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The Gamesman in Action: Being New as a Path to Power

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## **The Gamesman in Action: Being New as a Path to Power**

My career in corporate communication, employee engagement, and organization development (OD) has been marked by change. I have moved among a variety of corporate and nonprofit in-house positions, large and small agency roles, and served clients as an independent consultant on the east and west coasts of the U.S. I have recently made an additional geographic professional move to Chicago, where I am considering an offer to join a world-class academic medical institution as a director on its communication team. As I ponder if this is the right job for me, I am driven by the question of how much and what types of power I would have in this role. What power would I be given and what could I gain?

To effectively answer those questions, I turn to scholars and theories of power. I am using the FIRO-B, an adaptation of Schutz' 1978 FIRO Awareness Scales (Schnell & Hammer, 1993) and Maccoby's 1976 career style inventory as a basis for self-awareness; Maccoby's 2004 study on transference for further self-understanding and to understand the team I will be managing as well as my peers and superiors; Kanter's 1979 look at position as a primary determinant of power; Cohen & Bradford's 1989 look at gaining influence through reciprocal exchanges; and Eagly & Carli's 2007 study that depicts common blocks to women's paths to leadership. In addition, and as a foundation, I will use the advice of Jeffrey Pfeffer in his 2010 book on power regarding personal qualities, creating resources, building a reputation, and overcoming opposition.

### **Understanding Myself and the Organization**

Having completed Maccoby's (1976) career style inventory, I am interested to learn that I am a "gamesman," and I realize this is an apt description. In thinking of my career, I have taken risks and made career moves most of my peers have not, and my resume now reads in a way

some find unconventional because I have not stayed with one or two organizations nor even with one industry. In fact, this move to Chicago, while done for family reasons, is one of the calculated career risks I've taken. Nearly three years ago, I left a vice president position in a global corporation to become an independent consultant – a risk that I deemed worth taking because it would give me new opportunities. I love to learn new techniques – this is part of the reason I'm in the MSMOB program at Benedictine University although I have another graduate degree in a different field. I am great at energizing my team and my peers, and I compete in the workplace to “gain fame, glory, the exhilaration of victory,” which is part of Maccoby's description of a gamesman (1976, p. 171). In terms of career, my greatest fear is to be labeled a loser – this is a trait Maccoby also ascribes to gamesmen.

Being a gamesman has not been easy – among the difficulties is that the path I've chosen is misunderstood by traditionalists who see moving around and taking risks as non-strategic or even foolish. It's also disheartening at times to watch my peers who have been in one company or industry many years move steadily higher in position, salary, and prestige while I make seemingly lateral moves. However, deep down I know my truth, which is that organizations need gamesmen like me because we can adapt to meet the requirements of any organization, we are driven to succeed, fair, tough, demanding and above all, in tune with our environments and innovative in meeting its requirements. All of these have been attributed to me by peers and subordinates in evaluations, and are gamesman attributes, according to Maccoby (1976).

Being a gamesman means I am open to all opportunities – even this new one, which is a director-level position that could be considered beneath me. In my understanding of gamesmanship, I am willing to pursue this position because it's fun to meet the people in the

organization, figure out where I could fit and be successful, and compete for the role and its accompanying elements such as salary, responsibilities, and management of the team.

Taking risks and playing games could send the message that I'm independent and don't depend on what others think of me, that I prefer to be alone. As my FIRO-B scores attest, this is far from true. I have clearly high needs for both inclusion and affection (with need for control much lower). Is this a paradox? Schnell & Hammer (1993) describe the FIRO-B description of need for inclusion as having to do with forming new relationships and associating with people, and determines the extent of contact and prominence that a person seeks. The need for affection has to do with emotional ties and warm connections between people, and determine the extent of closeness that a person seeks. I know I have been missing these elements in my independent consulting structure, which is one of the reasons I am now seeking a return to organizational life as an in-house professional.

As a gamesman, I'm paying attention to all the playing pieces in this situation – all the factors that could impact my power bases. One fact that strikes me as significant is that the people most key to my position and success are women at this point. My boss, her boss, and my two team members all are women – and I'm a woman. Other vice presidents in the organization with whom I would work closely also are women, and the president of the organization is a woman and one of my key stakeholders (I am told I would be working with her directly for much of my work.)

Why is the prevalence of women significant? I understand it could have pros and cons. Women in positions of power could be a sign that the organizational barriers preventing their progress are not so important in this organization. Eagly & Carli (1989) present some of these as prejudice, resistance to female leadership, leadership style issues, family demands (p. 1), and say

they can form a labyrinth of confusing blocks to women's growth in the workplace. Perhaps this is not the case at this organization, but I feel it's important to track. Eagly & Carli do suggest that no department, team, or other unit have only one woman in it, to avoid being outnumbered and therefore ignored, by men. Or, on the darker side, a department comprised primarily of women might mean the entire department faces these barriers, and so I would face a double challenge individually and as part of a disadvantaged team within the organization.

As a team member and a supervisor, I wonder if I would be prone to transfer attachments from my family and from previous work relationships onto the women with whom I'd be working closely at this organization. Maccoby (2004) has studied this concept of transference in the workplace. Based on the work of Sigmund Freud, Maccoby's premise is that followers and leaders project unconscious images and emotions onto each other that are based on past relationships, most commonly family ones. While this transference can be positive in the workplace, and result in higher productivity, it also can be negative, resulting in harmful competition and unrealistic expectations for both leaders and followers.

Some of the ways I've observed transference at play in my career include expecting male bosses to be fatherly to me, which, in my family experience, includes taking care of me financially (sometimes without the expectation that I would earn that financial care) and emotionally (protecting me from co-workers who are not fair with me or hurt my feelings), and provide for my future (through promotions, raises, ensuring that I am held in high esteem by others in powerful positions, and through superlative performance reviews that stay on my record permanently). With women co-workers, I have tended to view them similarly in care-taking roles related to me – I am the youngest of four sisters and was the recipient of this kind of relation in the family setting. While this has led me to be trusting, collegial, fun, and expecting

the best of those around me in the workplace, the downsides have included that I am not viewed as wanting to take care of myself and therefore am dependent on others – this is not how an executive should be viewed. Further, transferring the role of youngest child with the least valuable opinion in the family setting, I have had difficulty finding my own voice in the workplace. Consequently, I am sometimes viewed as less assertive than an executive should be, and that I'm confusing in the direction I give to staff (as a result of being unsure of my own opinions).

I realize that in the workplace, this family-related transference is complicated by my Indian upbringing, which at times is at odds with the norms of an American workplace. For example, hierarchy is less important than collaboration and contributing assertively, even aggressively, in the U.S., while in India and in my family of origin, subordinates, especially women, wait to be told what to do by bosses, and rarely speak against a boss's wishes or opinions, at least not directly. In my career, I have found myself falling into these norms and being called out for not being leader-like in the U.S. workplace. (In Europe and Asia and workplaces dominated by those cultures, I have fit in much more smoothly.)

By bringing my transferences into awareness, I am attempting to manage them – this is also the advice Maccoby (2004) gives in order to manage unconscious transferences and make transference work for us.

### **Examining the Organization and My Path to Power**

French and Raven (1959, in Burke), in their famous five sources of power, provide an effective structure for thinking about how I might enhance, create, and maintain power in this new organizational situation. These power bases, which define power in terms of behavioral acts are: reward (having something others want and would be willing to do things for you to get

them), coercive (having resources that can be used to punish others, so they will do things to avoid), expert (having information or knowledge that others benefit from and that they don't already have), legitimate (having authority based on position, title, or role, which others accept as your right and are willing to obey), and referent (having power due to personal attraction and others' desire to please you). Using these, I can analyze my potential power sources in my new position.

### **Reward and Coercive**

Using Cohen & Bradford's (1989) metaphor of trading currencies (or rewards and punishment) in the workplace, I could offer the rewards they recommend to my subordinates and to my superiors that are both intangible and tangible. Intangible rewards they mention would be related to inspiration (vision, excellence, moral/ethical), relationship (acceptance and inclusion, personal support, understanding), or personal (self-concept, challenge and learning, ownership and involvement, and gratitude). Tangible rewards would be related to task (resources, assistance, cooperation information), and position (advancement, recognition, visibility, reputation, importance, network/contacts). In my experience, a combination of both intangible and tangible are important to being viewed as a powerful leader.

On the flip side of reward is coercion, or the withholding of desirable currencies, in order to gain support or compliance from others. While this has never been my style in a punitive sense, I suppose it is acceptable and necessary to act on coercion in some situations. For example, a subordinate does not get a promotion if their job performance is not good enough. It does not appear that coercion can work with superiors in a moral way (at least, not in my view) – I could withdraw intangible rewards such as acceptance, esteem, and gratitude that they might find valuable. However, to me, if this withdrawal is done to manipulate rather than from an

authentic emotional place or as a natural consequence of the relationship, then it does not strike me as a moral way to go. This might be a quality I possess that is out of sync with being a gamesman – a true player might not mind giving and taking emotions in the workplace to test and win people and situations. Maybe I can do it, too, in a way that also aligns with my moral code. It will be interesting to try.

Cohen & Bradford say that key to trading any of these currencies with my new co-workers (subordinates and superiors) is a mindset that involves thinking about the person to be influenced as an ally; knowing the pressure, needs, and goals of the potential ally; correctly matching the resources I have with what the potential ally values; and effectively making the exchange transaction. I would need to be strategic about choosing potential allies with whom to make these currency trades – on the surface, it seems that my superiors would be the most effective allies to have. However, my subordinates, especially those who have been with the organization a long time, also could be influential.

The tangible resources under my control would be among the rewards I could offer as I strive to become more powerful in my new organization. Promotions, raises, days off, flexible work hours, parking spots, and similar items could be given to my subordinates as ways to motivate them to achieve my desired tasks and goals. For peers and superiors, I could offer my time, that of my team members, my professional contacts (such as external vendors and conference organizers) to get work done and raise their visibility.

Pfeffer (2010) discusses social capital in the form of a strong professional network as a critical resource in most organizations, and I believe it applies to my situation. The job I will be doing includes bringing together people from disparate function areas and business divisions across two highly matrixed and complex organizations to achieve an integrated brand and

reputation internally and externally. Many people are performing some aspects of branding, marketing, communication, and community relations, with less than stellar results. There is a need for someone (it can be me!) to integrate people and tasks. I find Pfeffer's advice on building networks valuable as I think about network as one key resource I can create and manage.

Pfeffer (2010) describes effective networking as building, maintaining, and using social ties with influential people from across diverse internal and external groups. He advises being highly strategic about who you choose to be part of your network and once you've selected them, use your time with them wisely – you don't have time to get to know all of them really well, he says, and don't need to know them that well for the purposes of your business strategy. This can be done while still maintaining authentic relationships with those people. Pfeffer emphasizes having influentials in your network – high level decision makers and those who are well recognized in their professional and social circles – to make your network effective.

Pfeffer (2010) says that power can be gained through connections across diverse networks. With this in mind, I would build my network to include not just those people involved with communication, but I would also include those in operations and other areas from within my new organization. By connecting these disparate groups, I increase my social capital, which is measured by how many structural holes a person bridges, and impacts promotions, raises, organization status, and other elements of power, according to Pfeffer.

Building and maintaining an influential, useful network has always been easy and fun for me, I suppose in part due to the fact that I am a gamesman. In Maccoby's (1976) description, the gamesman is good at putting together pieces for a common goal, and has a great time figuring out how everything fits together. This aligns with the skills needed to build an effective network.

**Expert**

This is the path to power I am most clear about prior to entering the new organizational situation. I am being sought for this role because I bring specialized expertise in internal communication, employee engagement, and corporate communication, and because I have senior level experience in relevant organizations and industries. This is unique to me – the boss I would have possesses a different skill and background set and needs the expertise I bring to complement her. Further, higher level executives impacted by my new role and with whom I would be working closely have expressed their desire to have my unique blend of skills and experience in the organization and closely aligned with them. I am sure others in the organization have skills and experience similar to mine – once I am in my new role, one of my priorities will be to find out who these people are, and to display my background as complementary to and distinct from any other professionals. This will help maintain my expert path to power.

**Legitimate**

In this new role, it is likely I would hold a title of Director, with two direct reports when I begin. I would report to an Executive Director, who reports to a Vice President, who reports to the President. My position is considered “senior,” so it appears it comes with a level of power related to the position and title. Further, in getting power by association, this position is slated to work closely with the President and Chairman of the organization almost daily.

It seems I might not have high levels of legitimate power in this role, given its current rank. (I could discuss and negotiate a higher level title going in to the organization, which I plan to do.) I would be able to influence the level of legitimate power later on in my tenure at the

organization. At the beginning, I would need to work on establishing other types of power bases that push me higher than the Director level. I would need to find ways to develop mutual influence without too much formal authority. Cohen & Bradford (1989) present the “law of reciprocity” (p. 7) – or the expectation that actions will be paid back in some form – as a path to influence. They assert that reciprocity is the basic principle behind all organizational transactions. So it seems worthwhile to explore reciprocity as one of my potential tools as I am seeking to gain power in this new organization.

### **Referent**

French and Raven (1959, in Burke) used the term “referent power” to describe charisma and other personal qualities that Pfeffer (2010) sees as a clear path to power. If a person doesn’t already possess personal qualities necessary to gain power, he advises opening our minds and changing in order to adopt certain qualities to gain power. Referent power is probably the most effective power base due to the modern organizational model that allows for few structural bases (many organizations are moving toward flatter rather than deep structures with fewer supervisors and more collaboration across teams and functions). As well, as said earlier in this paper, changing family structures mean lower chances that employees will think of their bosses automatically as powerful – in the past, they might have transferred deference, respect and granting of authority given to their parents onto their bosses. Referent power gives a person more control – you don’t have to wait for power to be conferred upon you by others. Deciding on and projecting and communicating a certain defined image and building a reputation using various tools – these are up to you.

Pfeffer (2010) says that the two most important qualities determining power in leaders are *will* (the drive to accomplish big things), and *skill* (the capabilities to turn ambition into

accomplishment (p. 40). According to Pfeffer (2010), the attributes of will are 1. ambition (a focus on achieving influence and the drive to succeed at a clear vision), 2. energy (the ability to put in long hours to acquire knowledge and skill), and 3. focus (specialization in a particular industry or company, concentration on a limited scope of skills, and/or concentration on the particular skills within your job that are the most critical).

Pfeffer's emphasis on focus seems at odds with this era, in which workers are moving among companies, the corporate celebrities are entrepreneurs who are shunning traditional paths to success, and gamesmen (like me), who take good risks and have fun moving around the pieces of their careers rather than sticking to a well-worn and marked path, and who Maccoby (1976) says are the leaders of today. Pfeffer (2010) says that power is more likely if we apply our ambition and energy to a limited range of activities in a pretty narrow set of companies or industries because we have to build networks, relationships, visibility, expertise, and power over time, and, given that our careers only contain a few decades, it isn't possible to build these very deeply if we have to cover more than a few companies and industries. This makes sense to me - I have seen employers shun gamesmen in favor of those who have been in certain industries or types of companies, and human resources professionals look suspiciously at resumes that contain more than a few moves. Does it mean gamesmen cannot be truly powerful? Or does it mean our opportunities are fewer, only found in a certain kind of modern mindset among executives and hiring managers? Those are interesting and important questions for further study by organization development professionals and scholars.

Pfeffer (2010) presents the attributes of *skill* as 1. Self-knowledge and a reflective mindset; 2. confidence and the ability to project self-assurance (which Pfeffer says can be particularly troublesome for women, who are socialized to be more deferent and less aggressive

than men); and 3. the ability to read others and empathize with their point of view (which I believe are strengths most often attributed to women); and 4. ability to tolerate conflict (p. 41).

Several options are available for those of us who don't yet possess the personal qualities Pfeffer says are necessary for gaining power. Marshall Goldsmith (2007, in Pfeffer, 2010), advises instead of giving feedback, which is based on the past, to arm leaders with "feedforward," (p. 37) which gives them information, insight, and tools to meet challenges ahead. This resonated with me after years of 360 evaluations, formal and informal feedback sessions, and performance evaluations – unless these are conducted very well (timely, with sensitivity and objectivity), the recipient cannot do anything about feedback – the situation is gone and cannot now be improved. Using feedforward to improve awareness and personal qualities appears to be an effective tool.

Reputation is another personal quality that Pfeffer (2010) emphasizes as key to gaining referent power. To create and maintain a positive and powerful reputation, he recommends that we make a good impression early, carefully delineate the reputation we want, use media to burnish image and give us visibility, have others sing our praises, and put out just the right amount of negative information about ourselves so we seem human yet still desirable.

Pfeffer goes further in his advice about making a first impression. He says that how you speak, appear, and project confidence all are important, as impressions that are made of you in the first few seconds tend to last. Pfeffer suggests also finding many different situations and people with whom to make a good first impression, since others' perceptions of you are often based on things like similarity, chemistry and other elements over which you have little control. He says we should start with the image we want to project, set out from the start to consistently and clearly project that image.

## **My Strategy**

Based on the insights, research, and recommendations from the scholars discussed in this paper, I have created the following roadmap to maximize my chances for success in my new organization.

### **Strategic Concept One: Use Data**

1. Communicate my successes with objective results, such as weekly or monthly reports to my boss and key stakeholders.
2. Make sure my performance evaluation criteria are explicit and collaborate with superiors in its creation.

### **Strategic Concept Two: Maximize Diversity**

3. Build on the fact that women already are in positions of power – join in their success, and contribute to their success so I can be part of that success story and they can help remove blocks related to being a woman.
4. In the name of diversity and having a richer set of perspectives on my team, strive to hire a man or two in the first year. That could also increase influence.

### **Strategic Concept Three: Use Productive Transference**

5. Take charge of my own path without depending as a child might on an older sister or mother to run interference for me.
6. Be aware of my own transferences and those of my supervisors and subordinates in order to manage them well and make them work for me as I gain power in the organization.

### **Strategic Concept Four: Leverage Inclusion and Affection**

7. Use my affinity and desire for affection and inclusion (Schnell & Hammer, 1993) to form warm ties with my new team, peers, and superiors, and display sensitivity, openness,

support, empathy, and a collaborative approach in seeking and giving the elements of inclusion. These include recognition, attention, participation, being involved, association, belonging, acceptance and acknowledgement (p. 3).

### **Strategic Concept Five: Trade Currencies**

8. Figure out what rewards I can offer to the people around me, and how those align with their values, based on Cohen & Bradford's model of trading currencies. Thinking about tangible and intangible rewards, I will figure out and grow the kind of tangible reward I can offer as one of my first and earliest priorities.

### **Strategic Concept Six: Make Great First Impressions**

9. In making my first impressions positively, I want people in my new job to think of me as collaborative, smart, successful, a great writer, well connected, charming, in demand, and a one of a kind expert - the only person with the combination of communication and organization development expertise.
10. Now that I have defined my desired image, I can deliver messages, work products, and a sense of being that projects all these traits consistently and persistently, to everyone I work with and in all settings.
11. Using the media to help me build my reputation should be easy for me, with my background in public relations. Some of the things I will do: use my blog and Twitter feeds to deliver content about communication and OD, writing these things really well and sending the links to them to my network; internally publicizing my speaking engagements and the follow up publicity (and inviting those I want to influence to join me in some of those opportunities); and other public relations tactics.

**Strategic Concept Seven: Build Networks**

12. Based on Pfeffer's (2010) advice about networks, it seems I could create a formal structure around my network that I build around this organization, starting now, even before I officially join. I would start with my existing professional and social network, and add those from within my new organization. Further, I need to create a role for myself at the center of the network – I think is especially true of the network I form that is internal to my new organization.

**Strategic Concept Eight: Change Location**

13. One challenge I see as I enter the organization has to do with location. Physically, my office would be far from those of the executives and others who I want in my network, and those with whom I would be working closely. The office is in a completely different building, blocks from the executives' office building. Understanding the power of physical closeness in building power and an influential network, I might propose that I be given an office in the executive suite where I can work at least a few days each week. Further, I would ask to attend meetings and gatherings with the executives often.

**Strategic Concept Nine: Get Feedforward**

14. Ask for feedforward in as many ways as I can get it. Be clear that I require (and I will give) regular formal and informal chances for improvement and information to do so and want/need to track progress at regular intervals.

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