

The freedom of power

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With the forthcoming inauguration this January, the nation will be closely watching to see how the President Elect will respond to the advice, influence, and criticism of his advisors, cabinet members, media, and other political leaders as he takes office. According to new research in the December 2008 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, being in a high power position may protect people from being influenced, creating a psychological environment where they are comfortable relying on their own attitudes, insights, expressions, and intentions.

The research was led by Adam Galinsky, the Morris and Alice Kaplan Professor of Ethics and Decision in Management at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., in collaboration with Joe Magee of New York University; Deborah Gruenfeld of Stanford University; Jennifer Whitson of the University of Texas at Austin; and Katie Liljenquist of Brigham Young University.

"Although power is often perceived as the capacity to influence others, this research examines whether power protects people from influence," said Galinsky. "Our findings indicate that the powerful will generate creative ideas that are less influenced by others, be more likely to express attitudes that don't necessarily conform to prevailing peer pressure, and be more willing to counter with opposing views or statements in a discussion or argument."

Through a series of five experiments, the researchers sought to find whether the powerful are immune to influence in various situations.

In two of their studies, the researchers explored the effect of power on creativity. For example, in one experiment individuals took part in a marketing exercise and were asked to create novel names for a number of different product types. To give them some guidance in the task, they were shown examples of the kinds of names typically found for each product, but they were asked not to copy any aspects of the examples provided. The problem for creativity is that examples typically place boundaries on imagination. The high-power individuals generated more novel responses, or ones that did not reflect attributes of the examples, suggesting that their creative thinking was less constrained than the thinking of low-power individuals.

Another experiment tested susceptibility to conformity pressure from peers among participants with high or low power. When participants completed a task that most people disliked, low-power and baseline participants' opinions of the task were influenced by a bogus feedback sheet displaying that ostensible previous participants had greatly enjoyed the task. By comparison, high-power participants expressed dissatisfaction with the task, resisting the supposedly favorable opinions expressed by others. High-power participants, in other words, did not conform to what they believed others were thinking. As Joe Magee said in describing this study, "High-power people's attitudes do not change with the wind."

In another study, high-power individuals negotiated based on their deeply held values about cooperation and competition. Low-power individuals were more likely to be influenced by the behavior of their opponents. The research also suggests that power, by leading people to express their underlying attitudes and thoughts uninfluenced by others, reveals rather than makes the person.

Magee mentioned the relevance to President Elect Barack Obama. "Our research suggests that people may not need to worry too much about

power corrupting Obama," he said. "His newfound power might enable the change he desires rather than that power changing him instead. This is contrary to what most people think: that the longer he works in Washington the more he will be influenced by the same old ways of doing things."

"Although power is often thought of as a pernicious force that corrupts people who possess it, it is the protection from situational influence that helps powerful individuals surmount social obstacles and express the seemingly unpopular ideas of today that transform into the ideals of tomorrow," Galinsky concluded.

Source: Manning Selvage & Lee

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