Power is a dirty word

To many people, in private and public sector alike, power is something that has connotations of abuse, politics, excess ambition and a presumed basic misunderstanding of the essence of management. And yet, without power, no one can accomplish anything. So why the problem of perception, and what to do about it? The answer, as ever, is complex and messy, but a fundamentally important issue in a fast changing world, and one where the expectations of a wide variety of employees are quite different from those of yesteryear.

To unravel the nature of the problem and to derive practical guidelines for managers requires an examination of four separate concepts and the intersection of all four around the issue of power and influence.

Power and Negotiating

One aspect of management behaviour that has been researched to a remarkable depth is that of negotiating, and practical lessons to be learned for negotiators. It is generally accepted that power lies at the heart of the negotiating model, and that de-powered negotiators normally end up with a poor deal. One question that bedevils negotiators is that of "Who has the power?". The answer is intriguing and best illustrated by example.

Assemble a bunch of sales people in a room and ask them who has the power when they are negotiating with buyers, and generally they will answer "The buyers". At the same time ask the reciprocal question to a bunch of buyers, in a different room, and their answer hits the opposite note, with "The sales people". Bring the two groups together, and ask them to share their different responses, point out that they can not both be right, and wait for the discussion that ensues.

When they have explored the truth table of either, or, both or neither, and discovered that they can't agree on any of the available options, the truth may finally dawn. The researched answer is "Whoever believes they have the power has the power", which is a new option not in the truth table. This observation leads to the opportunity to develop very useful insights and skills when combined with a review of the sources of power.

There is a tendency to assume that there is only one source of power and that is decision authority. The reality is very different. All of the following are sources of power, (and the list is an abbreviation of the full set):

● Decision authority

● Contacts with and the ability to influence others

- Skills and knowledge

- Information

- Time and timing

- Preparation

- Commitment

- Patience

The reality that negotiators have to address is illustrated by the example above - unskilled negotiators tend to assign more power to the other party than to themselves, in their thinking about power when preparing for a negotiation. A useful trick during preparation, therefore, is for the negotiator to review their own sources of power, using a check list like the one above, and to identify the actions they can take that will increase their power. Similarly, the skilled negotiator reviews the other side's sources of power and identifies actions that can be taken that will minimise or offset their power. The very act of going through this piece of preparation increases the negotiator's sense of power, and, hey presto!, the negotiator actually becomes more powerful.

Now, in case the reader is wondering, none of this is about departing from the golden rule of aiming to achieve a win-win outcome. It is, however, about avoiding ending up with a lose-win outcome. And, by the by, the research also suggests that in the main, skilled negotiators achieve better deals when working with other, skilled negotiators, who inevitably have been through a similar process of preparation ... Which leads us to conclude that the thoughts offered here on negotiating are only a small part of then overall model. For the moment, however, at least note the point that there are several sources of power, and knowledge and influence are two of them, and the whole issue revolves around people's perceptions.

Manager as Negotiator

The second concept goes to the heart of what managers are for, in this age of information, technology and mass communications. The role of a manager can (loosely) be defined as 'making things happen through other people'. It's an old definition but probably as fresh and valid today, as when it was first coined. One implication is that all of the critical things that managers do will happen when they come face to face with other people, and that makes their interactive skills themselves critically important.

It also raises the question of who the other people are. A very narrow view of what managing is all about might just marginally support the conclusion that managing is about command and control, (the power is all approach), but simple reality points to all the people through whom the manager will need to get results achieved, where there is no command authority to apply. Managing in a matrix has been a fact of life for many a year, although not always formally recognised as such.

Which in turn leads to the observation that a large part of managing is all about negotiating, and that this is a key skill set for managers to acquire. The manager as

negotiator concept focuses attention on the cross functional relationships which have to managed, as well as the management of the boss, or the boss's boss. And once the concept has been grasped, it is not too difficult to see that it applies equally to working relationships and transactions with staff, assuming that their motivation is of more than passing interest to the manager.

Another dimension of the negotiating model is highly appropriate here, and that is the part of the negotiator's preparation that is concerned with the objectives of the other party or parties. Very few negotiators will be lucky enough to prepare an offer which gains ready acceptance, when their preparation is solely focused on their own needs and priority objectives. A better approach turns on a review of the other objectives in play and how the offer may be adjusted so that all the people involved achieve the priority outcomes they need. Which is another way of saying a win-win solution. And loosely defines part of a very effective approach to managing within organisations.

All of which is very different from the internal politics approach which focuses on sectional and individual interests to the exclusion of others, and which tends to result in conflict and disputes kicked upstairs in the hierarchy, for higher power to be used to get a resolution. Disputes resolved in this way, almost by definition lead to win-lose outcomes, with an inevitability that the boss, daft enough to play this particular power game, will have many more such disputes to resolve in the future, as last time's loser tries to redress the balance.

To avoid such nonsense, the need for training all managers as negotiators is evident, and has to be set against the reality that most managers don't get such training - which is perhaps why internal politics play such a big part in so many organisations. In passing, it is worth noting that the politician uses power to attain personal objectives, often using other senior peoples' power - the manager as negotiator attains joint objectives, using and acquiring influence on the way.

Reach and Richness in Internal Information Systems

The sometimes contradictory needs for and trade off between reach and richness in marketing communications have long been understood. 'Reach' is about the number and spread of people reached by a particular communication: 'richness' is about the depth of information conveyed, the degree to which it can be targeted and customised, and made interactive in a two way feedback loop. For example, advertising tends to be high on reach and low on richness: sales people are low on reach and high on richness, (or should be, although sometimes the evidence suggests otherwise, when the non-listening variety heaves into sight!).

Less well observed is the effect of technology as it is applied in increasingly common intranets, the intent of which is to improve internal communications in organisations. If the organisation in question links up with suppliers' or customers' own intranets and becomes part of a virtual organisation, using what are becoming known as extranets, the old reach and richness trade off starts to disappear. The fact is that the employees involved will have access to a much greater and wider spread knowledge base than was previously available - both reach and richness are extended. Which is great in the sense that it increase their power and influence - knowledge was one of the sources of power noted above, as was contacts and the ability to influence them - but one or two problems tend to follow in the wake of the benefits.

The problem arises when the new sources of power conflict with traditional power bases, which flow much more strongly from position in the hierarchy, are to do with decision authority and where the old trade off between reach and richness is alive and well. Where power is held to just a few people at or near the top of the organisational hierarchy, reach is very limited. The richness in the interactions that go hand in hand with the exercise of that power are only too evident, to members of the elite group, but to many others as well, by implication if not by direct observation.

This raises two new issues. The first concerns the holding on to traditional power, by the privileged few, which will immediately dash the raised expectations of the many, who will believe that their increased knowledge and influence will mean an increase in their power. Frustration sets in more or less straight away. Frustration leads to many other unfortunate side effects, such as anger - the fight back, often using subterfuge and sabotage - withdrawal - often expressed as malicious obedience - or flight - exit stage right, and go some place else, in the hope of a better deal.

The second occurs when the very best intentions of top managers, who really intended that the intranet and / or extranet should empower people, founder on their other practices and own lack of interactive skills. What happens all too often is that the overt message conveyed by the new technology, and the positive PR that goes with it, is sharply contradicted by the symbolic messages contained in the behaviour of the same top managers. Consider the reaction of employees in the new, information technology enabled organisation when they find that their boss is still exercised by the need personally to check minor requests for expenditure. Or worse, gets personally involved in office housekeeping issues. Or second guesses the minute detail of marketing materials and PR releases.

Worst of all is the boss who, in group sessions, talks at and over people and ignores their suggestions and feedback. When anyone has the temerity to open their mouth in contradiction of an existing policy, the boss then proceeds at length to tell them that they are wrong and why they are wrong - as an ingrained habit.

Which is just another way of saying that training for the top manager is as important, if not more important, as for all other managers, and training in interactive skills is a fundamental part of the need. And of course, negotiating is just one dimension of interactive skills.

Manager as Enabler and Facilitator

This leads straight on to the last of our four concepts, and that is an updated view on what managing is all about. The original definition was 'managers make things happen through other people'. While still be fresh and valid, there is the question of that word 'make'. There are possible emotional overtones of 'against the wishes of employees' or overcoming resistance if change processes are involved. It is probable that these connotations never did have any real validity, except possibly in some individual managers' minds. At least, if resistance there was, the cause was almost certainly caused by the managers themselves.

Confucius said, among other things, "First find people you can trust, and then trust them". Stated simply, managers who put their trust in people are seldom badly let down. Which is not to suggest that all employees are pluperfect all of the time - far

from - they are human too, and like the rest of us, get it wrong from time to time. But that is very different from assuming that they will always produce the worst. Except, of course, in the sense that, if that is what the managers assumes, and treats employees accordingly, that is probably what will happen. It is to be hoped that Macgregor's work on self fulfilling prophesies in management are well known enough not to need reiteration here.

Research confirmed by observation indicates quite clearly that there few if any employees working passionately to fail. On the contrary, they enjoy success and get great satisfaction from it - in fact, the harder it is to push over the wall, the higher the mountain that has to be climbed, the greater the satisfaction at a successful outcome. Which is not very surprising, unless we believe that employees are not subject to the same human emotions as, er well, human beings really. In which case the key question is why do many employees not produce more than they, in fact, do? And why are there such high levels of frustration among employees in so many organisations?

Apart from the Pygmalion effect itself, which is down to the wrongly assuming manager, observation suggests that most large organisations have an almost magical ability to create and sustain obstacles to the greater productivity and satisfaction of many of their employees. The sources of these obstacles may be resources, processes, lack of training or other support, internal politics and the abuse of power, contradictory messages from on high, the effect of functional silos - the list is almost endless. And the employees know they are there, and often can not understand their managers' inability to see them or reluctance to deal with them - hence the frustration.

This opens the door to a view of managing which is quite contrary to the emotional temperature of that word 'make' identified above. It quite clearly places the manager in the role of working with employees to uncover the blockages which the organisation places in the way of their enhanced productivity and satisfaction from their jobs. Agreeing the priorities, and starting the process of unblocking them produces two immediate benefits. The first is that productivity improves, and the second is that employee motivation improves, which means that productivity improves ...

Now it may be an obvious comment, for which apologies, but the fact is that through this kind of approach, employees gain influence, and to gain this benefit, the manager will need good negotiating skills. The latter are needed to identify and agree priorities properly, and to successfully unblock the blockages, since many of these may have sources that sit elsewhere in the organisation.

If that all makes sense, consider the effect of not adopting a similar approach in an information and knowledge enabled organisation. Failure to do so, when set alongside the raised expectations of people working with intranets and extranets will not only lose a much greater benefit, but the negative consequences ensuing will be that much greater too. Manager as enabler of people to experience the satisfaction derived through meeting their strongly felt need to be excellent performers, by supporting them and facilitating the removal or diminution of the constraints on the performance, has never been more important as a role.

Which leaves us where? The complex and messy explanation through which we have journeyed leads us a simple and elegant conclusion. It is this. The use of traditional forms of power, typically restricted to a few people at the top of the organisation has

really had its day for many years - it's outlasted its usefulness only because too many people at the top have not realised the effect of their behaviour, protected as they have been by lack of feedback coming up the hierarchy.

Increasing influence, more widely distributed throughout the hierarchy, either created through a sensitive, negotiating style approach to managing by individual managers, or through the advent of new information technologies, or both, is simultaneously a source of improved productivity and employee motivation. And as a bonus, embeds a style of operating in the organisation where change becomes a way of life, instead of a problem of resistance to be overcome. Which is the very antithesis of the decision authority as power approach, with none of the nasty connotations. If only more people would adopt it, perhaps they would find that they also become more powerful as a result, as long as they don't confuse decision making with negotiating, and power with influence.