

## Power Literacy: Own and Leverage Your Power

*Power emerges first  
from the imagined.*

Eric Liu

You're More Powerful Than You Think 2017

In this article, you will learn the basics of power literacy in order to enhance your effectiveness.

I have found a surprising paucity of helpful, nuanced guidance about power relative to other issues in the organizational literature. For example, the word “power” is absent in the index or topic headings of multiple leadership textbooks. Likewise, a review of conflict in healthcare yielded very few articles which highlighted power despite ubiquitous power differentials on healthcare teams. (1)

### The true nature of power

Also, in my experience, power in organizations is predominantly seen as top-down and controlling. Due to this negative view, guidance emphasizes countering as opposed to harnessing power. For example, a common recommendation is to eliminate layers of leadership—also called “flattening the hierarchy.” But, such structural solutions too frequently hurt morale and productivity. (2)

Recently, I discovered the work of Eric Liu, an activist who writes about similar experiences in the civic arena. He observes that illiteracy about power is widespread in our society because it is seen as inherently bad or evil or Machiavellian. So, it is uncomfortable to talk about power. (3)

Negative views of power are completely understandable. Power has been and will always be used for bad and evil purposes. But, as Liu states, the true nature of power is neither good or bad. It just *is*. Its impact depends on clarity about the type of power we use and our intended purpose.

### Two important types of power in organizations

In organizations, two types are particularly important--Relational Power and Positional Power. All of us have Relational Power. For positive impact, it means getting involved to influence others toward *collaboratively* defined goals and solutions. Strong evidence links collaboration to better results.

Paradoxically, Positional Power, the authority to make decisions about direction and expectations, is necessary to foster aligned actions through Relational Power. For positive impact, decisions must be primarily participatory which means assuring the opportunity to give input and problem-solve concerns.

### The risks of power

Psychological studies show that having power puts us all at risk for expressing it in negative ways. Especially under stress, Relational Power can quickly shift from collaboration to win-lose

debates. Positional Power can quickly shift from participatory decisions to top-down directives. Sustaining positive power requires strength of purpose and constant vigilance.

At times, all of us think of power negatively. Staying negative evokes powerlessness. Seeking power literacy enables effective action with integrity.

### References

1. Kim, Sara *A New Focus in Healthcare Conflict Research* **Journal of Community and Public Health Nursing** Volume 3, Issue 4, 2017
2. Baker, Neil [Flattened Hierarchy = Increased Empowerment?](#)
3. Liu, Eric **You're More Powerful Than You Think: a citizen's guide to making change happen** Public Affairs 2017

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## About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership Strategies*. This means using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for more than twelve years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at [neilbakerconsulting.com](http://neilbakerconsulting.com).