

Book Review of Keltner D (2017): The Power Paradox How We Gain and Lose Influence. New York, Penguin

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Abstract

This book is about leadership in the twenty-first century. In this century, a leader's power is no longer a Machiavellian individual's grab for power over others within a hierarchy; instead, a leader's power is given to them by others in the team. But that power can corrupt the leader into becoming an "abuser" of those in the team. It should be read by all leaders and researchers of leadership.

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This book about the paradox of power is about leadership in the twenty-first century [1]. In this century, a leader's power is no longer a Machiavellian individual's grab for power over others within a hierarchy; instead, a leader's power is given to them by others in the team. But that power can corrupt the leader into becoming an "abuser" of those in the team. The author, Keltner [2], is a Professor of Psychology at the University of California Berkley and his book is an easy-to-read paperback that summarizes his twenty years of research along with that of many others, all noted in a big section towards the end of the book. He is a social psychologist and argues that power is gained when we share resources and act in ways that help the welfare of other people in our social networks in context-specific, everyday situations – when we enthusiastically advance the greater good of our community [3]. That is, power is given for enthusiasm, cooperation with others, focus on a group's shared goals, being calm, and being open to others' ideas (p: 48). These modern, everyday leadership practices do not only involve students in some of his experiments but were found in other studies of high level managers in financial firms, hospitals and manufacturing plants. So the situations occur in our consulting offices and in faculty meetings at universities; they even occur nowadays in the army and football teams [4].

When this other-focused kind of power is given to you, it can make you feel good (as shown by rising levels of dopamine, for example). But, as Keltner notes, "The evidence is clear when we lose sight of other focused practices that make for *enduring* power...Lord Acton thesis [that power corrupts] prevails" (p: 99). Enduring power comes from a steadfast commitment to the greater good

of the community. Four practices are involved: be empathetic, give to others, show gratitude and tell stories that unite. The first practice of empathy is taught in the book though aligning a series of facial photographs and illustrations with particular emotions. But note that empathy can be cognitive or emotional; cognitive empathy is used by psychopaths to manipulate other, while emotional empathy allows a leader to understand the feelings of others and so provide a base for helpfulness [5]. The second practice of giving to others emphasizes using a touch like a pat on the back. For example, Keltner found basketball teams who touched a lot out-performed other teams. And in an interview with me, the coach of one extraordinary football team, the Brisbane Roar, said he insisted that each player and staff member shook each other's hand the first time they met each day. The final practice of telling stories that unite is illustrated by Keltner's story of Abraham Lincoln's path to the presidency.

The opposite of the enduring power described above is *abusive* power. Keltner has many fascinating experiments about abusive power. For instance, in his Berkley lab he had groups of three subjects play a game with each team leader selected by the researcher. After some time, a researcher bought in a plate of four cookies; each member took one cookie but often the leader took the fourth one that was left over, without any regard for the other team members. In California, approaching drivers have to stop at a zebra crossing as soon as a pedestrian has stepped on to the crossing. Keltner's researchers found that all drivers in low-status cars like a Dodge Colt did indeed stop as they should have. But fully 42.6% of drivers in high-status cars like a Mercedes cut in front of a pedestrian (p: 123). And people who felt powerful

stole from a charity box for children far more than other people did. "Simply thinking how we are above others triggers more unethical behaviour" (p: 126). In other words, good, enduring leaders "eat last" after their troops do [6].

Many readers will agree with Keltner that power should not become abusive power – power must be complemented by principles like generosity to others, mutual respect, and pushing against inequality (in the Epilogue: a Fivefold Path to Power). Pushing against inequality could include concern about unequal salaries and recognition within an organization or a nation. For example, appropriate leaders say "we" more often than "I", and have group photographs rather than their own photographs on display in rooms and reports.

But some powerful readers of this book and readers of this review will not appreciate Keltner's ideas about how power can corrupt by becoming abusive. Indeed, Keltner has received messages that accused him of being a communist who supports welfare queens and immigrants (p: 126), but to me these messages exhibit the narcissistic anger of psychopaths who "kiss up and kick down" while their organizations almost invariably become mediocre or fail [1,7]. Social psychologist Keltner has extended some of the positions of other researchers about how psychopathic leaders can operate wrongly.

So his book has implications for all students, researchers and practitioners of a leader's power, and not just for social psychologists like he is. For example, his findings are presented as 20 wide-ranging principles separated into 5 major categories. The relative strengths of these principles are not mentioned, and how these relative strengths are different in different contexts

is not discussed (except for a note about his Berkley faculty meetings). The role(s) of the leader in different contexts is not discussed either. Those differences could be grounds for further research. And what about the higher-level leadership of a "team of teams" rather than the leadership of just one team [8]? Universities and hospitals may be areas where a team of teams could be important.

Another possible area of research arises from Keltner's apparent assumption that a leader is just one person in a group. Yes, just one person is a leader in many is common in many organizations. But further research may be needed into relationships among two or more leaders [9]. For a start, why and how does success often involve two leaders who work closely together [10]. Some successful sports teams have two captains or even a group of captains [11]? And how has research sometimes shown that leaders can be chosen randomly without affecting team performance [12]? Finally, given all this uncertainty, how should leaders be recruited and selected, and developed and rewarded? In brief, some questions about power remain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this book offers much to all people who work in organizations or to people who try to help those who have been severely affected by inappropriate behavior by leaders (like many readers of this journal). To begin, we all must acknowledge that leadership in social contexts has changed in the twenty-first century. And the core elements of this new form of this leadership must be learnt throughout life. So the book should definitely be read by all practitioners and/or researchers of leadership and power even though it will anger psychopaths.

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