

Power & Influence

Power is the ability to act or affect something strongly.

An individual's power can come from either external or internal sources:

- Internal power, or personal power, comes from within you
- External power is given to you by other people

This can be equated to an organisation's power:

- Internal power relates to organisational capacity
- External power relates to the organisation's influence

External power is given to an individual or organisation by other people according to how they perceive you. According to one model, there are six sources of external power:

Expert knowledge:

The audience believes the organisation's case because it perceives it as being based on expert knowledge (at least as expert as opposing voices).

- In the short-term, this perception may be built through publishing well-documented research. Credibility could be enhanced through the endorsement of and/or participation in this research by acknowledged 'neutral' experts.
- In the long-term, this perception is only built through the audience's experience of the organisation's previous messages. Have they been authoritative before? Any instance of being proved wrong or partial can undermine an organisation's expert authority for some time.

Legitimate:

The audience believes that the organisation has the right to speak out on a particular issue. This can be because the issue clearly impacts on the organisation's public work, or because the organisation has some form of statutory or official status within a particular policy arena.

- Lack of perceived legitimacy undermines an organisation's influence significantly, but once legitimacy is established with a particular audience on an issue, further strengthening a sense of legitimacy will not add extra power.

Representation:

The audience believes that the organisation is representing the views of others – for example, members, supporters, project partners, etc. The level of influence that arises from this depends on the importance of the constituency being represented, and how explicit the process of representation is. Organisations need to be careful not to undermine their case by over-claiming their representivity.

- Has there been a formal and transparent process of reaching a representative position? Is this position consensual or majority based? Was the constituency pre-screened to exclude opposing viewpoints?

- Is the constituency being represented clearly defined? To what extent is the target audience concerned about the views of this constituency? Are their views likely to be shared by other constituencies?

Reference:

The audience sees the values and underlying beliefs of the organisation as being close to their own, or to which they would like to associate themselves. This could arise from a shared political or religious identity, or the 'halo effect' of NGOs being seen as modern-day saints. This identity can be very clear for some organisations, and unclear for others.

- Establishing an organisational identity is a long-term process, and can be affected by the 'identity' of the spokesperson. Associations with other organisations or celebrities can also help establish in the audience's eye what you stand for.

The above sources of power can be applied in relation to any audience, whether it be the advocacy target itself or to intermediate audiences. The sources listed below are typically only applied in relation to the target or decision maker as audience.

Trade:

The organisation has resources or information that the target wants, and which can be exchanged for the target agreeing with the organisation's messages.

- For NGOs, this is typically more significant when influencing partner organisations who they also fund, rather than in influencing government bodies. However, the power of information should be under-estimated, and this may be highly significant when assessing the influence of opponents (for example, trans-national companies).

Reward & Punishment:

The main opportunity for organisations to reward or punish the target is through praise or criticism. In a face-to-face negotiation, a little praise can go a long way. However, making the praise or criticism public can give it extra weight, depending on the organisation's strategy and its influence with these other public audiences.

- This power can be enhanced through increasing an organisation's ability to communicate its view (by building its relationships with the media, for example) and the degree of trust that public audiences have in the organisation (relating to the sources of power outlined above).

It should be emphasised that all the above sources of power are dependent on the audience's perception of the organisation, rather than on any objective reality. Therefore an organisation's power will vary significantly between different audiences.

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