having the ark carried on the shoulders of Levites (2 Samuel 6).

Instead of going out with his armies one year, David stayed behind preferring the comforts of his palace. One day he noticed a young woman, Bathsheba, bathing on her rooftop and decided he had to have her. She became pregnant, and David conspired to have her husband, Uriah, killed so that he could marry her (2 Samuel 11).

It is sad that David changed from a quiet, humble, young shepherd who regularly looked to God for guidance into a man so driven by his own power that he ignored God's laws, and allowed his lust to turn to murder.



Getting Started

Among the group who handled power poorly, at least at some stage in their lives, are some key learnings about handling power:

- 1) **Power does not respect background.** Whether from wealthy or poor families, whether prominent or unknown, the ability to manage power is inherent in your character not your family tree.
- 2) **Power is difficult to maintain.** Those who want power will always be trying to increase their power at the expense of others.
- 3) **Power is addictive.** A little power makes one hunger for more. You think, “If I can do this with a little power just think what I could get done with more?”
- 4) **Power is difficult to control.** The more power you have the more difficult it is to understand the effect of the power on others.
- 5) **Power is easily abused.** In the quest to do a good thing, power is often exerted over the will of the people and to their detriment.

Noah

Noah lived in a time of lawlessness and corruption. When Noah was about 600 years old, God told him to build an ark. Being a man of God, Noah began building the ark. He was the patriarch of the family that was saved to populate the earth. During the balance of his life of some 350 years Noah demonstrated five keys to handling power.

- 1) **Noah walked with God regardless of the actions of the rest of the world.** While the world became so corrupt that God decided to destroy the whole population, “*Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God*” (Genesis 6:9).
- 2) **Noah was obedient to God.** God told Noah He was going to flood the earth with rain. No one on earth had ever seen rain or a flood yet Noah set about building the ark. It was 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. No small task since he had no lumber mills nearby, no power saws, and not a nail gun in sight! Noah never questioned, “Are you sure about this God?” He just got to work; “*And Noah did according to all that God had commanded him.*” (Genesis 7:5).
- 3) **Noah received his salvation through faith.** “*By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*” (Hebrews 11:7).



- 4) **Noah tried to help others.** Despite the ridicule suffered from 100 years of building a boat miles from water, Noah kept preaching to his neighbors hoping that they would repent of their sins, *“he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others.”* (2 Peter 2:5).
- 5) **Noah honored God.** After Noah, his family, and all the animals got out of the ark the first thing Noah did was set up an altar to God and offer a sacrifice.

One Final Thought

Noah lived a quiet life preferring to walk in God’s light rather than the light of the corrupt world he lived in. Noah was obedient to God in small things and in large things. Noah believed through faith that God would save him and his family. Noah tried to help those around him understand God’s plan for salvation. Noah never forgot to honor God in all things.

Character is what matters in the handling of power. Noah had strength of character because he never lost his focus on God. In all the examples of those Biblical characters who started out well but ultimately misused their power there is one clear commonality; they all lost their focus on God. They began to think that they could do things on their own without God’s help, support, and direction.

Whether you aspire to power, or if you already have power, pray that you will never lose your focus on God!



Words to Ponder

But you, O Lord, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me. Deliver my life from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs. *Psalms 22:19- 20*

A few great minds are enough to endow humanity with monstrous power, but a few great hearts are not enough to make us worthy of using it. *Jean Rotund*

Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous. *Psalms 37:16-17*

Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. *Proverbs 3:27*

In the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding on the back of a tiger ended up inside. *John Kennedy*

Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have understanding and power. *Proverbs 8:14*

When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing. *Proverbs 11:7*



Cases in Real Life

Dave

Dave was a middle-aged executive on the fast track. He had risen in his company through the sales ranks to the level of national sales manager.

There was tremendous pressure on his sales organization to increase sales of a particular product line. There was also significant pressure from national competitors who manufactured similar products. Their products were slightly less expensive, but of good quality. Recently, private label companies had begun manufacturing items that were not high quality, but significantly less expensive than Dave's products.

What Dave needed was a major infusion of cash to use to promote his products through retailers to the end consumers. He had asked for the promotion money, but had been turned down by the division's general manager. As a young executive he was reluctant to continue to press his boss for the money. Dave's boss however, still held him responsible for meeting his sales objectives.

Dave looked inside his sales division for ways to increase sales. He found there was a special promotion allowance that was seldom used due to the restrictions on its use with retailers. Dave encouraged the sales managers reporting to him to use this allowance as a promotion tool. Each of the four division managers did the same with the managers working for them, and so on down the hierarchy.

Soon the entire organization was using the allowance, in violation of company policy, to promote the division's products with retailers. The money was never used to line a corrupt employee's pocket, or a retailer for that matter. But it was a clear misuse of company funds.

Dave misused his power as national sales manager to encourage employees to break company policy. Despite the well-intentioned result, he created an organization that thought it was acceptable to break company policy.

John

John was a regional manager for a large company in a rural area. He had 14 people working for him. John was a very aggressive manager who insisted on results with little regard for how they were achieved. John was like Dr. Jeckle and Mr. Hyde. If he liked you, you were ensured favored son status. If he did not like you, he made your life miserable.

John set up a three-month contest for his employees. When it became apparent that an employee he did not like would win the contest, John changed the contest rules so that an employee he did like would win. When the losing employee's boss saw what was happening he challenged John.



John took such an affront to the challenge that he tried to fire both employees. When he was unable to find policy violations he could use to fire them he put the employee on probation, where he controlled the outcome, and tried to force the manager to transfer to another division or be fired without cause.

Years later John's arrogance finally caught up with him. He had violated too many company policies, and mistreated too many good employees. Company management finally saw what was going on, and gave John the opportunity to seek alternate employment.

It is easy to see the abuse of power in these two examples. Sometimes however, the abuse of power is far more subtle. Both of these men made the mistake of putting the expedient over righteousness.



Meeting Notes

Use these meeting notes to take a personal inventory of your use of power. Then use them to lead a similar session in your organization.

Personal Inventory

- 1) Make a list of the people who exercise power over you. Include friends, relatives, family members, customers, and other business people with whom you work, either directly or indirectly.
- 2) Make a list of people over whom you exercise power. Include friends, relatives, family members, customers, and other business people with whom you work, either directly or indirectly. Don't worry if some people appear on both lists.
- 3) Of the people who exercise power over you, note whether the individual uses their power responsibly, or whether they abuse their power. For those that abuse their power over you specify the type of abuse. Are they asking you to violate company policy? Are they pushing you to abuse your power with others?
- 4) Of the people over whom you exercise power, note instances where you have abused your power with specific individuals and in what way you abused your power.

Corporate Inventory

- 1) Ask employees to list the ways power is handled in the organization.
- 2) What forms of these uses of power do employees consider abusive? For example, Do bosses threaten employees to get results or else? Do people harass others in the work place? Are there cliques within the organization that control other groups?
- 3) How can power within the company be managed productively, rather than to the detriment of the organization?

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Key Points:

Key learnings about power:

- **Power does not respect backgrounds.** The use and abuse of power is determined by your character not by your birthright or upbringing.
- **Power is difficult to maintain.** If you have power someone else will want it and may try to get it from you through subversive means.
- **Power is addictive.** With a little power you can do a little with a lot of power you think you can do even more.
- **Power is difficult to control.** People with a lot of power are often so far away from the lives of the people they exercise power over that they can't see the effect of their power.
- **Power is easily abused.** It's easy to convince yourself that you know better than others about how things should be done and you exert this influence over them.

Key learnings about managing the power in your life:

- **Maintain a relationship with God.** Keep your relationship with God fresh by reading His word and attending a good church.
- **Remain obedient to God.** Be obedient to God in both small things as well as large.
- **Rely on God for your salvation.** Salvation does not come from being a "good" person, or from good works. God gave his Son, Jesus, for your sins.
- **Remain humble and avoid the proud.** Most misuse and abuse of power occurs when people lose their firm grounding and believe that they don't need God.
- **Keep your focus on God.** Over the long haul, the best way to manage power well in your life is to remember that we are called to serve, not lord power over others.