Making Use of the Bases of Power Framework in Analysing Real Situations

The Usefulness of the Bases of Power Framework

The 'Bases of Power' framework, developed initially by French and Raven (1959), has probably been less successful as a general theory than its authors hoped. It is difficult to make general, well supported claims about power and influence, because the effects of each type of power can vary in different contexts and because the interrelationships between types of power are unclear and complex. Nonetheless, in practice, the 'bases of power' framework is quite useful in the analysis of particular situations because it draws attention to key beliefs of the target as an important factor that can affect the outcome of influencing attempts.

When analysing an influencing attempt, and the results of this attempt, the following questions, derived from the bases of power framework, can often prove useful:

1. What does the target believe about the likelihood of punishment for not following an instruction?
2. What does the target believe about the authority of the agent to give an instruction or enforce a rule?
3. What does the target believe about the likelihood of receiving a reward for following an instruction or suggestion?
4. What does the target believe about the relevant expertise of the agent who is giving an instruction or providing a suggestion?
5. To what extent does the target like, respect or identify with the agent?

Implicit Beliefs

The beliefs of the target about punishment, authority, rewards, expertise and the character of the agent, are often implicit and unspoken. An interaction can take place between the agent and the target with neither party raising or referring to those issues. The background and unspoken beliefs of the target may, however, be a major factor in shaping their response to an influencing attempt.

Suppose, for example, that a new department chair makes a suggestion to me for a way of delivering a course online. I don't believe that they have any particular authority or expertise and, although I don't dislike them, we have no established personal relationship.

Neither of us mentions any of these issues, but, on balance, I may be unlikely to follow their suggestion due, in part, to these background beliefs.

When we are analysing an influencing attempt as an observer or 'third party', the beliefs of the target are often uncertain. Because these beliefs are often implicit and unspoken, we have to draw indirect inferences. For example, does the target talk to the agent in a way that appears to recognize their authority or expertise? Does the target appear concerned about possible punishments? Does the target interact with the agent in a way that suggests that they respect and identify with them? When we have limited information about a situation, our inferences about the beliefs of the target should nearly always be cautious and provisional.

The Meaning of Explicit Reference

Although these beliefs of the target are often implicit, the agent may refer explicitly to a belief or to the content of that belief during the interaction. For example, the agent may say something like: "under the organizational rules I have the authority to tell you to do this", "I have been doing this a long time and know what I'm talking about", or "if you refuse to do this I will have to write you up". Sometimes, the target may be first to raise one of the beliefs explicitly. For example, they may say: "has this instruction been approved by senior management?" or "will we be given extra payment for doing this?".

The meaning of this explicit reference to the beliefs of a target or the content of those beliefs can vary substantially between situations. Usually, the agent or target raises the issue for a purpose. The agent may raise the topic as a way of trying to strengthen an influencing attempt. For example, they may try to draw the attention of the target to a reward, to possible punishments, to their authority and to their expertise. But there is a danger that, in making things explicit, they may raise questions in the mind of the target. For example, the target may think: "why are they talking about their expertise? Is this really accurate?". Explicit reference to possible rewards runs the risk that the target may view the task as more unpleasant and the reward as too small. As described above, explicit threats may promote resistance.

When a target is the first to make explicit reference to one of these topics it is often because they are questioning the claims or assumptions of the agent. For example they might say: "I don't think this is really a disciplinary matter" or "I don't think that you really understand our job".

Analysing Failed Influencing Attempts

There are many possible reasons why influencing attempts can fail. One possible reason is that the target does not hold the beliefs that could be the basis of successful influencing.

For example, they may not believe that there is the possibility of a valued reward or they may not like and respect the agent. A second possible reason is that, although the target holds these beliefs, they do not hold them strongly enough to overcome their reluctance to carry out a task. For example, they may believe that the agent is an expert but they still may not want to do a task that they find unpleasant. Finally, as we have seen, explicit reference to punishment, authority, and sometimes even rewards, can promote resistance. The target may know that they would be 'better off' going along with an instruction, but they may feel resentful at a loss of autonomy and not want to 'give in'.

References

1959 French, J. and Raven, B. "The Bases of Social Power." In Studies in Social Power, D. Cartwright, Ed., pp. 150-167. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.