

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

Hello, you are listening to Stanford MedCast, Stanford CME's podcast where we bring you insights from the world's leading physicians and scientists. This podcast is available on Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, Spotify, Google Podcast, and Stitcher. If you're new here, consider subscribing to listen to more free episodes coming your way. I am your host, Dr. Ruth Adewuya. This episode is the final part of our leadership mini-series, and today I will be talking with Dr. Deborah Gruenfeld, who is the Joseph MacDonald Professor at Stanford University in the Graduate School of Business. Her research in the psychology of power in group dynamics has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, the New Yorker, Fast Company, Psychology Today, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the Chicago Tribune. Dr. Gruenfeld teaches courses on power, teams and leadership to a wide variety of audiences around the world, including startup founders and women leaders. She is on the advisory board of the Lean In Foundation and the Steering Committee of the Faculty Women's Forum at Stanford. Thanks so much for chatting with me today.

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

So nice to be here. Thanks for having me.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

Great place to start is to talk about how do you actually define power, because we probably all use the word power, but we have different definitions of it. How do you define power and how does it show up in our work, in our teams?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

That's a great place to start. Power gets conflated with a lot of related concepts and ideas. Those of us who study power have to define it very precisely. We define power as a person's capacity to get other people to do what you want them to do despite their resistance, and that differentiates it from things like influence, which really has to do with the outcome of having tried to get someone to do something. So you can have power and not have influence. You can have influence and not have power, but it really refers to a latent capacity that people have that can be used or can remain hidden. And there are two ways to think about how it shows up in the real world.

The one form of power is what we think of when we talk about things like power in organizations or social power, and that really has to do with the extent to which there's asymmetries in the dependence that individuals have on one another. So when one person needs another person more for access to things that they care about. Then vice versa, the more needed person has more power, they have leverage, and that's what we call social power. There's also personal power and that really has to do with the extent to which we're able to get people to do things that they may resist doing just based on how we show up and how we interact with them and the impact of our behavior on their feelings and thoughts and actions.

So power comes from many sources, but those are just two important ones that I think are worth distinguishing because I think in organizations is that both forms of power operate and it sometimes confuses people. You can look at the organizational chart and everybody knows that someone who's higher up in the chart has more power than people who are lower down in the chart. But then if you're thinking about the context where you work, you can sometimes identify people who should not have as much influence as they do, and that's often a function of personal power, just the way people manage relationships. Sometimes it's things like charisma, how dominant they are and how good they are at creating the sense that other people want to help them out. All of those kinds of things are sources of personal power that are separate from the carrots and sticks that we normally associate with people having power over others.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

I really liked your definition of power and how there's this latent capacity because we sometimes think about it as having power or not having power, and maybe it's reframing it as leveraging the power that we have versus not leveraging the power that we have. You talked about how there are many sources of power, and you talked about social and the personal power, but I'm also curious about what does power look like?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

That's a great question too. What we learned from experience growing up in our lives and how power exists in society when we think of power, we tend to think of men versus women. We tend to think of white people as opposed to people of color. And so I think we often project power onto people based on those demographic qualities or project the absence of power onto people who don't have those qualities. I can remember as an assistant professor at Northwestern where I had my first job, there were a number of women in my group, but not where I was sitting, and students mistook me for the administrative assistant all the time.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

Oh my goodness.

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

I'm Sure a lot of your listeners can relate to that type of thing. People have stereotypes about power, and when we think of a powerful person or even sometimes a leader, the images that come to mind are the ones that are from memory what we've seen in our society, which has power differences embedded in it. So it's a vicious cycle that keeps reinforcing itself is that we assume certain people have more power than others and then we treat them like they have more power. Then before you know it, they actually have more power. So that's another take on what power looks like. There are these non-verbal indicators too. So there's research that shows certain ways of behaving, certain non-verbal gestures, emotional displays are also interpreted as evidence of having high or low power as well.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

I want to dive into the nonverbal cues. What would that look like?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

It can take a couple of different forms. The most direct answer to your question is to say that if you think about power from a functional perspective, like what would be a logical, rational reason that we would see power differences across human beings? We know there are lots of downsides to it, but why is it that hierarchies and power differences just keep recreating themselves? And the answer, some of us believe, is that there's an evolutionarily adaptive aspect to hierarchy, which is that as part of survival, people need to function in groups and in order for groups to cooperate effectively, it's helpful to have an agreement about who has which responsibilities, who has which rights, who's responsible for defending the group against challenges from the outside, who is responsible for taking care of members of the group who need care taking. All of these division of labor challenges need to get worked out in groups.

And so people have a tendency to elevate people into leadership positions very quickly, even in contexts where it's not really necessary. So I sometimes think about what it means to behave in a way that looks powerful from that perspective, which is to say, "Okay, if I take a functional perspective and I say if I'm in a leader position, what do people need from me? What's my responsibility?" And I guess what comes to mind, first of all, is my responsibility to control. It's my responsibility to control things so that, for example, people within my group don't have to fight over status and power. They can just focus on doing

their job. So I may have to remind people of who gets to go first or who reports to whom. And if someone's misbehaving, it's my job to call that out and do what's necessary to create a safe place for others to thrive.

So that requirement of controlling things often necessitates the ability to behave in a way that indicates you are willing to use force if necessary to keep things under control. And what we see in the nonverbal literature that's consistent with that interpretation of what power looks like is things like using your body in a more physically expansive way, like taking up more space, but also letting your arms leave your torso so you look more active and more agentic. It could also be staring at someone a little bit longer than would make them comfortable as a way of letting them know that you're serious and that you're paying attention and you're ready to take action if it's needed. All of the ways that we use our bodies to indicate readiness for action are consistent with what power looks like.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

I'm curious about these nonverbal cues that you mentioned. There's an overlay here with the fact that some people are introverts and some people are extroverts, that their personality styles will never make them be the type of person who projects that powerful cues that you mentioned. What have you found around that?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

I see this show up a lot in the people that I work with. When you are a cerebral person, that's another way of thinking what it means to be introverted, most of your energy is in your head and not in your body, and people can see that actually, and it reads sometimes a little bit passive, even though that may have nothing to do with your intentions or what you're capable of. So it is something that people sometimes have to work on.

Another really important quality in leadership that has an interesting relationship to power, but it's very important for influence and having impact is how present you are and the extent to which people think you're capable of putting your interests ahead of their own. So how engaged are you with them? How curious are you about them? How much do you care about how they're actually doing? That's a challenge for introverts as well. So extroverts tend to be more naturally present. They're just happier living with other people very closely connected to them. It is a challenge for sure, but it's something that can be adjusted once you understand what the impact of it is, what's necessary for you to have the impact that you need to have in the context where you're working, and then some techniques for how to get there.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

Speaking as an introverted leader myself, I think that the struggle around that connection has been, over the years, something that I've had to work on intentionally. And it's not because I don't care, it's not because I'm not curious about the person, but it's just not my natural inclination. A lot of times when I hear people talk about power, it's always juxtaposed against influence. What is more important, power or influence?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

I think it's a great question. People tend to think of those two things as very closely related, and I think there's also an assumption that the only reason you would want power is because you want to have more influence. What the research shows is something slightly different, which is that what people really care about, actually, is status. What you tend to find is that the desire to be respected by other people is really quite universal, and I'm not sure there's any cap on it. It's like no matter how much respect you have, you always feel like you're not really respected enough. So this is part of what leads people to reach for more power. I think for many people it's a proxy for respect. And then you have people running into situations

where they find out that what really comes with power is a lot of responsibility and accountability for things and what they really just want is a status.

So one of the things we've found in our work is that if you ask people, and this is true even of our MBA students in project teams that they're working on, if they had to rank order the members in terms of status, who's most respected, and then ask them which rank they aspire to attain, majority of people will say, second, they aspire to rank second. Some people say they aspire to rank first, but it's usually only about 30, something closer to 60% says they want to rank second. And it's because of this interesting distinction, which is that I think what people really want is to know that others respect their expertise. They want to have a degree of control over their own outcomes. They want others admiration. They want to feel like they're important in terms of what's happening, but a lot of people really don't want the accountability for bad outcomes and the responsibility for controlling other people that comes with power and with ranking first.

So that's a slightly off-tangential answer to your question, but that I think is the most interesting part of it, both power and influence and the desire for those things are a reflection of a deeper desire to be respected and admired by other people.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

What I'm hearing from you when talking about power and influence, you're forcing us to look inside and learn more about ourselves and what are the levers that are forcing us to ask this question as opposed to asking, how can I get more power? How can I influence? Why do you want that power and what is behind that need? And that will help you determine if you really want that power or if you just want respect and status. Along those same lines, do you feel that the sentiment that power is something we should be wary of? Do you feel like that's the correct approach to thinking about power or should we reconceptualize this?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

It's so interesting. One of the things I do worry about a lot based on the research that I've done on power is that because of the risks associated with it that we've talked about, being accountable, being responsible, the exposure that comes with being in a position of power, being visible, having people project evil motives onto you, which is part of what comes with power as well. So one thing that I worry about is that because not that many people are drawn to it, we may not be leaving it to the right people. And so one of the reasons that I ended up teaching the class that I teach and writing the book that I wrote about power was really to try to make the idea of having and wielding power more attractive to a broader range of people. One of the things that we know about power from the research that I've done is that it's a source of disinhibition.

So if you think about the way most of us navigate the social world, we're engaged in self-regulation. We have impulses and desires and motivations, and we look around us in the context where we are and we decide whether to act on those impulses or not. And a lot of growing up and maturing is learning how to control your impulses so that you can behave in a professional way and you can behave in a legal way and you can behave in a way that allows you to be successful at work. So we learn how to do that, but when people are in positions of power, what we find is that they become less able to control their impulses.

So you get a very direct connection between a person's basic psychology and the way they behave. And what this means is for people who are naturally benevolent, naturally generous, naturally inclined to see others as more vulnerable than they are and use their power to help people who need things, those kinds of people when given power become more like that. For people who seek power because they're dealing with some deep insecurity around how worthy of status they are, how loved they are, and I think this is true of many people who seek positions of power, it has to be a matter of life and death to take these

really big positions, is that some of those people are dealing with very deep insecurities and injuries, and that comes out when they're in positions of power.

So this is where you see so many scandals and so much bad behavior, and it comes as such a shock. And what our research indicates is that it's just that when you're in a position of power and there are fewer consequences for behaving badly, people just stop trying to control themselves. So you get this very raw picture of a person. So it's very important to me that people who have an aversion to power can approach the idea of seeking and using power, because if people who care about the downside of power aren't willing to go there, we're leaving it to all the wrong people.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

A lot of us work in complex organizations. We have seen and experienced different types of leaders, the power seekers and the leaders who are not power seekers, but are there anyways. How do you see these power dynamics influence decision-making processes?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

There are two problems I see a lot that I end up working on in classes and then outside of school as well when I work with people in companies. One of the big problems is that organizations invest a lot of time and energy building diverse teams and organizations because they understand the benefits of having a lot of diverse perspectives and how useful that is for learning and innovation and creativity and finding the best solutions to problems. What ends up happening often is that even if you can compose a group with diverse members, the power dynamics will wipe out the benefit of diversity because certain people in the group will have too much influence. And I have students tell me this all the time, I'm that guy. Maybe it's someone who has a background in the military. And every time I get into a group, everybody looks to me to tell them what to do.

It's not just coming from the person. There's, again, this need for people in groups to identify a leader and the tendency to look to certain people. And then you end up with everyone being too deferential to certain members because of how powerful they seem or how much power they have, how influential they are, how much status they're given. So that's one big issue is that you end up without being able to take advantage of all the diversity that you need in organizations to make good decisions and innovate. So that's, I think, one issue. The other one is that you can find when people are making decisions in groups, one goal is to hear from everybody, which is what I just described. But the other is you want to make sure that the experts have the most influence. And when influence is based on power and status, that can also create a disconnect where the deep expertise is in the introvert sitting quietly at the table while the extroverts feel like they belong more are talking. So that's I think the other way in which this can create problems.

Organizations invest a lot of energy, a lot of time and money with consultants trying to flatten their organizations, get rid of power and status differences to create an environment where you can get these more ideal types of organizational outcomes where there's learning happening and the experts are having influence no matter where they are in the organization. But it's very, very difficult to do because where I started with this conversation, which is that people really don't like the flat organizations. It just feels too chaotic. There's too much opportunity for conflict. Nobody knows which direction to move in, and groups will conspire to give somebody power and influence based on qualities often that have nothing to do with their expertise or even their ability to lead.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

What are some of the strategies that can create this healthy balance of authority so that the quiet introvert who has the expertise can actually bring their expertise up within a team?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

I would say as a general approach, something that I recommend a lot is to make sure when you are trying to make decisions in groups, that you very clearly separate the phase where learning is supposed to be happening and the phase where a decision is supposed to be made. When you conflate those things, people come into these groups just wanting to get to the answer. And this contributes to brushing over the opportunity to learn and creating the hierarchy as quickly as possible and just looking for someone to tell us what we can do so we can get out of this meeting and go back to our jobs. So in making that separation saying, "Look, we're going to have a meeting today where we're just going to share our thoughts about the problem, how we understand the problem, what we think the priorities are. We're not going to talk about solutions today. We're just going to try to share our perspective on the problem that we're solving."

And in those situations, the person who's running the meeting, it's on them to make sure everybody's speaking. And if someone is taking up too much air time to ask them to hold off until other people have shared. It's incumbent on the person in charge to make sure that flat structure stays flat. You can't just count on that happening by accident. And then in the second phase of it, there's also, I think, it's very important you get to the decision-making part, and again, the person in charge has to say, "We're done considering new ways of looking at this problem now. We've got to figure out how to agree on one way of doing it, and we'll try to reach a consensus, but if we can't, here's how the decision's going to be made."

Or it may be a situation where the leader says, "I've heard everything I needed to hear and this is what we're doing." So it's just changing the process and the structure with a clear rationale for why things are changing from phase to phase. I think that's a really simple heuristic that people can use to make sure that you're able to capture the benefits of both a more flat participative structure and also the benefits of hierarchy and why we need it.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

A really great way for individuals who have that informal authority to be able to dig into their latent power to be part of creating that organizational change. It's such a simple basic way to be able to get at it, and I think it's something that all of us can apply or even suggest in all of our different organizations. I want to make sure that I also talk about the fact that there has been a lot of work in organizations to build diverse teams, some doing a better job than others, but I think there's still the reality of issues with marginalized individuals and how they show up to work and they provide their expertise, but often there's an imbalance there. So either their power is not recognized or influence is not recognized, they don't get the credit that they deserve. So how do you balance that?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

It's a big problem. I think the best way to think about addressing that issue is to recognize that for people who look in some way not like what we think an expert looks like or not like what we think a leader looks like, it's in everybody's benefit to make sure that whatever they're bringing to the table gets shared. And so this is where allies come in. What I always suggest to people is once one of us elevates someone like that by referring to them as doctor or by asking them to talk a little bit about their experience in a situation that's relevant, or just by saying, "I really need to hear from Ruth because we haven't, and I know she has relevant information." Once you establish a norm in a group where that's a normal thing to do to actually elevate someone who is...

I sometimes think in groups that there's an arena and there's spectators. There's this 80/20 rule, which is that 80% of the talking is usually done by 20% of the people. So just being aware that happens. It's incumbent on the rest of us to start treating people on the outside as though they're meant to be in the arena. And then it creates a dynamic that can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once you've referred to someone or elevated someone or given them a platform, that becomes an acceptable and I think admired thing to do. I always remind people that there are people in the organization who need a stamp of

approval. They need other people to see them being treated with the respect that they're entitled to. And once that happens, other people can get on board with it. It's often just one person realizing that the best way to change norms in a group is to just act in a way that's not consistent with the current norm and signaling what you'd like to see happen.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

There's an intentionality for all of us who are in leadership positions or in a place to influence the conversations in meetings, to set the tone and set the norms. And what I'm hearing is that it's not enough to bring in a diverse team and have a diverse team around the table have to take that extra step to create norms that allow for additional voices. What else have you seen or strategies in building and really activating successful, diverse teams?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

So there are a couple of things that just came to mind all at once. Let me see if I can start with one. So one thing I often recommend for people who are having this issue, specifically when what you're seeing is the diversity in your team becoming stratified, where there are certain people who seem to have more power and status and others who seem to be falling down in hierarchy is to assign deliverable to everyone, but specifically to people who are not comfortable fighting for airtime, people who are very comfortable claiming airtime, there are people who do not want to fight for airtime. And so it's interesting what you were saying before about being an introvert. One of the things that you and I both have in common it seems is that we may be naturally introverted. We both have jobs and roles that give us permission to talk.

And I think this is a helpful heuristic to keep in mind for teams where there are people who just don't want to fight for airtime or aren't sure what they have to say is worth the time they're going to take. So I just advise people to assign deliverables or do what we sometimes call a warm spotlight. It's the opposite of a cold call, which is you let somebody know at our meeting on Monday, I'm going to ask you to share some information on X, Y, and Z. So go do some research and come ready to do that. So if you're legitimizing, they're the space, you give them time to think about it, and then often once people have started to participate, that dynamic also just carries itself forward. So I think giving people legitimate reasons to talk, especially with preparation can be very helpful.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

What advice would you give, though, to the person who they're not the leader, they can't assign the deliverable, they're on the opposite side, or they feel they're falling down, what would you tell them?

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

I guess two things. One of the things I will often advise people to do is to intentionally try to move their visual attention onto one other person and to focus as much as they can on the other person. So much so that there are no resources left for thinking about yourself and whether you're doing things wrong. If you can train yourself, it's almost like a meditation really, just in those moments where you're feeling maybe stressed or unsure or self-conscious to train your visual attention on someone else, it's sometimes enough to draw you out and into the room and into the conversation.

And then I think the other thing that's very helpful is to be aware that other people are also not speaking and ask them what they're thinking. So instead of worrying about yourself sharing, start the norm of asking other quiet people what they're thinking. So that's your way of getting in, but it also then creates a norm, like when you're quiet next time somebody can say, "What are you thinking about?" Just changes the norm. It's much easier to correct all of these things when everybody's part of it. It's very hard for one person to change how they behave, how they feel, the impact that they have on their own.

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Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

This has been such a refreshing conversation around power and influence. I didn't know where this conversation was going to take us. What I heard was really a call to self-reflection, what are your own personal levers and being part of the change. If you're seeing power dynamics that are not inclusive and that are not helping to build the team successfully, what can you do as an individual even if you don't have that formal authority? And if you are in a position of authority and you have that positional power, again, still take a look, do a check-in. Why are you here and what can you do differently? Thank you so much for your time today. I've learned so much personally. This has been a great conversation.

Deborah H. Gruenfeld, PhD (guest speaker):

Thank you so much for having me.

Ruth Adewuya, MD (host):

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