

Pfeffer on Power

Have you ever advised a friend to ignore the political manoeuvring, just work hard, do the right thing and get results? If so, you were probably indulging in what Jeffrey Pfeffer calls the 'just world hypothesis' and you probably weren't doing your friend a favour.

Pfeffer explains,

Decades of research have shown people really want to believe the world is—in the end—fair. It allows them to feel in control.

Yet, even a cursory observation of the world shows it is not fair and business is no different. Realistically, who is likely to get the promotion: the nose to the grindstone worker or the one who devotes his or her talents to the world of office politics?

Pfeffer has released a much awaited new book on power and organizational politics called *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*. He also has long taught a course on the topic at Stanford.

When I teach this to MBA students they understand it analytically, but emotionally they are very uncomfortable. They've done well based on their individual academic achievements and they are ill-at-ease with the notion that diligent work and good performance is not necessarily what gets rewarded. We also have Sloan Fellows, who are mid-career executives, in the class and they tell the younger classmates 'That's just the way the world is, get over it.'

The alternative to just working hard is learning how to act with power. As it turns out acting with power is reasonably straightforward stuff. Pfeffer gave some examples.

You need to act confidently and present yourself in a forceful manner. It's how you dress and sit and speak. You also need to be thoughtful about who you spend time with. I recall asking a young woman who she spent her time with and she was quick with an answer, "I spend all my time with my close friends." However, if you want to ahead there is a point where you need to know a wider circle than just your friends. The research is clear on the importance of networking, and you have to

spend time meeting people you don't know and may not particularly like.

This is a message many people do not want to hear, but it is essential for managing your career. Pfeffer makes the point forcefully.

You are not responsible for your career; it's the boss or set of bosses above you who are responsible for your career longevity and success. Dealing with those bosses requires flattery and managing up. We overemphasize the technical aspect of our jobs given that so much our career success is a matter of being savvy about power and politics.

It's important to recognize that this is not about clawing your way up the corporate ladder, leaving a trail of bodies behind you. Pfeffer says his objective is to give his students and the readers of his book the knowledge, insight and skills they need so they will never have to leave a job involuntarily. In the book, Pfeffer shares stories of good people who lost their jobs simply because they were not sufficiently astute about the political dynamics in the workplace. You probably have seen this many times before.

But even the astute manager can suffer from serious setbacks and it's in these situations that understanding power is particularly important.

You can't be embarrassed about the setback. The just world hypothesis affects how we think of ourselves too. If you get fired you tend to think you must have done something to deserve it. You've to realize that, just like the title of Rabbi Kushner's book says, bad things happen to good people.

One thing that struck me in Pfeffer's book was the stories of people who really had done something wrong boldly standing up and defending themselves without a hint of self-doubt or remorse. It seems outrageous but tactically this can be the very best approach to take.

Pfeffer sees overcoming setbacks as a critical skill to develop.

If I had to bet on one characteristic that makes people successful it's persistence and resilience. You need to be like the water that wears down the rock. Setbacks happen to everyone but successful people often show amazing resilience.

As logical and evidence-based as Pfeffer's ideas are, many people would still like to find a way to avoid entering the fray of power and politics. Pfeffer says,

One thing I say that upsets students greatly is that some of you think you are going to avoid this by going into a relatively small organization in a partnership form. But while your partner is patting you on the back they are wondering if you are still interesting and useful to them. If you are not, they will try to push you out.

Politics exist in all organizations. Often it is a matter of whether it's subtle or in the open. You can ask yourself if subtle politics is better than when it's more overt. I don't know. The main point is that this goes on so get used to it. The idea that you can escape this by size of organization or governance form is wrong.

Of course there is a risk that after reading Pfeffer's book you will find you are so skilled at the game that you quickly rise to the top. While power has its perks, it also has its price.

As soon as you have power you are under constant scrutiny. There is no such thing as a private dinner or private time. Everything you do from the clothes you wear to the car you drive is under scrutiny. Take Condoleezza Rice who is now back on the Stanford faculty. She can't go to Mexico and have a nice weekend with boyfriend or girlfriend; she can't just let her hair down and be a human being.

A more insidious price is that power can make you a less nice person. Pfeffer cites the infamous cookie study in which one participant was given some minimal trappings of power. Even those minimal trappings were enough to lead them to be more likely to eat with their mouth open, leave crumbs and take more than their share of cookies. Power can turn you into someone you wouldn't like to hang around with. As a result some people do step back and rein in their ambitions, and this may be a wise thing to do.

Lots of people do check their ambitions because of the price of power. I get into trouble saying this, but I think it's more common for women than for men. I spoke to one woman who had decided to drop out of the entertainment industry because the politics were too intense. I told her my impression was that she was extremely good at that. She smiled at me and thanked me and said she probably was, she was doing great but she decided she didn't want to keep doing it.

There is something very radical lurking in Pfeffer's thinking that goes beyond just developing some useful career management skills. I asked him, "Is all this

focus on power and politics good for the organization?" Pfeffer's response was disarming,

Who cares? Organizations have long since given up the pretext that they care about you so why should you care about them? At Stanford MBA virtually every other class is about business skills and I tell students that this class is going to be different; I'm going to teach them political skills.

The correlation between personal well-being and organizational well-being isn't that high. If you haven't noticed, a bunch of finance executives left their crumbling firms with hundreds of millions of dollars and there are many people who fail upwards. This book and the class I teach is not about the company, it's about you. The company is going to take care of itself.

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Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't is available at Amazon.com