

# THE FUEL OF LEADERSHIP AFFLICTION: UNCHECKED POWER

I charge thee, fling away ambition: by that sin fell the angels—Shakespeare, King Henry the VIII

Organizations place leaders on a pedestal and hand them a megaphone. They give them access to “hard” organizational resources (capital, tools, personnel) as well as “soft” assets (the authority to promote or demote, the right to grant job security or take it away, and to give or withhold recognition). Organizations expect top leaders to use these resources wisely and leverage the privileged visibility and influence provided them to serve the common good. Things Get “Interesting.”

**LEADERS, DUE TO THEIR AUTHORITY AND POSITION, CONTROL RESOURCES THAT PEOPLE WANT, GIVING THEM REAL, “EVERYDAY” POWER OVER OTHERS.**

This is a simple fact of organizational life. Epictetus (AD 55-135) a Greek stoic philosopher living in Rome, observed that no one was afraid of Caesar himself. Yes. Caesar was the most powerful person on earth. But, no one “is afraid of Caesar himself, but he is afraid of death, exile, loss of property, prison, disenfranchisement. Nor does anyone love Caesar himself unless in some way Caesar is a person of great merit; but we love wealth, a tribuneship, a praetorship, a consulship. When we love and hate and fear these things, it needs must be that those who control them are masters over us.” French physicist and philosopher Pascal was more to the point. Power comes from “the possession of things that men covet.”

Top leaders control “things men covet.” These coveted items may take the form of recognition, financial gain, job security, promotions and increased access to scarce resources such as the privilege of “sitting at the table” when consequential decisions are made, and so on.

And here’s where things get “interesting.” The leader afflicted by emotional immaturity and destructive narcissism is now, by reason of their position and power, afforded the means to afflict the entire organization. This is especially true if the power is ample and unchecked. Or put another way,

**UNTIL EMOTIONAL IMMATURITY AND DESTRUCTIVE NARCISSISM ARE MIXED WITH POWER AND POSITION, THE AFFLICTED INDIVIDUAL IS NOT LIKELY TO AFFLICT AN ENTIRE ORGANIZATION.**

While they exert a negative influence to be sure, and painful and destructive though it may be, their afflicting attitudes and behaviors are relatively confined to interpersonal relationships or perhaps a team. But, when mixed with the organizational power of a top leadership position, especially if the mechanisms of accountability are not in place, the attitudes and behaviors associated with emotional immaturity and destructive narcissism are intensified and magnified.

Unaccountable power “weaponizes” this toxic brew, afflicting not only individuals but now also the entire organization.

Here’s how it works.

The Fuel of Leadership Affliction. Two principles drive and shape the toxic interaction between emotional immaturity, destructive narcissism and access to power.

## **PRINCIPLE # 1:**

Power is inherently corrupting, and those who have access to it often abuse it, expressing it outside of the limits of legitimate authority. It is naïve to think that power is neutral and that it matters only that we use it well. Power is only neutral to the degree human nature is neutral. And it is not. Power is a seductive force because many human beings, perhaps most, are highly “seducible.” Power does something to people. It does more to those in leadership positions with an ample power supply. Historian Will Durant observed,

“Corruption is natural in government because it is natural in man. Few who reach the summit can be acquitted of vanity or deceit.”

The point is simple but with a twist of irony. The very qualities employed to secure a position of power—to reach the summit—are decidedly not those qualities that enable that person, once in the position of power, to use the power they now possess in service of others. Instead, the qualities that “got them there” are often sourced in emotional immaturity and destructive narcissism (more on this in Part II of the series).

## **PRINCIPLE # 2:**

Power, while not universally corrupting, does reveal the “deep character inclinations” of the leader for better or worse. Lord Acton’s famous aphorism,

“Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely”

is a reminder of the dangerous combination of the dark side of human nature and unchecked power. But is the statement absolutely true? Acton said power tends to corrupt. As presidential historian James Barber noted,

“Power may corrupt—or ennoble or frighten or inspire or distract a man. The result depends on his propensity for, his vulnerability to, particular kinds of corruption cleansing—in short, on his character.”

Barber observed that power seems not to have corrupted George Washington in the least. The possession of political power seems to have lifted men like Harry Truman to perform beyond what others thought him capable. And presidential power seems to have made Lincoln a better leader. As John Maynard noted, power developed in Lincoln “a grandeur and generosity of soul.” Check back to read more on the fuel of leadership affliction as you power up your New Year.

Lyndon Johnson could not stand to have his power and authority challenged. As a boyhood friend recounts, “Johnson had to be the head and he had to make sure everyone knew it.” Another boyhood friend remembered, “He (Johnson) had a baseball, and the rest of us didn’t have one. We were all very poor. None of us had a ball but him. Lyndon wanted to pitch. He wasn’t worth a darn as a pitcher, but if we didn’t let him pitch, he’d take his ball and go home. So, yeah, we’d let him pitch.” If Johnson couldn’t play as THE alpha, he didn’t care to play

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