

Is anyone in an organisation ever powerless?

To understand the nature and distribution of power in an organisation, we must investigate the fundamental sources from which power is derived. These can broadly be categorised into two groups: formal and informal, with some sources spread between both categories. The myriad of sources of power demonstrates that no one in an organisation is powerless. The most likely candidates for being the powerless within an organisation would be workers from what Gareth Morgan calls the “secondary labour market” who are “lower-skilled and lower-paid workers in offices, factories, and open-air jobs who are more dispensable and more easily replaced” as compared to “primary labour market” workers who take “career-type jobs that are especially crucial or that call for a high degree of skill and detailed knowledge, often of a corporation-specific nature.”¹ However, the apparently powerless can exercise a type of power that is not enshrined in rules, regulations, or hierarchy of organisation. Not only this, but they have power in consensus, for a coalition is much more effective for achieving aims. In this way, they possess power in their inherent potential.

It is undeniable that different actors in an organisation possess different levels of power and this is especially apparent in large organisations. The need for efficiency and the sheer scale of operations necessitate specialisation and division of labour which inevitably leads to the divergence of power of each individual because “as soon as various actors do different parts of the whole task, the possibility arises that the various functions and activities may not be equally critical to task accomplishment and organisational survival.”² In *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism*, Chandler illustrates the rise of the need for managers to monitor and coordinate operations of a firm. By the nature of their job, managers are central to the survival of the firm even though they may not be core to what the firm does. Centrality is important because marginalised subunits of an organisation inevitably lose power as they do not have comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the happenings in different corners and the decision making process. J. D. Barber writes that “insofar as knowledge is power, communication systems are power systems.”³ This encompasses the importance of centrality as being at the core translates into frequent communication with most subunits of the organisation. Knowledge of surroundings is most definitely power, especially in environments where people and groups can be opaque to ‘outsiders’ of the subunit. Centrality is mostly a bureaucratic type of power as the organisational hierarchy is structured in such a way that managers have oversight of everything.

However, the workers lower in the hierarchy also have an informal centrality to operations because they are deep in the ‘rank and file’ of the organisation. One must never forget that workers are human and they develop relationships with each other. Connections within an organisation or even outside an organisation (perhaps a useful friendship with a regulator or a worker at a rival firm) can often shift the balance of power. In some situations, workers will have a much clearer idea of something managers have little to no knowledge of, for example the general sentiment of the workforce towards the management. This knowledge empowers the worker as awareness of surroundings is ever so important in order to exercise control and

¹ Page 269 *Images of Organisation* by Gareth Morgan

² Page 98 *Power in Organisations* by Jeffrey Pfeffer

³ *Power in Committees: An Experiment in the Governmental Process* by James D. Barber (1966)