

Running Title: Managing Power, Influence, and Structure in Higher Education

**Managing Power, Influence, and Structure in Higher Education: A Case Study of the
Politics and Dynamics at Bennington College in Vermont**

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What does it mean to manage power? How can managers employ power effectively? Are there limitations to the uses of power in organizations? In today's worldwide higher education landscape, stakeholders are required to use power as a base for gathering information and resources in order to achieve effective administrative goals and priorities within departments and schools. Many colleges and universities are often described as large, interdependent, and complex systems. Within those complexities, stakeholders are pressured to exercise power through subtle use of language, symbols, ceremonies, and settings. Pfeffer (1993) defines power as "the potential ability to influence behavior of others and change the course of organizational events while making others to do things that they would not otherwise do." In other words, he believes that power is derived from where the individual stands in the division of labor. Often times, power is exercised in situations when a social or political conflict arises. Although the use of power can drastically affect how decisions are made from both institutional and state level, higher education leaders (e.g., presidents, faculty members, and senior officials) are often times pressured to use prior knowledge to think politically and to act politically as means to achieve administrative effectiveness within institutions.

Ever since the emergence of the guild framework in 1200, higher education institutions are constantly striving to acquire power, position, and reputation as their primary source for influence. Leaders who hold substantial power are often required to make sound judgments and actions under the conditions of ambiguity (Pfeffer, 1993: 208). Power is derived not only a political skill, but it is also a political will, or the desire, as Pfeffer (1993) asserts, to be "in the arena" (p. 300). To avoid losing power, institutions must remain sensitive to subtle changes in their environment (Pfeffer, 1993: 306). Power must be utilized when there are changes to: 1) resource scarcity, 2) critical issues arises and higher level decision making units are involved, 3) organizational interdependence, 4) differences in perspective or point of view, and 5) issue affecting the entire organization. In other words, leaders in higher education should utilize power as a mean to take action, to overcome resistance, or to persuade people to quickly accomplish goals and priorities within the organization.

A good example of a higher education leader that managed power to achieve long-term administrative goals is President Elizabeth Coleman of Bennington College in Bennington, Vermont. Since 1987, President Coleman would use power and influence to quickly transform Bennington College into an institution of self-innovation. Once described by Edmundson (1994) as the “American higher education’s School for Scandal” (p. 1), President Coleman would transform the entire campus community to embrace the ‘highest possible standard within their own disciplines’. Professors would hold a ‘never complain, never explain’ philosophy once coined by Henry Ford II (Pfeffer, 1993: 127). Moreover, faculty members would become more than “productive excess and eccentricity; they would take their students seriously” (Edmundson, 1994: 3). For instance, supporter Edward Hoagland would praise President Coleman: “I think what she’s doing is brave. The place needed to change.” Likewise, Jenni Person would admire President Coleman ideals to “re-create Bennington everywhere.” Despite the fact that she had changed Bennington College into a self ‘educational innovation’ institution, many faculty members and staff would criticize President Coleman for mismanaging the power dynamics and structures of the campus scandal.

To enumerate, during the early 1990s, President Coleman would abolish the tenure system and fire twenty-five faculty members in order to cope with the financial constraints that would burden the campus community. Additionally, she would target academics and administrators for demoralizing their conditions overtime within the institution. President Coleman once wrote, “Bennington became mediocre overtime and now the world outside is aware of that” (Edmundson, 1994: 1). Though she would later inherit numerous enemies within the institution since the publication of *Symposium Report of the Bennington College Board of Trustees*, President Coleman would use power and influence to develop new structures and departments that would, in reality, help save the legacy and culture of Bennington College today. President Coleman firmly believed that “Bennington has got to do something that no one else is doing, and it’s got to do it superbly well.” As a result, she was able to effectively create pressure to variety of stakeholders in order to cope with

broad-base institutional problems, such as, how to get things done, how to move forward, or how to solve problems facing student enrollment.

Despite the fact that many non-supporters have still criticized President Coleman overtime, her strong desire and passion to engage in conflict, and to divide and conquer the opposition at Bennington College is an extraordinary example of how leaders can ‘act politically’ to authority, and how they can promote administrative effectiveness among different stakeholders’ interests in higher education (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009: 133). President Coleman usage of structural power would be influential as a base to advocate the employment of standards that favor one’s position. She would use power in many areas: 1) resources (disproportional influence), 2) allies (building coalitions), 3) communication networks in organizations, 4) formal authority and formal positions occupied in the hierarchy, 5) reputation and the record of performance, 6) being in the right unit, and 7) attributes and characteristics. As a result, President Coleman power would encourage faculty members and staff to progress up the institutional hierarchy that is both consistent and persistent. Because of her bold and courageous leadership, many would praise President Coleman as a woman who can manage with power effectively during critical institutional uncertainties in higher education.

Theoretically, to successfully manage great power, Pfeffer (1993) outline that leaders must possess six key characteristics: 1) energy and endurance, 2) to avoid wasted effort, 3) sensitivity, 4) flexibility, 5) willing to engage in conflict, and 6) ability to submerge one’s ego (p.166). These characteristics, as exhibited by President Coleman, are invaluable traits to accomplish specific administrative goals and priorities within an organization. To clarify, Pfeffer (1993) emphasize that there are six fundamental strategies and tactics to employ power in organizations and institutions: 1) framing the important organizational issue, 2) uses of interpersonal influence, 3) timing, 4) uses of information, 5) changing the structural aspects or consolidating units, and 6) taking symbolic action: languages, ceremonies, and settings. He believes that language,

symbols, and ceremonies allow leaders the opportunity to mobilize political support as well as to quiet opposition (Pfeffer, 1993: 291). For example, President Lyndon Johnson was able to use both symbols and language to effectively make situations appear well during his presidential election. Comparatively, President Jimmy Carter was able to secure the U.S. Democratic Party nomination and win the U.S. presidency in 1976 simply by building alliances and using language and symbols that would make him appear to be a strong leader for the position. Likewise, Lou Pondy once stated that “the effectiveness of a leader lies in his ability to make activity meaningful for those in his role set” (Pfeffer, 1992: 284). Nonetheless, language and symbols are powerful tools for adaptation and social influence. The vast limitations of power may occur when there are subtle time changes, environmental effects, and/or constant power tension between different actors and stakeholders. Thus, exercising rational processes can help render the use of power as most decisions have highly remote or indirect connections to the goals or outcomes in higher education (Pfeffer, 1993: 301).

In essence, the organizational culture of American higher education often involves changes in the distribution of power. As argued, the best way to manage with power is to recognize three common properties: 1) existence of varying interests in an organization, 2) define the issues set out by various interest groups, and 3) develop new strategies of acquiring power. An additional approach is to build allies and coalitions or supporters that would support the leader’s articulated vision and outcome. Additionally, powerful leaders should consider identifying the opposition; showing compassion and empathy to the opposition; and spending time with the opposition as strategies to successfully think politically and to act politically within the worldwide higher education landscape. Karl Weick once wrote that “Managerial work can be viewed as managing myths, images, symbols, and labels” (Edmundson, 1994). Hence, developing effective power requires both will and skill. It is those salient characteristics that allows a leader in higher education to consolidate power for institutional change or as Pfeffer (1993) concludes, “If you don’t like the news, go out and make some of your own” (p. 345).

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