

Skillbook

Building Expert Power

Leadership
Skills



Mindtools

Building Expert Power Skillbook

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1. Introduction

There are many different types of leaders, and they all have different sources of leadership power.

Some of these sources are highly effective and motivating, while others can leave us feeling unmotivated, uninspired or even oppressed.

People have been studying the causes of these differences for a long time. And, while opinions vary on what makes a good leader, there are two things that we do know for certain about leadership:

1. It's about much more than being responsible for other people.
2. It's a role that you can **choose**.

This means that you can be a leader in your own way, even if you're not in a formal position of leadership.

This **Skillbook** encourages you to think about how you can start using “expert power” as the foundation of your approach to leadership. We'll explore:

- Different types of power.
- What expert power is and why it's so important.
- How to build, maintain and use expert power.

By the end of this Skillbook, you'll understand how expert power can make you a more effective leader, and you'll be able to apply the skills that you've learned straight away, whether or not you're in a leadership role.

2. Leadership Power Basics

Having responsibility for people and projects does not automatically make you a leader. Leadership is a process, rather than a position – you identify what has to be done, influence others to achieve it, make sure that the job is done well, and build an even stronger team.

You can learn to be a successful leader by developing effective leadership skills and behaviors. But how do you know which approach to take?

Social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven identified six bases of power that leaders can draw on. The six bases fall into two categories:

- **Positional** – formal power derived from your position within a hierarchy.
- **Personal** – informal power that comes from your own skills and qualities.

The ability to draw on the right power base at the right time – and knowing how to strike the appropriate balance between them – is key to becoming an effective leader. Let's look at these bases of power in more detail.

1.1. Positional Power Bases

There are four positional power bases:

- **Legitimate Power** – comes with a particular position or title.
- **Reward Power** – comes from the authority to give rewards.
- **Coercive Power** – comes from the ability to punish.
- **Informational Power** – comes from exclusive access to information.

Many people in positions of authority will possess these bases of positional power, but that's not necessarily enough to make them good leaders.

Think of “the carrot and the stick” – positional power can be like the “stick.” Fear of punishment, or even the promise of reward, often does little to motivate and inspire people in the long term. And there will likely be negative consequences for people who rely too much on positional power, or for those who misuse it.



Action:

Think of leaders you've worked with in the past who used positional power alone. In other words, their power was not based on their knowledge or expertise, on setting a great example to others, or on personal qualities such as charisma (we'll look at these later). Write their names in the table, below.

Next, identify the type of positional power that each person held. Were they powerful just because they were the boss? Did they lead by intimidation or coercion? Did they have access to certain information, and withhold it from others? Think of at least one base of positional power for each person.

If you can't think of an example from your own life, consider a generic group who might use a particular source of power. For example, the popular kids at school who were thought of as leaders because they had the power to reward others with inclusion in their group.

Finally, analyze the long-term effectiveness of each person's power. Would people continue to follow them, even when circumstances changed?

Person	Base of Power	Effectiveness

This exercise shows that true leaders do not necessarily need positional power. Some people can inspire you to work hard, and can make a real difference to your life, without being in a formal position of authority. Such individuals likely derive much of their power from personal or informal sources, although they may also have formal power in terms of their job titles or the ability to reward.

1.2. Personal Power Bases

Personal bases of power are:

- **Expert Power** – comes from having the knowledge, skills and experience that you need to lead, and from other people recognizing these abilities.
- **Referent Power** – comes from treating people well, setting a good example, demonstrating integrity, and behaving in such a way that team members seek to please you and emulate your behavior.
Charisma is a form of referent power that comes from the ability to project an attractive, charming or “magnetic” personality.

Personal sources of power are often the most compelling. But, when you can use both positional **and** personal power, and balance them effectively, you have taken the first steps toward becoming a “transformational” leader – someone who has integrity, inspires people with a shared vision of the future, sets clear goals, motivates team members, and communicates effectively.



Action:

Take some time to think about people who have exerted informal, personal power in your life. Then, complete the table on the next page. Consider the following points:

1. What were their sources of power? (Check all that apply.)
2. Did they also hold positional power? (Check the box if they did.)
3. Compare their effectiveness with the people you identified in the previous exercise (leaders who had only positional power).

Person	Base of Power				Effectiveness
	Positional	Expert	Referent	Charisma	

Do the people that you've identified have more than one type of personal power? If so, they were likely influential leaders, whether or not they also had positional power. Their leadership likely had a positive impact on you, too.



Action:

Think about your own sources of power. Remember, regardless of whether you're in a leadership role, you do have power. Write down your personal sources of power in the table on the next page.

Power Source	How I Have Developed and Used This Power Source
Legitimate	
Reward	
Coercive	
Informational	
Expert	
Referent	
Charisma	

You can clearly see from this exercise that you do have power, and the ability to exercise it. In the next chapter, we'll learn how you can build on this to increase your expert power and maximize your effectiveness as a leader.

3. Building and Using Expert Power

When you're a leader, your team members look to you for direction and support. They have to believe that you know what you're doing, and that you have the skills to guide them to success. That's why expert power is such an important part of effective leadership.

When people see you as an expert, they trust you. For example, we trust computer technicians to recover data from our hard drives because of their expertise. And we employ public relations professionals to handle media inquiries, because that's what they're trained to do. This is the same sort of trust that your team members have in you when you're the expert in your field.

Along with trust in your skills comes trust in your judgment. When you have expert power, team members look to you for guidance. Your knowledge enables you to think critically when problems arise, and to find the solution to a problem. Your experience gives you the ability to see through fake news, or to know whether a "quick fix" found on Google will do more harm than good.

All of this will lead your team to respect you and your abilities.

What's more, expert power can allow you to influence people's behavior, and to motivate them to do great work. And your team members' respect for you means that you'll likely experience fewer "people problems" than non-expert leaders.

3.1. Building Expertise

By definition, an expert has specialized skills and abilities. You know what you're doing, and you understand how to secure a positive outcome.

But you can't be an expert in everything. So, to be a leader with expert power, you have to identify three things: your current expertise; where you **have** to become an expert; and where you **want** to become an expert.

You should also be clear about what you **don't** know, so that you can bring in other experts when you need them.

3.1.1. Current Expertise

Building expert power starts with understanding your current skills. When you know your areas of expertise, it's much easier to identify leadership roles where you can thrive.



Action:

Use the table, below, to record your current expertise.

First, list the areas where you're already an expert. Then, record the credentials you have that make you an expert. Include experience, education, awards, and so on.

When you've made the effort to become an expert, it makes sense to ensure that your achievements are recognized. If you've gained a professional qualification, held a high-ranking position, worked for a very successful company, or been given a prestigious award, people should know about it.

Don't forget that "soft skills" are important, too. You may have expertise in conflict resolution from a previous job, for example, or have valuable experience of facilitating group training sessions. Make yourself the "go-to" person for these skills.

But, however you promote your expertise, make sure that it's appropriate for your organization and doesn't come across as bragging. For example, writing an article in the trade press, or on LinkedIn, is a far better way to showcase your knowledge than reminding people every day that you graduated top of your class at Harvard!



Action:

In the last column of the table, below, write down how you will promote your expertise.

Area of Expertise	Credentials				Method of Promotion
	Experience	Education	Awards	Other	

Remember, you can't be an expert in everything, and earning a credential doesn't necessarily make you an expert. So, don't claim to be an expert in something if you're not – this will only damage your credibility.

3.1.2. Additional Expertise

To increase your expert power it's important not to limit yourself to your current areas of expertise. Aim to expand your knowledge, so that you continue to grow and develop. Consider the following:

1. **Expertise you need now** – you may have gained plenty of skills and knowledge in your career so far, but do you have the right ones to be exceptionally effective (and respected) in your current role? Are your skills up to date? Do you need to develop additional areas of expertise?
2. **Expertise you need for the future** – do you have the skills you need for your next promotion? Some experts struggle when they are promoted to a management position, because the skill set required is very different.
3. **Expertise you want** – you may want to build certain skills because you're interested in them, and as part of your personal development. Make sure that you focus on the areas that are most important to you.



Action:

Think about how you would like your career to develop, and the expertise you'll need to make this happen. Record your thoughts in the table, below.

Then, think about specific ways to develop that expertise. List as many activities as you can, including further education and training, and consider how much "hands on" experience you may need.

I want/need to develop expertise in:
How I will do this:

I want/need to develop expertise in:
How I will do this:
I want/need to develop expertise in:
How I will do this:

3.2. Maintaining Your Expertise

When you've built up your expert power, you have to work hard to maintain it.

The first step is to understand your limitations. Some people think that leaders should know everything, but this is not true: the most effective leaders are those who know when to call on other experts for their skills or opinions.

People trust leaders to know how to achieve the team's objectives, but they don't expect them to do every task themselves. Others will quickly see through you if you claim to be something you're not. You will be seen as inauthentic, and people may even start to question your abilities in areas where you really are an expert.



Action:

Think of a time when a leader you worked with overstepped the boundaries of their expertise. What was the result? What can you learn from the experience? Write your answers in the table, below.

Briefly describe the situation. Who was the leader? What was your role?
What did the leader do to compromise their credibility?
What can you learn from the experience?

As an expert, you may know a lot about a subject or task, but this doesn't mean that you're better or smarter than anyone else. Take care to ensure that the people around you feel comfortable expressing their ideas, or asking questions. Expertise is a positive source of power, so make every effort to support your team members, to be mindful of their self-esteem, and to avoid making them feel inferior.

3.3. Using Your Expert Power

There are three key ways that you can use your expert power to influence and motivate others. These are:

3.3.1. Stay Informed

As an expert, you can make use of rational persuasion – logical arguments and facts – to convince others to join or agree with you. However, this relies

on objective information, so it's critical that you stay up to date with what's happening in your projects and in your field in general. Otherwise, people may question your expertise, and this could impact your ability to influence them.

3.3.2. Stay Connected

Your ability to motivate and influence your team members with your expert power depends on remaining approachable and connected to them. If you keep your distance, you'll likely stop sharing and communicating your expertise.

So, be generous with your knowledge, and seek out opportunities to help people to get things done and to progress in their careers. If it's appropriate, consider becoming a mentor – this gives you the opportunity to make a positive difference in another person's life, and to develop your own skills, too.

No matter how extensive your knowledge, wear it lightly and with humility. Be patient, and take the time to coach or advise people when they need it. And, where possible, allow them to work out solutions for themselves, and to keep ownership of their ideas.

Using your expertise in this way shouldn't threaten your position. The more you invest in helping the people around you, the more your professional value will grow, and the more powerful your position can become.

Sharing your knowledge also helps to break down silos in your organization, enables you to delegate more effectively, and helps to prevent "knowledge gaps" if you are absent or leave the company.

3.3.3. Be Confident in a Crisis

Being confident in a crisis can be a challenge. When a crisis occurs, your team will look to an expert for direction. They'll expect you to know what to do, and you must meet that expectation if you are to maintain your expert status.

But, remember that you don't always have to find the "perfect" solution – a "good" one is often enough. In fact, the final outcome of your decision can sometimes be less important than your willingness to take the lead.



Action:

Think about a situation where you were, are, or will be the expert, and answer the questions on the next page. How will you apply the three approaches to expert power, discussed above, to maintain your expert status?

Situation description:
What will you do to stay informed, and to build expertise?
What will you do to stay connected to people?
What risks and contingencies should you prepare for?

4. Key Points

One of the best ways to become an effective leader is to increase your expert power. Expert power comes from developing the skills, knowledge and experience that you need to lead, and from gaining recognition for these abilities.

When you lead without expert power, it's much more difficult for you to achieve buy-in from team members, and to influence and motivate others.

But, when you have expert power as your power base, or use it to complement other sources of power, you can build on the trust and respect that your expertise inspires in people, positively influence your team members, and improve the work that you're doing.

Start building – and using – expert power today. You'll be a much more effective leader as a result!

