

Above, Below and Sideways: Exploring Soft Power Dynamics in Leadership Relationships

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Abstract

Although this conference is about the study of leadership, we prefer to consider the matter as leading. This move from noun to verb takes us into the relational sphere (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011), with a focus not on the leader alone but rather as an activity which necessarily involves others. Examining leading as a relationship rather than a role can be an enlightening perspective, showing for example how a hero leader is most likely to be accompanied by 'rescued' followers.

Our work on the metaphor of leading as a host (rather than a hero or servant) (McKergow, 2009, McKergow & Bailey, 2014) has led us to examine the different ways in which 'soft power' can play a part in leadership dynamics. The concept of soft power was originally developed in connection with international diplomacy (Nye, 2008). Soft power – the power of attraction, welcome, connection and potential positive consequences – can be seen alongside hard power – the power of coercion, threat, payment and potential negative consequences. In this paper we will present our smart power matrix, showing how combinations of hard and soft power can be used within the same leadership relationships and contexts.

In exploring the leadership potential of the host metaphor and (by extension) the host/guest relationship, we have been particularly struck by how host leaders can and do use soft power to build relationships. These relationships can then sustain through occasional deployments of hard power. Thinking invitationally, engaging with positive ends in mind, offering affirmative feedback and simply being interested are surprisingly potent means to build connections. This can be seen in contrast to relationships built on contracts, strict hierarchies and threats.

We will contrast the power dynamics of the hero leader with the host leader. In the first case, the hero is always operating with a backdrop of possible disappearance – they may abandon the field, to the detriment of their followers. The case of the host/guest relationship is more complex: hosts are required in all cultures to protect their guests, and yet they also have a role in serving their guests and meeting their needs within reason. This produces a paradox of power – the host is 'above' their guests in terms of being able to call the shots, and simultaneously 'below' their guests in being required to act in service. (We see this as combining aspects of servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) with a clearer line of responsibility on both sides.)

This host/guest relationship can form the basis for productive and practical leadership frameworks. It requires effort and input from both host (leader) and guests (followers) – but can produce a very two-way productive relationship. This is not an equal relationship (the host has the upper hand in the end) but one where all parties have a role in shaping what happens and have their parts to play. The cultural ubiquity of hosting and guesting – we all know what these things are and have participated in them ourselves - can play a major role in bringing this interesting power combination to the surface in organisations.

References

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