



# The Power Language of Collective Action

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**This discussion on “Power Languages” was recorded prior to the death of George Floyd and the subsequent protests that were organized in the aftermath. As such, we were unable to include a robust discussion or even an acknowledgement of how policing, race, and power have commingled throughout America’s history. In light of this, we’ve attached this addendum to the presentation to add clarity to our perspective on what power and power languages mean in this very moment.**

The concept of power is anchored at the center of every complex human society. It emanates outward and sets the boundaries of our individual and collective experiences. Like the force of gravity, power is inescapable. It envelops every facet of our lives. It dictates what we can do, where we can go, what we can say, and to an extent, what we can even imagine or hope for. And yet, it is virtually impossible to meaningfully define power. At the most basic level it means “to be able.” But beneath the surface it is a dense abstraction that has made it possible for us to coexist in large numbers.

Nonetheless, each of us has a deeply personal relationship with power that determines how we exist in the world and directs our interactions with others. For many of us, however, our connection to power is trapped inside of a black box that obstructs our ability to recognize it for what it really is. Power isn't an institution, a social order, or even a form of endowed strength. It's really just a name that we use to label the nuanced interpersonal exchanges that define our social lives.

Power is characterized by three core attributes that once understood allow it to be harnessed and wielded by anyone, even those who have been convinced of and entrenched in their own sense of impotence.

**Power is dynamic.** It is malleable, fluid, and defined by constant change. No entity is powerful forever. What rises will eventually fall.

**Power is relative.** Nothing can be powerful in and of itself. As an attribute, power is only meaningful in comparison.

**Power is situational.** Context ultimately determines what separates the powerful from the powerless. When the context changes, so too can the balance of power.

As human beings our desire for power stems from our psychological need for control. But our thirst for power has less to do with others and more to do with ourselves. We want autonomy. Control over ourselves is fundamental to our sense of wellbeing and it is often the motivation that drives our desire for power. That is ultimately what power languages are — attempts at the individual or collective level to exert a sense of control over our lives.

But sadly, many of us are conditioned by the broader culture to feel powerless. We are told implicitly that certain groups of people have a more legitimate claim to power; that power must embody specific attributes. As a result, we often adopt power languages born out of intimidation. We posture strength, weaponize manipulation, and engage in personal attacks all in an effort to muster a semblance of power. But the events of the past several weeks around the country are demonstrating that we have another mechanism to garner a sense of control.

A forty-six year old black man, George Floyd, died on May 25, 2020 while in the custody of the Minneapolis Police Department. He stood at six feet seven inches tall and weighed about 250 pounds, but on this fateful day he laid flat on his chest, gasping for air, and pleading for mercy. While Mr. Floyd certainly possessed a physical presence, in this country he was not what you would characterize as powerful. He was neither wealthy nor famous and he was not white. On that day in May, he was unable to exert control over his fleeting life.

But in the aftermath of his untimely death, a new power language has emerged. One focused on accountability and transparency that emboldens people to band together, to speak truth to power, and to focus our collective attention on an issue that has long been overlooked in our society. Protests against police brutality sprouted in over 140 cities across the country to assert a sense of control over the law enforcement institutions that have long wielded power at the people's expense. In a world where power is dynamic, relative, and situational, citizens armed with a little bit of courage and their smartphones are demonstrating that they can tap into a well of creative potential and harness power for the greater good.