

By Invitation

The unbearable weight of power

Does power corrupt? Research suggests that it can, and often does. Worst of all, people with weak moral identities tend to abuse power when they get it.



David Chan

For The Straits Times

When leaders at the workplace or in politics behave badly, people often go: "Power corrupts."

The statement is used broadly to mean that power has led one to behave in ways that violate norms and values. The violations may be cultural or moral, such as making offensive remarks and inappropriate demands, or legal, such as falsifying documents and misusing funds.

Sometimes, the phrase "power corrupts" is used in conversations to refer to how someone has changed for the worse after acquiring new power, such as a promotion to senior management or winning an election.

Does power actually corrupt? Or is it that corruptible people are attracted to power and more likely to get it, so that corruption is the correlate rather than the consequence of having power? Does power always corrupt? Could power not enable people to make good things happen that benefit others?

The answers to these questions have implications for practical decisions, such as selecting leaders, designing systems to check and balance power, and when or who to give more or less power to.

POWERFUL PERSONS BEHAVING BADLY

When powerful people misbehave, people are likely to think that it is their powerful position that makes them misbehave, rather than other personal traits or circumstance.

This is due to three reasons. The explanation that power induces misbehaviour is coherent because we understand that a person in power can make others do what he wants. It is conspicuous because many scandals involving politicians and senior executives are high-profile ones that come easily to our mind. And finally, it is common because most people have come across powerful people behaving badly. Thus, the notion that "power corrupts" becomes a convincing conclusion.

But what is the scientific evidence that power corrupts?

Studies on workplace incivility and deviant behaviours show that disrespectful behaviours, bullying and sexual harassment are committed mostly by persons in

positions of power. This is not surprising since powerful persons are more likely to get away with misbehaviours.

What will surprise many are the findings from laboratory experiments showing that ordinary and decent people can end up doing bad things when they have power.

In these experiments, participants were randomly put into a position that has either high power or low power, so the findings can be explained by power rather than personality. Findings from these experiments consistently showed that participants in high-power positions were more likely to engage in various deviant behaviours such as cheating.

They also make more biased moral judgments. In the experiments, participants induced to be in either high- or low-power positions were asked to rate the moral severity of the same deviant behaviour hypothetically committed by themselves or others. Results showed that, whether it is over-reporting travel expenses at work, under-declaring income for taxes or speeding when late for an appointment, high-power participants were harsher than low-power participants when rating a transgression committed by others, but more lenient when rating the transgression committed by themselves.

Powerful persons who condemn the transgression of others while being less harsh on themselves are engaging in moral hypocrisy. But why are they not deterred by a sense of guilt? Studies suggest two possibilities.

First, a sense of entitlement may accompany the self-righteous judgment. Experiments showed that when the high-power participants are led to believe that their power is legitimate, they are even more likely to make self-righteous judgments.

Second, studies have shown that persons in power are less likely to be empathic or good at perspective-taking (understanding other people's perspectives). If they do not see or understand the angst and agony they have caused to others, they have no thoughts that would make them feel guilty.

The troubling conclusion from the research is that power can and does corrupt, and it can happen to normally decent people.

THE PERSON MATTERS

But does this mean that bad people do more bad things if they have power, and good people may do bad things if they are given power?

It turns out that the nature of the person in power matters a lot.

Recent experiments suggest that power reveals the true nature of a

person's character because it removes the constraints that normally exist, and allows him to act freely in ways that are consistent with his values, goals and interests.

In one experiment published in 2011, Dr Michael Kraus and his colleagues induced participants to feel that they are in either high- or low-power positions, and then asked both groups to describe themselves three times when they are in the presence of their family, friends and co-workers, respectively.

Participants with low power described themselves differently in the three situations, suggesting that they varied their behaviours and tried to accommodate their traits to those around them. In contrast, participants with high power described themselves consistently in the three situations, suggesting that they tended to behave freely in ways that are consistent with their traits.

In another piece of research, Dr Katherine DeCelles and her colleagues demonstrated, using an experiment and a survey study with working adults, that power can heighten pre-existing moral tendencies.

The researchers measured the participants' pre-existing moral identities by asking them the extent to which they see certain

moral values, such as fairness and compassion, as important to their self-identity.

Results showed that those with high moral-identity scores were less likely to break rules or misbehave and more likely to engage in pro-social behaviours when they had power. This was directly opposite to those with low moral-identity scores, who exhibited the usual pattern of more misbehaviours and fewer pro-social behaviours when they had power.

These and similar studies showed that power does not necessarily corrupt. On the contrary, for a person with good moral character, power accentuates his positive traits and enables the person to do things that benefit others.

In the real world outside the laboratory, there are many individuals who use their position of power to do good and benefit many people. They include policymakers, religious leaders, educators, union leaders, business leaders, celebrities, philanthropists and civil society advocates.

Power does not always corrupt – it can be used to do either good or bad. It can bring out the best, and not just the worst, in individuals. Power helps translate an intention to actual behaviour, but it is the person, and not power, that determines whether it will be a good or bad behaviour.



WHAT TO DO WITH POWER

Power per se is not the problem, since power can either harm or help. How then to minimise power corrupting and maximise power doing good? Here are some possible approaches.

- Ensure a robust system of checks and balances. This is not a complicated audit with comprehensive technical details, which will only hinder effective functioning. A robust check is real when relevant information is available and accessible, and independent when it can operate without fear or favour.

- Reinforce a culture of zero tolerance for wrongdoing. In such a culture, everyone believes that wrongdoings will be objectively and swiftly dealt with, no matter how high the position of the transgressor. There must also be effective processes to protect whistle-blowers, while discouraging malicious allegations and ensuring a thorough investigation and fair hearing for the accused.

- Prevent power from breeding complacency and a sense of entitlement. To do this, seek feedback and self-monitor honestly. Know the ground and see things from another's perspective. Be humble and open to other viewpoints, especially those of the less powerful and those with good intentions. React constructively to information contrary to the preferred position.

- Build a culture of positive values. These values include respect for others, compassion for the disadvantaged, and concern for the collective good. They help prevent power from corrupting, and enable power to benefit others and improve their lives.

- Emphasise that character is fundamental. When selecting leaders in an election or for an assignment, look for more than competence. Recognise the values that their actions reflect. Scrutinise character, not just academic achievements or technical skills.

So, the question is not whether power corrupts. The research is clear that it certainly can, and unfortunately it tends to, but fortunately it is not the case that it always will. Power can be negative and destructive, but it can also be positive and uplifting.

We need to guard against the perils of power, but also galvanise goodness from power. Power matters, so it matters who is in power, and who we give power to.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

- The writer is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute, and Lee Kuan Yew Fellow and professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University.