

POWER, PERSONALITY, AND LEADERSHIP

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Overview

Power is a topic that many people find uncomfortable to discuss, yet the appropriate use of power affects all relationships, especially those between leaders and followers in the workplace. By understanding power we can learn to use it more effectively and justly; otherwise we risk relegating it to the shadows where it is prone to abuse and misuse. This article will discuss power in the context of David McClelland's motivation theory, correlations between his theory and the Enneagram, and how the Enneagram can be used to develop a more mature relationship with power. While the concepts covered here affect all of the Ennea-types, the format and scope of this article limit the focus to the Three, Nine, and Eight.

A few caveats are in order at the outset of this article:

1. There are many qualities of leadership and the qualities that serve leaders well in some situations or environments may not serve them well in others. There are no “necessary and sufficient” models of leadership or organizational tools that work in every situation. It is better to view the qualities of leadership through Aristotle's eyes: we should learn to apply the *golden mean*—the appropriate amount of *whatever* competency is needed for the circumstances. Leadership wisdom lies in learning a variety of tools and heuristics and then skillfully applying them in appropriate circumstances. Good leaders are constantly upgrading their skills and learning new tools that can be applied at the right time, rather than taking a one-tool-fits-all approach (even when that tool is as powerful as the Enneagram).
2. While the Enneagram is a good probabilistic model, it is not necessarily a good predictive model. No one can predict that a person of any given type will always respond a particular way in a particular set of circumstances. In fact, what usually happens with the Enneagram is a form of *retrodiction*—using current information to explain past events. It is impossible to say that a person of a given type will fall short (or succeed) in a given area. However, retrodiction is often useful, and the Enneagram can be extremely effective in figuring out why someone is struggling when they indeed find themselves struggling, and it can be a great tool for identifying corrective action. Any correlation between Ennea-type and any leadership model or set of attributes must be held lightly, as a heuristic for identifying potential

and probable opportunities or pitfalls. But each leader, regardless of type, must be seen as a unique case in a particular set of circumstances.

Three Cases

The Nine

Dale was the vice president of finance for a \$2 billion business unit of a multinational automotive parts manufacturer. Dale's technical skills were first-rate—he understood the operations of the business, he understood the market, and he could contribute to strategy conversations with senior leaders in the company. In addition, everyone liked him—all of his co-workers rated him highly in areas such as integrity, work ethic, and likability. His boss, the company's CFO, however, consistently gave Dale feedback that he needed to upgrade the talent on his team to prepare the business for expansion. Some of Dale's subordinates were in over their heads and needed to be replaced, according to the CFO, others could succeed with some coaching and direct feedback about their weaknesses. Dale, however, could not bring himself to remove the underperformers—most of whom had been with the company for many years and had families to feed, and he was uncomfortable giving direct feedback to the others. Finally, after giving Dale multiple chances to correct the situation, the CFO fired him. She then moved on to Dale's subordinates, firing those she viewed as underperformers and giving very direct feedback to those who remained on the staff about their shortcomings. Everyone was shocked. Almost all of them relayed to the CFO that they thought they were doing fine and that Dale had never given them anything but positive feedback. Most of them felt that had they received the feedback sooner they could have changed their ways and perhaps saved their jobs.

The Three

Kathryn was the vice-president of marketing for a pharmaceutical company. Long viewed as a rising star in the company, Kathryn was known for the high quality of her work, her personal polish, and her unequalled work ethic. When a corporate restructuring nearly doubled the size of Kathryn's team from 18 to 35 people and dramatically expanded the number of product lines for which she was responsible, she quickly found herself drowning. Kathryn had never been good at delegating, and problems always rolled upward; when one of her subordinates got stuck on a project, Kathryn would take over the project herself because it was easier and quicker than to take the time to teach the person how to do it. The result was that her subordinates never improved their skills and Kathryn found it difficult to hand off complicated assignments to others because no one had the capability to complete them. When her team doubled, her work doubled. Unable to put in longer hours because she already worked 12 hours

a day, six days a week, the quality of the work from Kathryn's team fell sharply. Within a year she went from being a rising star to being demoted to a smaller role. Unable to cope with the humiliation she felt at the demotion, she left the company with no immediate plans for her next job. While her subordinates had admired Kathryn's skills and work ethic, they did not have the same drive to be self-directed learners that Kathryn had. Thus, Kathryn had no successor and the company had to replace her with an outside hire, further dispiriting the group.

The Eight

Tony was the senior director of field support for a telecommunications equipment manufacturer. When the company's clients had problems with the equipment that supported their networks, Tony dispatched field engineers to fix them. It was a high-pressure job; any equipment failure that caused a service interruption meant phone calls would be made by the customers to the company's CEO, who would immediately want status updates from Tony on the hour. Tony loved the work, however. He viewed himself and his team as the company's cowboys—willing to get on a plane at a moment's notice, work under high pressure, and solve problems caused by “the clowns in the lab,” according to Tony. He ruled with an iron fist, and people quickly learned that you got the best assignments when you did what he wanted and the worst when you challenged his instructions. Team meetings had the spirit of frat parties, and the team's annual meeting in Las Vegas was a bacchanalia that consistently caused ethics problems for the company. Turnover was high, and many people who left blamed Tony's dictatorial style for their dissatisfaction. Those who managed to succeed in the environment Tony created were fiercely loyal to him. When a female employee lodged a sexual harassment complaint against Tony, management finally decided they had had enough, and he was fired. When Tony found a new job, many of his loyal lieutenants went to work with him. His replacement was aghast at the lack of process and protocols in the department, and due to the turmoil, service to the customers fell dramatically and cost the company a number of key accounts.

Each of these cases depicts a leader who was undone by the inability to manage one of the primary needs identified by David McClelland. While we all have all three needs to greater or lesser degree, it is easy to see how some of the Ennea-types can be prone to being more influenced by one of them. This article focuses on the Nine, the Three, and the Eight because in my experience as an executive coach to hundreds of leaders over the last 15 years, there seems to be a higher correlation between the needs described by McClelland and those three types. It should be highlighted that one coach's anecdotal evidence is limited data for assessing correlation, but this article will also describe the plausibility for such correlation based on the strategy at the heart of each of those Ennea-types.

McClelland's Motivation Theory

David McClelland was a psychological theorist who taught at Harvard University for 30 years beginning in 1956. In 1976, he co-authored (with David Burnham) an influential article for the *Harvard Business Review* called "Power is the Great Motivator." It would be easy to assume that the author of such an article would be a Machiavellian uber-capitalist, advocating exploitation of others for one's own gain. On the contrary, McClelland was a Quaker who spent World War II working for the American Friends Service Committee and later became a close friend of the spiritual teacher Ram Dass. From McClelland's perspective, power is a natural part of the human experience, and what matters most is whether it is used in a mature way for the good of the group or is used in an immature way for the benefit of the individual at the expense of the group.

McClelland is primarily remembered for his motivation theory, which states that leaders are motivated by three primary needs: affiliation (nAff), achievement (nAch), and power (nPow). Everyone has all three needs, but they are present in varying proportions in each person. McClelland and Burnham conducted a study of leaders and found some intriguing correlations between leadership effectiveness and motivation. In short, they concluded that those leaders with a high need for affiliation tended to be least effective, and those with a high need for power tended to be the most effective—as long as they also had a high degree of personal inhibition. Those with a very high need for achievement actually struggled as leaders for a very specific set of reasons.

The need for affiliation is, at its core, a need to be liked by others. A person with a high need for affiliation desires harmonious relationships with other people and they need to feel accepted. They tend to conform to the norms of their work group and prefer work that provides significant personal interaction. While the ability to get along with others and connect at an emotional level are important in most leadership situations, the study showed that high nAff leaders often failed because they tried to make too many people happy and struggled to make difficult business decisions. Like Dale in the story at the beginning of this article, they often fail to give constructive feedback to their employees and tell their employees only what they think the employee will want to hear. They also have a tendency to make ad hoc and *ad hominem* decisions. This style creates a lack of consistency and clarity regarding policies and procedures, ultimately making subordinates feel like they have little responsibility for outcomes. Motivation and pride in their work tends to be lowest in employees led by high nAff leaders.

The need for achievement relates to the desire to accomplish and exceed goals. People with a high achievement need seek to excel and want to do things better than they have been done before. They tend to thrive in entrepreneurial situations and prefer to work alone or with other high-achievers. Surprisingly, high nAch leaders tend to struggle when they get to high levels of the

organization because they tend to be *doers* rather than effective *delegators*. Like Kathryn, they struggle in situations where they are removed from hands-on activities and are required to spend more and more of their time managing others. High nAch leaders need frequent feedback and a short-term rewards system so they can continually measure their progress. They quickly become frustrated with bureaucracies and often end up frustrated when they don't feel like they can immediately get involved in direct problem solving.

Those with a high power need are focused on shaping their environment and influencing others rather than the satisfaction of immediate feedback. McClelland and Burnham found that the most effective leaders tended to be those who had a need for power that was higher than their need to be liked. However, even this group could be separated into two categories:

- Personal power (pPow) leaders, who have a desire to direct others, and
- Institutional or social leaders (sPow), who have a desire to organize the efforts of others to advance the goals of the organization or group.

The key differentiator between these two groups was the degree of self-control or “inhibition” displayed by the leader; institutional leaders had high power drive mixed with high inhibition while personal power (pPow) leaders tended to combine high power drive with low inhibition.

According to McClelland and Burnham, while personal power leaders were more effective than high nAff leaders, they tended to put their own needs before the needs of the organization. They can be charismatic and inspirational, but the inspiration tends to be centered on a select group of loyal followers. They lack the discipline to be institution builders, focused on short-term victories and when the pPow leader leaves, the team left behind is often disorganized and morale quickly erodes. Further, pPow leaders often demonstrated problematic behaviors including rudeness, alcohol and substance abuse, sexual exploitation of subordinates, and fondness for the symbols of prestige such as expensive cars and large offices.

By contrast, institutional leaders—those with high nPow and high inhibition—are less egotistic and less defensive; their self-image is not directly connected to their job; they seek advice from experts; and they take a long-range view. According to McClelland and Burnham's study they were the most effective at instilling a sense of responsibility, creating organizational clarity, and building team spirit. They attributed these qualities to the sPow leader's self-control, which allowed them to direct their power toward the benefit of the institution as a whole rather than being put to use for the leader's personal aggrandizement. Further, sPow leaders had the following qualities:

- They are organization-minded—they like to join groups and they feel responsible for building them.
- They believe in the importance of centralized authority.

- They like to work and have a high need to get things done in orderly way.
- They are willing to sacrifice self-interest for benefit of the organization.
- They have a keen sense of justice, believing that all who work hard should and will be rewarded.
- They emphasize building loyalty to the organization and creating a sense of lasting team cohesion and organizational clarity.
- They empower people in an effort to make subordinates feel strong rather than weak.
- They help people get things done rather than focusing on their personal needs.

A critical differentiator between sPow and pPow leaders, according to McClelland, is maturity, which “involves the ability to use whatever mode is appropriate to the situation. Immaturity involves using perhaps only one mode in all situations or using a mode inappropriate to a particular situation.” (McClelland 24).

McClelland identified four stages of power orientation. The stages are based on a simple matrix comprising two dimensions:

- Whether the source of power is inside (“I have the power”) or outside (“It has the power”), and
- Whether the object of the power is the self or something else.

There are adaptive and maladaptive versions of all four stages, and while the stages roughly correlate to stages of ego-development models of Freud, Erikson, and others, the stages are also concurrent through life, and it is possible to demonstrate adaptive behaviors in a higher stage and maladaptive behaviors in a lower stage. Each stage can be summarized by a simple internal message.

In Stage I, the message is “*It strengthens me.*” For the child at this stage, the source of the power is outside of the individual—the parent, the institution, the deity, etc.—and the object that is being acted on is the individual him/herself. Adults in this stage align themselves with powerful others and tend to thrive in situations where they can serve powerful people—the boss, the political leader, an assertive spouse. Taken to an extreme, people in Stage I can be totally dependent on the powerful other, substances, a social group, or God.

In Stage II, the message is, “*I strengthen myself.*” The source of power is the individual, and someone in this stage uses it to act on themselves. Children begin to develop a sense of control and realization that they need not rely on others for their sense of power. They start to exert control of objects and become identified with their possessions; toys become symbols of power (a pattern that extends into adulthood for many Stage II-focused individuals, who accumulate symbols

of prestige). This is also the world of self-help and self-actualization, and taken to an extreme it can result in obsessive-compulsive behavior.

In Stage III, the message is, “*I have impact on others.*” Again, the source of power is the individual, but now it is used to act on the other. The young person begins to learn to feel powerful by controlling others, learning to manipulate and desiring to compete. People “who fixate in this modality...always try to outwit, outmaneuver, and defeat other people—in sports, in work, in arguments, and even in ordinary social relationships.” (McClelland 18) Oddly enough, displays of altruistic-seeming behavior can be seen in people at Stage III, as the individual gives as a way of (consciously or not) controlling the relationship, establishing a position of superiority by being the one who can help the other. At the extreme, Stage III power becomes smothering, dominating, and abusive.

At Stage IV, the message is, “*It’ moves me to do my duty.*” The source of power is outside—the institution, the organization, the group, or the cause—and it is used by the individual to act in service of others. “Great religious and political leaders from Jesus Christ to Abraham Lincoln and Malcolm X have felt they were instruments of a higher power which is beyond self. Their goal was to act on others on behalf of this higher authority” (McClelland 20). At a more mundane level, the institutional leader described earlier is functioning at Stage IV. Taken to the extreme, however, Stage IV power leads to messianism, and the individual can commit acts of violence in the name of the higher power to which he or she is identified.

An Approach to the Ennea-Types

It is commonly said that the Enneagram is not just a model depicting what people do; it identifies *why* they do the things they do—their motivations. While this may be true, the emphasis in the Enneagram literature tends to be on the *what*, or the traits demonstrated by individuals who cluster into a particular category. Typologies are often models of external characterization; they are categorizations of what we see from the outside. If the typology stops there, however, especially when it is a model of something as subtle and complex as human nature, the typology can be confusing. People of the same type can display very similar traits and it can be difficult to tell the types apart if one does not look beyond the surface.

In his book *Character and Neurosis*, Claudio Naranjo refers to the Ennea-types as “adaptive strategies.” (Naranjo, p. 5) That phrase inspired Robert Tallon and me when we were writing our book, *Awareness to Action: The Enneagram, Emotional Intelligence, and Change*. Writing primarily for a business audience, we were trying to capture a fundamental tendency at the heart of each personality type. This idea of seeing the types as a strategy seemed to fit perfectly.

As we analyzed the hundreds of people we had worked with over the years, it seemed that each of them was “striving to be” something, and that this striving to be was the strategy at the core of the Ennea-type. One definition of *strategy*

that seems relevant when it comes to the Enneagram “is the art of devising or employing plans or stratagems toward a goal.” At the heart of the strategies, Tallon and I felt, was a non-conscious desire to “be” or “feel” a certain way. Sixes, for example, need to feel secure, and thus we label that Ennea-type “Striving to be Secure.” This implicit need to feel secure causes Sixes to think about things related to security more than the other Ennea-types do, and then to behave in ways that are internally consistent with the affective need and the cognitive patterns. Taken together, this mix of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral patterns manifests in predictable traits visible to others that can be clustered into a typology.

Thus, we came to view the Ennea-types as the natural outcomes of preferred strategies. Those strategies are listed in Figure One, but here we will focus on Ennea-types Three, Eight, and Nine. Again, it is important to acknowledge that the needs identified by McClelland do not apply only to those three types; we *all* have all three needs in varying degrees. I focus on these three types because they tend to be the Ennea-types I encounter most in my work with leaders. I have insufficient data to determine whether this pattern is due to something inherent in these types *vis a vis* leadership; something inherent in the types of companies I have worked with (they tend to have a high population of engineers or people with an engineering education); or just a random pattern in a limited data set. The reader is cautioned against jumping to undue conclusions or overgeneralizations.

Nines

Nines are “striving to be peaceful;” they seek to minimize conflict and want their world to be calm and harmonious if at all possible. They tend to be likable and do their best to get along with others. This desire for peace means that they often have a high need for affiliation—one of the best ways to have harmony is to have others like you. According to Aramando Molina, in his excellent book *Our Ways*, the condition of the Nine is one wherein “[m]aintaining a sense of connection with others requires that they devote their efforts to perceiving the feelings of others by concentrating attention on them.... They have difficulty saying no....” Thus they let themselves be led along, divert energy from their own priorities, and park themselves until somebody else takes the initiative” (Molina, p.83)

Therefore, many Nines struggle with all the challenges McClelland identifies for the affiliative leader: They may avoid delivering difficult feedback; they may tell different things to different people in order to keep everyone happy; they may be unclear in their communication because definitive statements have a higher chance of causing offense than fuzzy statements.

It would seem logical that the need for affiliate can also hamper Ennea-type Twos, who Tallon and I call “striving to be connected,” and I have seen many of

these same issues with Ennea-type Two leaders I have coached. However, since I encounter more Nines than Twos in my work I will focus on them.

Ennea-type is not destiny; not all Nines will fall victim to the maladaptive tendencies of high nAff leaders, and those who do can grow and become more effective. The way for Nines to get out of the nAff trap is to start redefining what it means to be peaceful so they can start to incorporate new, adaptive behaviors into their leadership toolkit.

One way to look at this is to start using the strategy as a way of solving long-term problems rather than short-term problems. For example, Nines are striving to be peaceful; they also have a tendency to avoid conflict. Thus, they may not tell people when they are underperforming in an effort to avoid the discomfort of having to criticize a subordinate. This solution is short-term, however; the Nine may feel peaceful for the time being, but larger problems eventually arise when smaller problems are allowed to fester. The Nine's habitual and unconscious definition of what it means to be "peaceful" may include avoiding conflict at all costs to maintain harmony. By rewriting the definition of the strategy to say "I can maintain a greater sense of peace over the longer term by addressing conflict or unpleasantness before it grows into a bigger problem," the Nine will be more motivated to address conflicts head on.

For example, imagine that Dale, discussed in our first story, had received some guidance from a coach who was familiar with the Enneagram. After identifying the behavioral problems that were hindering Dale's performance, the coach could have worked with Dale to uncover how his striving to be peaceful caused him to resist taking the kind of actions the CFO wanted him to take. They could have seen that, for Dale, striving to be peaceful meant avoiding conflict, and giving direct feedback was seen as a source of conflict. Thus, Dale was behaving logically from the limited perspective of his story about the world. What he couldn't see was that his behavior actually led to greater conflict over the long run when problems grew and resulted in him and others losing their jobs. With a simple adjustment in perspective, the coach could have helped Dale see that addressing underperformance and giving constructive feedback actually led to increased overall peacefulness, saving jobs, giving a greater sense of growth and improvement to his people, improving communication, etc. A significant lesson for Nines is to see that addressing the small conflicts that exist today (even if doing so temporarily upsets people) will lead to greater overall peacefulness (and avoid creating permanently upsetting people).

Further, Dale could have been coached in becoming more comfortable with power. The coach could have worked with Dale to understand that the effective use of power is expected in the position he held—that it was his job to influence people to achieve things and produce results for the organization. Focusing on the necessity of power in relation to the role rather than the individual can often help Nines get beyond their fear of hubris and make them more comfortable doing the things that are required of people in authority.

Threes

Threes are “striving to be outstanding;” they seek ways to demonstrate their value through achievement and accomplishment. They habitually set goals for themselves and then set a new goal that exceeds the last goal. According to Naranjo, “ennea-type III is the most usual background for what is diagnosed as type A personality: achieving, competitive, ever stressed, and prone to cardiac diseases” (Naranjo, p. 205). They are uncomfortable or impatient with the activities they see as detracting from the straightest path to their target, and they often have little tolerance for the social dynamics of an organization. This is not to imply that Threes cannot engage in the activities commonly considered “political,” but they can become easily frustrated when things start to seem bureaucratic. Reading McClelland’s article of leaders with a high need for achievement, it is difficult to believe he is not writing about Threes.

People often think that Threes must be highly represented in the ranks of CEOs or other senior leaders in large organizations. In my experience, this is much more common in smaller companies that are highly entrepreneurial (and thus less bureaucratic). In large companies, Threes often rise quickly but struggle at the executive level for the reasons that McClelland describes for high nAch leaders.

Kathryn would have been helped by coaching that helped her manage her high nAch and develop some of the behaviors seen in high nPow leaders. For instance, a simple reframing is often helpful for Threes. They see themselves at “outstanding doers” but need to see themselves as “outstanding leaders.” They often unconsciously fear that the behaviors associated with being a sPow leader—doing through others, not always getting credit, etc.—make it difficult for them to “be outstanding.” The goal is to help them merely become “outstanding” in a different way—as a leader rather than a doer. They should then be given the task of creating a list of the attributes of an outstanding leader. Typically, that list will reflect the qualities they already possess, and read like the description of a Three. The coach should help them revise the list and refocus it on the more appropriate behaviors: developing people, delegating effectively, sharing credit, influencing, etc. A useful reminder for Ennea-type Three (and other high nAch) leaders is that if they are doing their subordinates’ jobs for them rather than doing the job of the leader, they are under-performers rather than over-achievers.

Eights

Eights are “striving to be powerful.” Again, it is hard to believe that McClelland is not copying directly from the Enneagram literature about Eights when describing people with a high power need. Eights are driven to take control and seek dragons to slay. They naturally accumulate the resources and capabilities necessary to shape their environment and influence those around them. Eights

are frequently seen in leadership roles; in fact, most Eights would say they struggle with understanding how to behave when they are not leading.

In Molina's words, Eights "embody the will to power, to gain control and emotional mastery both of themselves and their surroundings. From an early age, they exert their will like it is a muscle until it becomes like steel; they control with an iron hand their personal possessions, their space, and people relevant to their lives" (Molina, p. 47).

Reading McClelland's descriptions of Stage II and Stage III power is like peering into the psyche of an Eight. The challenge Eights face, as McClelland points out, is making sure that they are acting as mature, institutional leaders rather than immature personal-power leaders. Since Eights tend to be high nPow to begin with, the work of the coach should be helping the Eight become more mature in their need for and use of power.

The first issue Eights need to be helped with is developing self-control or, as McClelland calls it, "inhibition." They need to understand that self-control is actually a sign of a more powerful person than is the tendency to act impulsively on one's emotions; that power over oneself is the ultimate power. Second, Eights need help seeing that they can be far more powerful through influence than through force; that the blunt and often-abrasive tactics that worked well for them in their younger days cause collateral damage at high levels of leadership that ultimately undermine their effectiveness. Finally, Eights need help to discriminate between when their actions are an attempt to satisfy their own needs and when they are truly for the good of the whole. The coach can use their need for power in adaptive ways—helping the Eight reach for mature Stage III and IV power rather than be trapped by immature Stage II and III power.

While the topic far exceeds the scope of this article, it is necessary to briefly mention the subtypes here. With all the previous caveats about predictability and probability still in place, it is difficult to ignore that the traps associated with the personal power leader seem more frequently seen in the Sexual Eight, and that it seems easier for the Social Eight to develop the qualities seen in institutional, or social, power leaders. The implications of this are wide-ranging and perhaps deserve a follow-up article.

Final Words

Again, Ennea-type is not destiny. Nines will not necessarily fall victim to the traps of the need for affiliation, Threes of the need for achievement, or Eights for the need for power, and each of them can be helped to the kind of institutional leaders that McClelland described. The beauty of the Enneagram, however, is that it points to probabilities; to potential patterns that are more likely than others. Understanding these patterns and how they relate to power can make leaders much more effective and help them develop healthy, pro-social leadership skills. Ignoring the patterns and their correlation to power issues keeps power issues relegated to the shadows, where they are sure to cause trouble.

Sources

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