Claim Your Power
By Michelle LaBrosse, PMP®, Chief Cheetah and Founder of Cheetah Learning, and
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Have you ever looked at someone in power and wondered—*how did they get there?*
Is there some special power gene that makes certain people rise to the top of the
power hierarchy, but not others?

In a popular study in 1959, social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven
identified five types of power: Legitimate, Reward, Expert, Referent, and Coercive.

Throughout our careers as project managers, we wear many hats, and therefore, we
utilize different types of power. Sometimes we come into a project as an expert in a
particular field (*expert power*). At other times, we have the ability to give or deny
resources for a project (*reward and coercive power*). If you're named the Project
Manager on a project, this very title brings you a form a power (*legitimate power*).
And when we have no formal sources of power, we have to rely on our likeability
factor and ability to influence others (*referent power*).

Let's take a moment to delve a little further into each source of power and how you
can use each, no matter where you are in your career.

Legitimate Power – This type of power comes from the belief that a person has a
formal right to make demands. For example, a CFO has legitimate power over an
intern working for them, as they are higher in the organizational ranks.

While we can't always choose our titles and organizational hierarchy in our
workplaces, we *can* choose what kind of project management titles come after our
name (PMP®, PMI-ACP®, CAPM®, etc.).

We polled 70 Cheetah PMPs with various levels of experience, and asked them—
how has earning your PMP® (and gaining legitimate power) changed your career?
Here is what we found:

- Enhanced reputation within PM community (21%)
- Promoted within current organization (17%)
- Obtained a new job (16%)

These letters behind your name give you legitimate power translate to real career
improvements.

Reward Power - This type of power comes from the ability to reward/compensate
another person. Lets say you have the resources that a project team needs. In the
past, you typically provided the resources with no questions asked, and when the
project team says, "thank you," and you say, "no problem." Now, what is the problem
here?

According the Robert Cialdini, author of *Influence*, the time when someone says "thank you" as a reward for something you've done is the crucial moment at which you have power. And here is how you can grab that power – instead of saying, "no problem," you can say, "of course, I know that you would do the same for me." This small change in semantics enforces the rule of reciprocity, and gives you power in future dealings with this party, as now they owe you one.

Expert Power – This type of power is based on a person's superior skill or knowledge in a certain area of expertise. In what areas are you an expert? If you can't recognize it, think to what people ask you to help with most often. Maybe it's helping to negotiate a contract or to do a risk analysis.

Ask others what areas they think you excel in, and if you also enjoy doing these activities, you are well on your way to becoming an expert in that area. No matter what skill/area you ultimately choose, deliberately practice becoming better to develop the area(s) of expertise, and you will experience more power.

Referent Power – This type of power deals with your likeability factor. If you think going out to lunch with your coworkers and attending company-sponsored events is a waste of time, think again. The relationships and bonds that you build with your work associates can result in real power. People would rather work with people that they know and like then those that they don't know and don't care for.

For this reason, networking can bring you power as well. The more you network outside your immediate circle of friends and coworkers, the more opportunities (and power) you will find as a result of these connections. Take inventory of your likeability factor and work to improve it by having more meaningful connections with your close peers as well as broader connections throughout your industry.

Coercive Power – This type of power comes from the belief that one can punish another in order to achieve compliance from them. This is usually tied to legitimate power. For example, a boss has the authority to reprimand an employee for not complying with a request. However, this type of power can also be tied to reward/expert power if you have information/skills that could help someone, but by withholding this help, you are, in effect, punishing them. While you may want to use this power sparingly (or else risk losing referent power), it can only help you if you recognize when the opportunity exists to use coercive power, and go from there.

The next time you feel powerless, stop and think—*what do I have control of in this situation?* Chances are, it is a lot more than you originally thought.

May the power be with you!

About the Author:

Michelle LaBrosse, PMP, is an entrepreneurial powerhouse with a penchant for making success easy, fun, and fast. She is the founder of **Cheetah Learning**, the **author** of the **Cheetah Success Series**, and a prolific **blogger** whose mission is to bring Project Management to the masses.

Cheetah Learning is a virtual company with 100 employees, contractors, and licensees worldwide. To date, more than 50,000 people have become "Cheetahs" using Cheetah Learning's innovative Project Management and accelerated learning techniques.

Recently honored by the Project Management Institute (PMI®), Cheetah Learning was named Professional Development Provider of the Year at the 2008 PMI® Global Congress. A dynamic keynote speaker and industry thought leader, Michelle was previously recognized by PMI as one of the 25 Most Influential Women in Project Management in the world.

Michelle's articles have appeared in more than 100 publications and websites around the world. Her monthly column, the **Know How Network**, is carried by over 400 publications.

She is a graduate of the Harvard Business School's Owner/President Management (OPM) program and also holds engineering degrees from Syracuse University and the University of Dayton.