

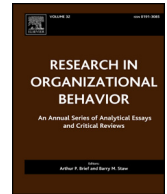


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The dysfunctions of power in teams: A review and emergent conflict perspective

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ABSTRACT

We review the new and growing body of work on power in teams and use this review to develop an emergent theory of how power impacts team outcomes. Our paper offers three primary contributions. First, our review highlights potentially incorrect assumptions that have arisen around the topic of power in teams and documents the areas and findings that appear most robust in explaining the effects of power on teams. Second, we contrast the findings of this review with what is known about the effects of power on individuals and highlight the directionally oppositional effects of power that emerge across different levels of analysis. Third, we integrate findings across levels of analysis into an emergent theory which explains why and when the benefits of power for individuals may paradoxically explain the potentially negative effects of power on team outcomes. We elaborate on how individual social comparisons within teams where at least one member has power increase intra-team power sensitivity, which we define as a state in which team members are excessively perceptive of, affected by, and responsive to resources. We theorize that when power-sensitized teams experience resource threats (either stemming from external threats or personal threats within the team), these threats will ignite internal power sensitivities and set into play performance-detracting intra-team power struggles. This conflict account of power in teams integrates and organizes past findings in this area to explain why and when power negatively affects team-level outcomes, and opens the door for future research to better understand why and when power may benefit team outcomes when power's dark side for teams is removed.

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In May 1985, Apple’s CEO, John Sculley, proposed a plan to the board of directors to remove Steve Jobs from his beloved Macintosh group and to put himself in charge of New Product Development. Sculley and Jobs had not been seeing eye-to-eye about resource distributions within Apple. Jobs had wanted to invest more resources into the new Macintosh, while Sculley wanted to focus on the older but more successful Apple II. After Jobs heard of Sculley’s power move, he was furious and immediately strategized a counterattack to get rid of Sculley and re-take Apple. This epic power struggle between these two high-power figures (which tormented Apple for many years and led to Jobs’ temporary resignation) is now frequently told as a cautionary tale in Silicon Valley for how relationships between founders and their CEO replacements can go awry.

When power emerges as a bone of contention in teams, such as in the case between Sculley and Jobs, team outcomes can be severely impaired (Greer & Van Kleef, 2010). Understanding when and why power can become contested in teams, or groups of three to ten people whom work together interdependently towards a common task goal (Argote & McGrath, 1993; Hackman, 1992; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006), has therefore become an important area of research within organizational behavior. To illustrate, numerous team-level studies on power (e.g., Bloom, 1999; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Greer & Van Kleef, 2010; Van Bunderen, Greer et al., 2017) have shown that power and politics go hand-in-hand in teams with a single power holder (i.e., high power-dispersed teams; e.g., Bloom, 1999; Greer & Van Kleef, 2010; Shaw et al., 2002; Van Bunderen, Greer et al., 2017; Van Bunderen, Van Knippenberg et al., 2017; for a meta-analysis on team power-dispersion, see Greer, De Jong, Schouten, & Dannals, 2017) or multiple power holders (i.e. high power-level teams; e.g., Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Greer, Caruso, & Jehn, 2011; Groysberg, Polzer, & Elfenbein, 2011; Hildreth & Anderson, 2016; Shen & Cannella, 2002). In teams with lower power dispersion and/or power-levels, power struggles and conflicts appear to be substantially less. Power struggles, in turn, have routinely been demonstrated to harm the ability of teams to function and perform (e.g., Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Greer & Van Kleef, 2010; Kilduff, Willer, & Anderson, 2016; Van Bunderen, Van Knippenberg et al., 2017; Van Bunderen, Greer et al., 2017).

The research which has documented the negative effects of power in teams is important in helping

organizations learn how to optimize team effectiveness and to prevent team performance failures. However, the ability of research to be successfully applied to organizations depends ultimately on the strength of the underlying paradigm (Pfeffer, 1993). Therefore, concerns arise from the growing disconnect between this line of research on the negative picture of power in teams (e.g., Tarakci, Greer, & Jehn, 2016) and the positive picture of power that has been documented in individual-level research on power (for reviews, see Fiske, 2010; Galinsky et al., 2012; Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2016; Guinote, 2007; Smith & Galinsky, 2010; Tost, 2016). Namely, power has been shown to offer individual actors a host of benefits, including an increased desire and ability to pursue goals (e.g., Guinote, 2007; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), enhanced executive functioning (Smith, Dijksterhuis, & Wigboldus, 2008), and even improved life satisfaction (Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012; Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013). Work in this line has also shown that these benefits are relatively stable – low power individuals were found to lack the ability or motivation to change their position, and to often (paradoxically) support the systems and hierarchy which suppress them (e.g., Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). This line of work was also extended to initial predictions on how power should shape teams, with initial key theories on power in groups and teams proposing power to be a stable and beneficial quality for teams (e.g., Halevy, Chou, & Galinsky, 2011; Tannenbaum, 1962; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). However, the emerging empirical findings on power in teams suggest that power may shape teams differently than it does individuals. While power may make individuals feel empowered and lead them to pursue their goals (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003), power within teams may actually make people more focused on their dependencies and vulnerabilities towards one another (e.g., Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Van Bunderen, Greer et al., 2017; Van Bunderen, Van Knippenberg et al., 2017) and may resultantly often be contested and unstable (e.g., Greer & Van Kleef, 2010; Hays & Bendersky, 2015).

We seek here to understand how the emergent work on the dark side of power in teams can be reconciled with the long-standing literature on the benefits of power to individuals as well as with initial theories on the functionality of power for teams. We begin with the general premise that context matters – contexts can widely vary in organizational research

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