

## **Pirates and Power: What Captain Jack Sparrow, His Friends, and His Foes Can Teach Us about Power Bases**

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### **Abstract**

Leadership educators are constantly looking for new and inventive ways to teach leadership theory. Because leadership educators realize principles of androgyny and experiential education work well with leadership theories, instructors find movies are a great way to infuse leadership theory with novel teaching methodology. "Movies, like Shakespeare, are becoming a staple of college curricula" (Hoffman, 2000, p.1).

*The Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) is a movie illustrating five power bases defined by Raven and French (1958). The rogue characters in this film use expert power, referent power, legitimate power, reward power, and coercive power to get the treasure, get the girl, get the curse lifted, and/or get freedom. Utilizing a three-hour block of time, an instructor can complete a mini lecture on power, watch the movie, and discuss the power bases shown. Results show students develop a deeper understanding of power after the class.

### **Theoretical Base**

#### **Power**

Power, powerful, wielding power- these words and phrases tend to have a negative connotation in many people's minds. Power, when used ethically, is a very positive occurrence. Power has been described like the wind; it cannot be seen but its effects can be felt (Daft, 2004). Definitions of power by three different authors, Daft, 2004; Nahavandi, 2003; and Shriberg, 2002, delineate power as the ability, or potential, of a person to influence the attitudes and behaviors of one or more people. Influence, then, is defined as the "degree of actual change in the target person's attitudes or behaviors" (Shriberg, Shriberg, & Lloyd, 2002, p.112). The change in attitudes or behaviors occurs when power can be felt. In an organization, power can be classified into two sub-categories: individual and organizational.

Raven and French (1958) found there are five main power bases leaders/managers utilize. Their widely accepted model named expert power, referent power, legitimate power, reward power, and coercive power as the five basic power bases. Expert power is based on the person's knowledge, competence, or expertness. Referent power is based on the respect for and/or charismatic personality of the leader. Legitimate power is power by title or legitimate right because of "acceptance of the social structure" (p.83). Reward power is the ability to offer incentives to gain compliance. Coercive power is the antithesis of reward power. This power base is seen when the person in power forces someone to comply by threats of consequences.

These five power bases can be subdivided into two groups: position power and personal power. Position power bases include reward, coercive, and legitimate. Formal authority, "the force for achieving desired outcomes, but only as prescribed by the formal hierarchy and reporting relationships," (Daft, 2004, p. 494) is another way to describe the position power sub-group. The power bases of positional power can be used two ways: appropriate or excessive (Nahavandi, 2003). When used appropriately, followers comply to the requests of the person with the power. When used excessively, followers resist the requests of the person with power (Nahavandi, 2003, Raven & French, 1958). The personal power sub-group includes the power bases of expert and referent. Nahavandi (2003) ascertains that the power bases in the personal power sub-group are the most effective sources of power. When these power bases are used, the person in power gains commitment. This commitment is much richer than the compliance gained using positional power.

### **Utilizing Movies as a Teaching Methodology**

Leadership educators are constantly looking for new and inventive ways to teach leadership theory. Because of the subject matter and the over-arching emphasis on androgological teaching methodology, straight lecture is not a viable option for all class periods. Leadership educators see that "over-reliance on the lecture method in higher education [has led to students to become] passive spectators in the college classroom" (Cooper, Prescott, Cook, Smith, & Mueck, 1990, p.1). Passive spectators, as constructivist theorists note, do not learn as much as active participants in the classroom. Both inside and outside the classroom, Astin (1998) further notes that student involvement in the college experience is the basis for persistence and achievement in college.

Allowing students to witness and discuss leadership theory aids in the students' ability to build the mental synapses that lead to deeper learning. However, simply watching a movie seldom lends itself to internalization of leadership concepts. As Higgins (2003) notes, multimedia enables students to learn in a different manner by encouraging profound discussion.

Two recent articles in the *Journal of Leadership Education* have focused on using movies in teaching leadership. Grahm, Sincoff, Baker, and Ackermann (2003) discuss the use of movies to teach theories from Kouzes and Posner's *Leadership Challenge*. They found using movies to teach the five principles helped adult learners connect the concept with application. Grahm, Ackermann, and Maxwell (2004) discuss the use of movies as the "bridge to developing emotional intelligence" (p. 48). They note movies are a launching point for class discussion and learning, learning conduits, and effective tools to "engage learners at all levels" (p.48).

### **Pirates of the Caribbean**

The Academy Award Winning Movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, is a sweeping action-adventure story set in an era when villainous pirates scavenged the Caribbean seas. This roller coaster tale teams a young man, Will Turner, with an unlikely ally in rogue pirate Jack Sparrow. Together they must battle a band of the world's most treacherous pirates led by the cursed Captain Barbossa in order to save Elizabeth, the love of Will's life, as well as recover the lost treasure that Jack seeks. Against improbable odds, they race towards a thrilling, climactic confrontation on the mysterious Isla de Muerta. Clashing their swords in fierce mortal combat, Will and Jack attempt to recapture The Black Pearl ship, save the British navy, and relinquish a fortune in forbidden treasure, thereby lifting the curse of the pirates of the Caribbean (as cited on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0325980/plotsummary>).

One of the best reasons for utilizing this movie in teaching power bases is that it is not only an action movie, but also a love story with comic relief. Thus, the movie tends not to alienate people based on their personal taste in movies.

### **Intended Audience**

The intended audiences for this lesson are college students or adults who are willing to learn leadership theory in an original and exciting way. Because of the rating, PG13, the movie could also be used for mature high school students. This lesson is best taught using a three hour time slot. This allows for students to listen to a mini-lecture, watch the movie, and discuss the leadership concepts observed.

### **Learning Objectives**

- By the conclusion of this class, students will be able to articulate a definition of power.
- By the conclusion of this class, students will be able to define the five power bases as identified by Raven and French (1958).
- By the conclusion of this class, students will be able to differentiate personal power from organizational power.

- By the conclusion of this class, students will be able to identify, explain, and discuss examples of the five power bases (as identified by Raven and French) from the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*.

### Resources and Materials Needed

- Method of lecture (power point, overheads, etc.) to teach the competency of power.
- *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) motion picture.
- Quiz (for the next class period).

### Lesson

- I. Announcements.
- II. Lecture (about 20 minutes).
  - a. Introduction.
    - i. Definition of power: the ability, or potential, of a person to influence the attitudes and behaviors of one or more people.
    - ii. Definition of influence: degree of actual change in the target person's attitudes or behaviors.
    - iii. Power is like the wind...it cannot be seen, but its effects can be felt.
  - b. Power Bases.
    - i. Expert Power.
      1. Definition: based on the person's knowledge, competence, or expertness.
      2. Example: many "fresh out of college" workers are looked to as experts, in the field of technology, by their older peers (I have been asked to explain an I-pod by several of my co-workers).
    - ii. Referent Power.
      1. Definition: based on the respect for and/or charismatic personality of the leader.
      2. Example: often, grandparents hold referent power because the grandchildren respect them (my grandmother asked me to pull weeds from her flower bed, and I did it because I respect her).
    - iii. Legitimate Power.
      1. Definition: legitimate power is power by title or legitimate right.
      2. Example: officers in student organizations.
    - iv. Reward Power.
      1. Definition: ability to offer incentives to gain compliance.

2. Example: When your mom told you “if you clean your room, I’ll take you to McDonalds,” she used reward power.
  - v. Coercive Power.
    1. Definition: this power base is seen when the person in power forces someone to comply by threats of consequences.
    2. Example: When your mom told you “if you don’t clean your room, I’ll ground you,” she used coercive power.
  - c. Position and Personal Power.
    - i. Position Power.
      1. the force for achieving desired outcomes, but only as prescribed by the formal hierarchy and reporting relationships.
      2. legitimate, reward, and coercive power bases.
        - a. short-term power bases.
        - b. do not use excessively, or you will lose power.
    - ii. Personal Power.
      1. the most effective sources of power.
      2. expert and referent.
        - a. gain a deeper commitment from followers.
        - b. usually where empowerment occurs.
- III. Movie (2 hours and 13 minutes).  
*Pirates of the Caribbean* follows a rogue cast utilizing their power bases to get the girl, get the treasure, get the curse lifted, and/or get freedom. The amazing part of this film is all five power bases can be seen throughout the movie. The most difficult part of this class is making sure the students watch the movie for the power bases and not just watch it for its entertainment value. I encourage students to take notes (making sure I explain there will be a quiz over the movie). I often prompt them, several times throughout the movie, when a power base is being shown or ask them what power base they believe the character is utilizing.
- IV. Discussion (about 25 minutes).  
 At the conclusion of the movie, we start discussion. I have a few starter questions to get the students thinking and talking.
- What examples of reward power did you see?
  - What examples of coercive power did you see?
  - Did anyone misuse their power base?
  - Who had the most power, Jack Sparrow, or Captain Barbossa?
- These questions are usually all it takes to ignite conversation about the utilization of power in this movie. I make sure all five power bases are discussed. Table 1 shows a small sample of examples of all five power

bases. My students constantly amaze me with some of the examples of power usage they see that I have never seen before.

**Table 1. Examples of power bases**

Expert	Referent	Legitimate	Reward	Coercive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mr. Gibbs: uses his expert power regarding the true story of Jack Sparrow (how he got off the island) to influence Will</li> <li>▪ Will Turner uses his expertise of sword making to fight Jack</li> <li>▪ Jack Sparrow utilizes expert power the most:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. uses the knowledge that the Curse of the Black Pearl is real to get his ship back</li> <li>2. uses his knowledge of corsets to save Elizabeth</li> <li>3. uses the knowledge</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Elizabeth has referent power over her father, Governor Swann, and Commodore Norrington. They do whatever it takes to protect her as well as listening to her requests (do not kill my rescuer)</li> <li>▪ Jack: at the end of the movie, Jack’s crew breaks the Pirate Code and return for Jack, showing their respect for him. Will also risks his life to save Jack’s out of respect.</li> </ul>	<p>All of these men have the “title” and the power that comes with it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Governor Swann</li> <li>▪ Commodore Norrington</li> <li>▪ Captain Barbossa</li> <li>▪ Captain Jack Sparrow</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prisoners try to use a bone to reward the prison dog for bringing them the keys</li> <li>▪ Will promises to get Jack out of jail if Jack will help him find Elizabeth</li> <li>▪ Will promises Barbossa that he will help him lift the curse if Barbossa will let Elizabeth go free</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Jack threatens to kill Elizabeth if the Commodore does not let him go</li> <li>▪ Elizabeth threatens Barbossa that she will drop the piece of gold into the ocean if he does not leave Port Royal</li> </ul>

that Will's blood is needed to lift the curse to get his ship back				
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- V. Quiz (next class period).
1. Define power.
  2. What power base(s) does Jack Sparrow use to gain control of the Black Pearl? Explain.
  3. Name and give examples of two of the power bases used by Elizabeth.
  4. The prisoners use what type of power to try to obtain the keys to the jail cell?
  5. In your opinion, who in *Pirates of the Caribbean* had the most power? Explain.

### Results

I have had great results with this lesson. Students appreciate the different spin on a traditional leadership competency. Because films are a catalyst for thought and discussion, there is always rich dialogue generated and a better understanding of the concept learned after watching the movie (Clemens & Wolff, 1999). I have found the quiz grades for this lesson are higher than the power lesson in the theory course that does not show the movie. The following are thoughts shared by students about the class:

- I cannot watch a movie now without finding some leadership in it.
- Great class, I loved that we got to watch the whole movie, not just clips. It made the concepts more complete.
- Thanks for letting us watch a cool movie. So many others that we have had to watch in different classes have been black and white or old stuff.
- Seeing people tackle leadership issues, and then discussing it, made me understand the subject more.
- Who knew that Johnny Depp was hot and a good leader!

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### **Biography**

**Jennifer Williams** is a graduate assistant at Oklahoma State University. She is currently working toward her PhD in leadership through the Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership. Her bachelor and master degrees are from Texas A&M University where she was a lecturer and advisor in Agricultural Leadership Development.