

Increase Your Office Power

Become more influential at work by building expertise and developing supportive relationships with others

By Ginger Lapid-Bogda

Carol Scherman is the first woman to reach director level at Bergen Brunswig Corp., a quite traditional pharmaceutical distributing company in Orange, California. How did she pull it off? First, she became highly knowledgeable about the work in her division. Second, she developed an extensive network of people whom she'd helped in some way. Last, she garnered a reputation for getting things done without being abrasive. In short, she mastered the art of accumulating "on-the-job" power.

Such political prowess is rare in the corporate world. Too many professionals disregard the issue of power at work, either because they don't understand how critical it is to their careers or because they think of power as inherently self-serving or destructive. In and of itself, power is neither good nor bad. Like gasoline in a car, power enables you to move, but it doesn't dictate the direction.

If you seek control for its own sake, you'll hamper your effectiveness and limit your career because "people will see you as a power-grabber and not want to work with you," says Gary Merrill, a vice president in Drake Beam Morin's consulting division in San Jose, California.

However, if you learn to acquire and use power constructively, you'll likely enjoy tremendous professional success. "To ignore power and politics is a cultural error [and] would, in fact, cause more problems," says Bill Wood, vice president of human resources and administration for Pacificare Health Systems in Cypress, California. "We have to keep power out in front of us and work with it."

Typically, your power at work depends on what you know, who you know, and how you're known -- and has more to do with your ability to persuade, negotiate, and cooperate than with your actual job title, says Mike Werneke, human resources development manager for the chemical division of American Cyanamid in Wayne, N.J. To increase your influence at the office, consider what power bases are available and heed the tips that follow on how to develop them.

Power Base #1: Knowledge

Anyone willing to do some hard work and homework can gain power through his or her knowledge in one of the three categories below:

Expertise. Colleagues are more likely to rely on your input when they're aware of the expertise you've gained from formal training or on-the-job experience. Also, the more your particular expertise is needed by the organization, the greater your power. For example, Marilyn Bourke started out in customer service with Kaiser-Permanente Medical Care Program in San Rafael, California and used this training to become a key manager in the special projects department. Her responsibilities have expanded to include advising senior management on service problems and opportunities because service has become such an important issue today.

To increase your expertise power base:

- Develop skills in areas the company values.
- Let co-workers know what expertise you possess.
- Avoid jargon when talking about technical subjects
- Don't give advice beyond your scope of knowledge.
- Use data to support your conclusions so others will trust your judgment.
- Share expertise freely, keeping in mind that the more you share, the more everyone gains.

Information. Many companies are essentially systems for processing critical information about technology, customers, changes in environment, employee attitudes, and so on. Thus, people with access to important organizational information are in key positions to influence others.

For example, Michael V. Collins was recently selected to become manager of Kaiser's organization development consulting group. As a highly successful consultant in the department, he was already familiar with key clients and their strategic needs and had already earned the respect of the current consulting staff.

To take advantage of this power base, start by developing reliable channels of information. Cultivate relationships with senior managers, support staff, and employees from different departments who are in a position to know what's going on. The flow of information should be two-way, constructive, accurate, and non-gossipy. During discussions, ask questions and be open-minded and attentive. Understanding what motivates people in your organization and industry will make them more likely to open up around you.

Cultural traditions. Company veterans naturally are privy to its culture, traditions, and history, and can use this knowledge to accomplish their goals. Yet by making a concerted effort to learn a company's traditions, even newcomers can develop this power base. For example, at a large family-owned consumer products company in Kansas City, Mo., one rising star is neither from the "founding family" nor from the Midwest. He overcame these obstacles by concentrating on turning in an excellent performance and learning the company culture during his first six months at the firm. He soon gained a reputation as a loyal and knowledgeable employee.

"You have to understand how the organization has developed," explains Ron Brown, principal of Banks Brown Inc., a San Francisco-based management consulting firm. "[Then], key players are more likely to see you as part of the team and you're more likely to understand how and why things operate as they do."

To learn your company's traditions, make a point of finding out about its myths, heroes, and fallen angels. Consider what makes people laugh in meetings. Ask what gets employees into hot water and how things get done.

Power Base #2: Personality

The following three personality traits also influence your political clout in a company:

Charisma. Charisma is the ability to lead and inspire others. Charismatic leaders aren't always naturally outgoing people with excellent public speaking abilities. For example, the CEO of a national retail chain based in Oakland, California, is by nature, reserved, thoughtful, and introverted. However, he's an effective leader who's been able to enhance employee commitment to values by holding small group discussions on the subject throughout the company.

To develop your charisma, you must know yourself and be able to project your sense of yourself to others. "Being strong of character engenders respect from other people," says Frank Alvarez, hospital health plan administrator for Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco. "People want to know that you know yourself; in this way, they believe they can trust you."

Read books on self-actualization, attend professional development seminars, and spend time alone reflecting about your values. Solicit feedback from people you respect, such as friends, family, coworkers, consultants, and supervisors. Listen carefully to others, and try to determine what's important to them so you can tailor your messages to coincide with their needs and hopes. Also, learn how to tell a story, use metaphors, and paint pictures with your words. If you're shy, experiment with video and other types of media to see which methods allow you to communicate comfortably.

Reputation. Colleagues' perceptions of who you are and what you're capable of accomplishing can determine how much you're allowed to achieve. To improve your reputation, try to assume relevant responsibilities that capitalize on your strengths. If possible, avoid tasks in areas where you're weak and work on improving those skills through training or informal practice.

"Look for opportunities to be successful in small ways," says Mr. Merrill. "Find multiple, early, small wins." It's also important to gain the attention of your superiors. Publicize your accomplishments (being careful not to appear self-serving) or get others to do that for you. Billie Alban, a management consultant at Alban & Williams in Brookfield Center, Conn., suggests demonstrating your knowledge at meetings or asking to make a presentation to higher-ups. "It's essential to get visibility," Mr. Alban says. "You may be loaded with talent, but no one knows."

Professional credibility. Being well regarded by peers at other firms can enhance your reputation inside your company. Consider the case of a former high-school teacher who switched careers and became a manager at a Southern California aerospace company. When he was assigned responsibility for the firm's quality program, he read up on the subject, retained an outstanding consultant to work alongside him, and joined several quality associations. He attended their conferences, expanded his network and, before long, was setting up a local network to provide support and guest speakers for other quality specialists. His employer now considers him the resident expert on the subject.

To increase your credibility, take a leadership role in a trade or professional association and accept opportunities to give speeches or write articles. If your profession has a credentialing process, try to get certified. It's also important to dress and speak like other professionals in your field.

Power Base #3: Relationships

Who you know and how they feel about you is a critical ingredient in your personal power equation. "People convey power and influence through relationships," says Mr. Brown. "They're able to help others get things done and, because of this, they're perceived as having even more power." You can gain influence through your relationships in the following four areas:

Political access. A senior manager in an East Coast electronics company was offered a large office with a two-window expanse in a new wing. Being sensitive to political access, however, he selected a smaller, older office that was only two doors down from the executive vice president. The manager understood that by maintaining ties with powerful people and groups in the company, he'd be better able to call up a network of people when necessary to help him accomplish certain tasks.

To improve your political access, build a network every chance you get. Attend company events and show a genuine interest in the people you meet. Actively look for a mentor. Have lunch with, call, and drop notes to people already in your network. Make connections with both the formal and informal leadership of your company. Informal opinion leaders often can be found organizing popular company events. To get closer to company bigwigs, see if they'll agree to meet with you to help you learn about the organization. "Getting involved with voluntary organizations such as United Way is another good way to meet influential people," says Ms. Alban.

Subordinate support. Fostering positive relations with the people who work for you is critical. After all, subordinates are the ones who make you look good. To gain the support of your employees and help them work to their potential, acknowledge them in public and praise their accomplishments. Develop an atmosphere of openness and honesty. If your staff feels valued, they're more likely to support you. Ask for their input on issues on which they're knowledgeable or that directly affect them. Find out what resources they need to do their jobs and try your best to provide them. Finally, be sure to nurture and maintain these relationships over time.

Peer support. Peers often affect your ability to get things accomplished. They can encourage or discourage their staffs to cooperate with your employees. They also can collaborate or compete with you at meetings. A peer may even one day become your boss or vice versa, which can strain even a mutually respectful relationship.

It's important to get to know your peers as people. Find out what they need from you and do what you can to deliver it, and try to work on projects that require you to interact directly and positively with them. Also, encourage your staff to collaborate with other departments.

Boss support. The most obvious person from whom you need support is your boss. Who you work for and how he or she perceives you can make or break your career. A senior human resources executive at a Silicon Valley high-tech firm has long believed that your boss's reputation can affect your career as much as the actual quality of your work. He's paid careful attention to who his boss would be at every step on the corporate ladder and, as a result, he's been promoted five times in eight years.

To win your boss's support, you must first learn his or her working style, strengths, weaknesses, goals, and gears. Help your boss solve pressing problems and reconcile any conflicts between your preferred working styles. Finally, keep your boss well informed to avoid unpleasant surprises.

Remember that clout doesn't belong exclusively to executives with lofty job titles. Professionals can use power constructively "to get through the red tape, get items on an agenda and get people to take a position," says M. Brown. If you do that, your career is sure to benefit.