

Reverent Power: Getting It and Using It

By Jerry Wilt

“Oops!”

That’s all I could say when my boss told me I’d made an accounting error amounting to half a million dollars, a mistake that made it onto the preliminary financial statements of the oil company I worked for. After graduating with a Bachelor of Business Administration degree and eight years performing routine accounting tasks, I’d simply credited when I should have debited.

My boss and I had to go to the assistant controller and tell him. I wasn’t worried about being fired, though I certainly could have been. Rather, I was devastated to have failed the assistant controller, who I will call Chuck, because that’s his name. Chuck hired me even though my degree was in finance (not accounting) and I’d never worked in oil and gas accounting. He nurtured me, gave me responsibilities very quickly, and let me bring some of my own creativity into an otherwise inside-the-box job description. I wanted to do my best work for him, not because he was my boss’s boss, but rather because I respected and revered him as a leader. To take a line from a bad war movie, I’d have followed Chuck into hell if he asked.



Fast forward three years. A giant oil company had swallowed up the one I worked for, so I took a job as accounting manager for a legal firm. My boss there, who I will call Hitler, and that’s not his name, looked upon me and my staff of five as mud larks who should be thrilled just to work for a prestigious law firm. At one meeting with the top lawyers, he turned to me and said, “We don’t need your blankety-blank opinion here. Just shut up and do what I tell you.” Mr. Hitler was using his coercive power; that which he held because he could fire me. Thereafter, my efforts in that job bordered on barely compliant as I looked for a new one.

A supervisor or a manager wields four kinds of power - coercive, legitimate, expert and reverent. Now don’t get me wrong. There are times when coercive power is absolutely the right tool to use, like when an employee is recalcitrant or is disruptive to others’ efforts. But it’s strictly a short term tool. In today’s workplace, excessive use of coercive power unleashes unpredictable and destabilizing forces.

Of more predictable value is legitimate power, the leverage a manager has simply because his or her employees respect the chain of command. Regardless of an employee’s personal like or dislike of the manager, he or she feels comfortable when the boss keeps things running in an orderly and predictable manner. They work for the manager because, well, someone has to have their hands on the wheel. The manager begins with this power, and then can strengthen it by making decisions and providing direction for the staff.

But what happens when the storm clouds gather? Whether the storm is macro (recession, depression, industry chaos) or micro (IT system conversion, new product rollout, a disgruntled customer), the best managers use more subtle forms of influence, those being expert power and reverent power. But these powers are not granted through title or promotion; they must be earned over time.

It is only when a leader is able to put expert and reverent power into play that he or she can truly motivate employees to give their best performance. To be more specific:

- Expert power: Followers do what they're asked because they respect the leader's knowledge and expertise and, therefore, trust him or her to give the best guidance. They feel safe when they respect the leader's abilities.
- Reverent power: Followers admire and seek to emulate the leader. They want to receive his or her approval. They move mountains to meet deadlines because they are gratified that the leader counts on them to do so.

So how do you get reverent power? You don't get it – you earn it, by keeping your promises, keeping the employees informed, and opening the door between your employees and top management. You manage by principle rather than consensus, and you look for what might have gone wrong instead of who is to blame. And most importantly, you talk your truth, stand in your truth, and let go of the outcome.

I gave Chuck Oliver reverent power because he'd earned it. When that oil company was absorbed by a larger one, and the employees of other departments were struggling to survive the transition, the employees of Chuck's department remained relatively stress-free. We trusted him. We knew he had his hand on the wheel. And we worked diligently to make the transition a success, because his name was on it. And if his name was on it, so was mine. That's reverent power.