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Power and Conflict: Hidden Dimensions of Communication, Participative Planning and Action

By

Benjamin V Lozare
Power and Conflict: Hidden Dimensions of Communication, Participative Planning and Action

Benjamin V. Lozare, Ph.d

"A Frenchman sitting in a cafe suddenly saw people running. "There goes the mob. I am their leader. I must follow them!"

A common tale

"Not I, but ten thousand clerks, rule Russia!"

An eighteenth century czar

"But whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: and whosoever of you will be chiefest, shall be servant of all.

From the Scriptures

The thesis of this paper is that power and conflict are essential elements of understanding the role of communication in nation building, albeit hidden ones. It will be argued that the study of communication should not be divorced from the context of power and conflict, two concepts which give communication much of its rationale, meaning and relevance.

If it can be assumed that all communication efforts result in greater understanding and harmony, then there is no need to be concerned with power and conflict at all.
However, it would be preposterous to assume this and it would be equally naive to assume that modern society can function without some people submitting their will to others.

Yet, while the exercise of power and the management of conflict are recognized in other disciplines as intrinsic parts of human discourse, communication scholars and practitioners seem to have assumed that these are not relevant to the study of communication at all. It is as if communicators have accepted that all communications are effective, and thus, that power and conflict have no place in the study of communication, much more in the study of the role of communication in nation building.

The idea that people, the beneficiaries of development efforts, should participate in the planning and implementation of development programmes touches the very core of power relationships and conflict.

Indeed, the concepts of power and conflict are central to social and communication analysis, even if these concepts remain vague and abstract, eluding rigorous empirical study.

Despite the lack of direction and agreement upon the phenomena being studied, however, one can reasonably argue the following premises:

a) Power struggles and conflict are constant features of development programmes and consequently,

b) If communicators wish to become more effective in
harnessing communication for national development, they must learn to understand the dynamics of power relationships and to manage conflict such that these elements contribute positively to the development process.

The exercise of power is not intrinsically good or bad. The ethics and morality of power rest on the central value of purpose and means and cannot be adequately discussed here.

Similarly, conflict is not inherently undesirable. In some situations, a certain amount of conflict is even desirable. What is needed, perhaps, is to make a distinction between poorly managed conflicts and properly managed ones.

Poorly managed social conflicts act as a major drag to development programmes. Unproductive conflicts waste time, resources and efforts, and on many occasions, harm careers and seriously damage personal reputations.

A high level of conflict usually produces high energy devoted to counter-productive objectives. Information flow becomes restricted and distorted resulting to low-quality decisions and one-sided commitments and tensions that undercut future relations among parties concerned.

On the other hand, too little conflict is not desirable either. It mobilizes little energy within groups, prevents disagreement and sharing of controversial information, promotes decision based on inadequate information, perpetuates unchallenged traditions or myths and generates fragile relations.
that cannot face the rigors of changing circumstances (Brown 1983).

The challenge to communicators, therefore, is how to apply communication principles in the management of conflicts such that they produce desired results. As Alfred North Whitehead has said, "the clash of doctrines is not a disaster, it is an opportunity."

Power - Some Conceptual Issues

Popular definitions of power simply describe the power of A over B as the maximum force which A can induce on B minus the maximum resisting force which B can mobilize in the opposite direction.

In a similar vein, Max Weber in his later works defines power as the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests. Weber's contribution is the concept of probability which highlights the possibility that power is rarely absolute—a button can be pressed but the light will not turn on.

Burns (1978), in his classic study of leadership, defines power as a relationship and not merely an entity to be passed around like a baton or hand grenade. He argues that power involves the intention or purpose of both power holder and power recipient; and hence that power is collective and not simply the
behavior of one person.

He further observed that power is a process in which the power holder, possessing certain motives and goals, acquire the capacity to secure changes in the behavior of a respondent (human or environment) by utilizing resources in his power base, including factors of human skill, relative to the targets of his power-wielding and necessary to secure such changes.

Burn's definition of power highlights three elements: the motives and resources of power holders; the motives and resources of recepients; and the relationship among all these.

Indeed, nothing can be achieved if one has the motive to do something but lacks the resources to accomplish the task. Nothing can be accomplished either if one has the resources but lacks the motive to act. For power to be realized, one must have both motive and resources.

Similarly, power, in the context of exercise of leadership, requires the presence of followers. To be a follower, on the other hand, necessitates having a leader. Man cannot conceptualize one without the other.

More recently, some progress has been achieved in the empirical study of power. Robert Dahl (1968), thinking in parallel lines with Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, presents three dimensions of the reach and magnitude of power.

The first dimension is distribution—which he defines as the
concentration and dispersion of power among persons of diverse influence in various political, social and economic locations such as geographical areas, castes and classes, status positions, skill groups, communication centers, and the like.

A second dimension is *scope*—the extent to which power is generalized over a wide range or is specialized. Persons who are relatively powerful in relation to one kind of activity, Dahl notes, may be relatively weak in other power relationships.

A doctor, therefore, may enjoy authority and credibility on matters pertaining to health but may not enjoy the same on issues pertaining to agriculture.

The third dimension is *domain*—the number and nature of power respondents influenced by power wielders compared to those who are not.

In a related work, John Kenneth Galbraith (1983), classifies the instruments of power into three types: condign, compensatory and conditioned power.

The difference between condign and compensatory power is the difference between negative and affirmative reward. Condign power threatens the individual with physical or emotional pain so that he forgoes pursuit of his own will or develops preference to avoid the threat.

Compensatory power, on the other hand, offers the individual a reward or payment sufficiently advantageous or agreeable so he forgoes pursuit of his own preference to seek reward instead. As
Galbraith puts it, condign power wins submission by the promise or reality of punishment; compensatory power wins submission by the promise or reality of benefit.

Galbraith observes that while condign and compensatory power are visible and objective, conditioned power, in contrast, is subjective; neither those exercising it nor those subject to it need always be aware that it is being exerted.

An excellent illustration of conditioned power is provided by Paulo Freire (1970):

"A sociologist friend of mine tells of a group of peasants in a Latin American country who recently took over a latifundium (plantation). For tactical reasons, they planned to hold the landowner as a hostage. But not one peasant had the courage to guard him; his very presence was terrifying. It is also possible that the act of opposing the boss provoked guilt feelings. In truth, the boss was 'inside' them."

Conditioned power comes closest to the study of communication because in the use of conditioned power, the acceptance of authority, the submission of the will of others, becomes the higher preference of those submitting. The preference can be deliberately cultivated—by persuasion or education or it can be dictated by culture itself; where the submission is considered normal, proper or traditionally correct. The first is explicit conditioning, the second is implicit.

Galbraith matches the instruments of power with three sources of power: personality, property and organization. Thus,
condign, compensatory and conditioned powers may come from the exercise of leadership, the capability to dispense rewards arising from a resource base and the combined effects of both personality and property harmonized by organizational talent.

Although Galbraith recognizes that the problem of understanding power is the absence of pure cases, he ventures to say that each of the three sources of power has a strong, though never exclusive, relationship with a specific instrument of enforcement.

He observes that organization is associated with conditioned power; property, with compensatory power and personality with condign power.

Media organizations are prime examples of the use of conditioned power while misplaced philanthropy can sometimes be associated with compensatory power. History has shown how the ancients achieved submission by superior physical prowess which is in reality the ability to inflict punishment of a physical nature to a recalcitrant or nonconformist.

Galbraith sees a relative decline of personality and property as sources of power and an ascendancy of organization as the primary source of power in modern times. He cites the development of armies, governments and transnational corporations as manifestations of organization as a major source of power where leadership or personality is blended skillfully with the management of resources through superb organizational skills.
The transient nature of power based on personality is clearly seen in the context of retired government leaders, generals and captains of industry. In the words of Somerset Maugham (1919):

"the Prime Minister out of office is seen, too often, to have been but a pompous rhetorician, and the General without an army is but the tame hero of a market town."

If the power of retired leaders were based on personality, then their influence should remain even after their retirement. Obviously, what they have lost is the power arising from the organizational base that they led.

The decline of property as a source of power, on the other hand, is manifested in the reduction of the servant class in more advanced nations, the increasing demand by workers for more leisure time in spite of the lure of higher wages, and the growing material satisfaction of people as their basic needs are met.

The historical development of the rise of organizational power can be traced from the drift of personality to its constituency which eventually leads to the development of a structure.

Thus, the politician comes to have what is called an organization or a political machine to conduct his campaign, the union leader a union to lead and the religious leader a church to minister.
Through an organization, a leader develops access to information, widens his reach and gains possession of significant assets.

As there are no pure categories, the combined sources of power and the use of multiple instruments of power become of prime importance in understanding the dynamics of social development. As Galbraith succinctly puts it, "never in the consideration of power can we assume that there is only one source or one instrument at work."

In more graphic language, John le Carre (1983), in his popular novel The Little Drummer Girl, says:

"I would say exploitation was the crunch issue... For exploitation read property and you have the whole bit. First the exploiter hits the wage-slave over the head with his superior wealth; then he brainwashes him into believing that the pursuit of property is a valid motive for breaking him at the grindstone. That way he has him hooked twice over."

Conflict- Some Conceptual Issues

The concept of conflict can be just as vague and abstract as the concept of power. The literature on conflict has not clearly answered whether conflict is a process, a relational state, a feeling or a set of behaviors. Differentiating conflict with related concepts such as "hostility", "disagreement," "incompatibility," "competition", and "misunderstanding" continue...
to present problems in empirical measurement (Miller et al., 1974).

In earlier literature, some scholars such as Coser (1956), Skolnich (1969) and others have even observed that many social scientists either deny the existence of social conflicts or dilute the concept's meaning. They do so by asserting that apparent conflicts are essentially breakdowns in communication or by lumping conflicts together with mere differences in opinion.

As observed by Coser (1956), such theorists seem to have an "anti-conflict" bias, tending to regard conflicts as "deviations" from a "normal" state of "harmony", "order" or "system equilibrium."

While "muddle-headed" treatments of social conflicts are found in one extreme, an over-simplification may be found in the game theoretic approaches that have become popular. In both extremes, the role of communication in managing conflicts seem to have been neglected.

More recent literature seem to project a clearer conceptualization of conflict and suggest a larger role for communication in conflict management.

Mortensen (1974) defines conflicts as "expressed struggles over incompatible interests in the distribution of limited resources".

Similarly, Simons (1974) defines conflict as "that state of
of a social relationship in which incompatible interests between two or more parties give rise to struggles between them.

For this paper, I prefer the simpler definition of Brown (1983) which states that conflict is "incompatible behavior between parties whose interests differ.

In encouraging participative planning and action in a development programme, it is reasonable to assume that if everyone is going to be allowed to have their say, chances are that not everyone will agree. Participative planning and action, therefore, imply operating more from a conflict model rather than a consensus one.

In a conflict model, conflict is deemed to be an integral part of the picture and not an aberration as would the case be in a consensus model. Conflict management puts conflict on the front stage and not on the back burner. Attention is called on how to resolve a disagreement or contrasting interests while taking care that the creative energy generated by the conflict is harnessed to more productive ends.

Similarly, in a conflict model, the exercise of power is given equal attention as the need for enforcing a negotiated or legitimised agreement (even while dissenting views exist) is recognized.

Thus, a better appreciation of conflict is called for. Figure 1 presents a conceptualization of the general issues in which people disagree, why they disagree and what can be done to
resolve whatever disagreement they may have.
Figure 1 - A Typology of Conflict, Their Causes and Possible Solutions

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<th>Types of Conflicts</th>
<th>Causes of Conflicts</th>
<th>Conflict Resolution Strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>A) Perception conflicts (differences in assessments of situations)</td>
<td>Differences in information and/or communication/education and/or strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>B) Goal conflicts (differences in desired states or standards)</td>
<td>Differences in values and/or structural or systemic strategies</td>
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<td>C) Strategy conflicts (differences in preferred courses of action)</td>
<td>Structural factors and/or Decision-making skills/styles and/or Selection of actors strategies (e.g. hiring, promotion of &quot;good people&quot; and firing of &quot;undesirables&quot;)</td>
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Note: Conflicts with strong personal and emotional undertones are not included here. Such conflicts require expert counseling and other similar strategies.

Thus, people may find themselves in conflict because they assess situations differently, vary in their objectives and/or prefer different courses of actions.

These differences may occur because people may have different sets of information or values or they may process information in varying ways. On the social level, structural or systemic factors may promote competition rather than cooperation.
Conflicts can therefore be resolved by increasing the quantum and quality of communication, by applying structural or systemic remedies or by selecting the actors, e.g. firing the "bad elements" and increasing the "good elements".

But how does one increase the quantum and quality of communication in conflict situations? Bowers (1974) provides a detailed conceptualization of communication strategies in conflicts between institutions and clients (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Interaction matrix where $p = \text{perceived probability}$, $c = \text{cost}$, $r = \text{reward}$. 

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<th>Individual</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Un-ionized</th>
<th>Unionized</th>
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<tr>
<td>Oral petition</td>
<td>Oral petition</td>
<td>Oral petition</td>
<td>Oral petition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written petition</td>
<td>Written petition</td>
<td>Written petition</td>
<td>Written petition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to super-institution</td>
<td>Appeal to super-institution</td>
<td>Appeal to super-institution</td>
<td>Appeal to super-institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promulgation of appeal</td>
<td>Promulgation of appeal</td>
<td>Promulgation of appeal</td>
<td>Promulgation of appeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectivization/organization</td>
<td>Collectivization/organization</td>
<td>Collectivization/organization</td>
<td>Collectivization/organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-violent Resistance</td>
<td>Non-violent Resistance</td>
<td>Non-violent Resistance</td>
<td>Non-violent Resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalation/Confrontation</td>
<td>Escalation/Confrontation</td>
<td>Escalation/Confrontation</td>
<td>Escalation/Confrontation</td>
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What is most promising in Bower's approach is the attempt to quantify perceived probability, cost and reward of communication strategies and counter strategies that can be used.

Although Bower cautions that individual/individual conflicts differ significantly from individual/institutional conflicts, his conceptual framework provides a good platform for developing more individual/individual conflict models. At the very least, Bower's introduction of cost and reward into the arena of studying conflict integrates the concepts and instruments of power in appreciating conflict situations.
Toward Encouraging Participative Planning and Action in Development Programmes

The concept of participative planning and action appears to be a new field of study for communicators. However, political scientists and sociologists have been exploring this concept, which is simply known to them as the difference between elitism and pluralism, for many years.

In sociological and political science literature, pluralism is usually defined as a socio-political system in which the power of the state is shared with a large number of private groups, interest organizations, and individuals represented by such organizations (Presthus, 1964).

Elitism may be defined as the antithesis of pluralism where disproportionate power rests in the hands of a minority of the community.

Late-comers or not, communicators encouraging greater people's participation in the planning and implementation of development programmes will have to face the following realities:

a) Participative planning and action require first of all changes in the thinking of development workers themselves. From looking at people as mere receptiants of development services and passive "targets" of development programmes, a change in perspective must be made such that people will be seen instead as resources and instruments of development.
b) There is a need to shift more power from development workers to the people. Such a shift will have serious repercussions in a society's power distribution and consequently in its decision-making process.

c) This reallocation of power in society or a community may not sit well with those who favor the status quo and thus they may be expected to resist such efforts of reallocating more power to the people.

d) Some problems of development present moral dilemmas that continue to evade solutions. A good example is the classic problem of building dams in the uplands which the uplanders resent but which are welcomed by the lowlanders because of the benefits that they will receive from the dams. Solving this dilemma by voting, in which case the majority opinion wins seems to be unsatisfactory because numbers rather than wisdom may prevail.

d) The point that participative planning and action works more effectively than top-down planning and action must be demonstrated. Making such a point, however, is not easy because in general, the limited capability of the poor to achieve significant tasks is precisely the very problem of development for which solution is being sought.

One must not forget that the poor have limited sources of power, e.g. personality, property or organization; and consequently they have little access to the instruments of power as well, e.g. condign, compensatory and conditioned power. It is
relevant therefore to ask whether empowerment is a precondition to participation or whether empowerment is its consequence.

The sudden allocation of privileges, e.g. the privilege to speak and participate in decision-making may not result to a meaningful empowerment of the people if they lack the requisite experience and skill in exercising power.

Mechanisms for ensuring a more meaningful participation of the people must be provided so that such an exercise will not lead to further frustrations and disillusionments.

It is relevant at this point to present Burn's suggestion to conceptualize leadership in two forms—transactional leadership and transformational leadership.

In Burn's thinking, transactional leadership occurs when one person takes the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of exchange of valued things. The exchange could be economic or political or psychological in nature: a swap of goods or of one good for money; a trading of votes between candidate and citizen or between legislators, etc.

In transactional leadership, the participants have no enduring purpose that holds them together; hence they may go their separate ways when the common purpose that they used to have is no longer valid.

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, is conceptualized by Burns as leadership that occurs when one or
more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and
followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and
morality. In this case, their purposes, which might have started
out as separate but related, as in the case of transactional
leadership, become fused. Examples of transformational leaders
include Jesus Christ, Buddha and Gandhi, though these examples
need not imply that transformational leaders are limited to such
great figures.

Burns describes transforming leadership further as a dynamic
leadership where leaders throw themselves into a relationship
with followers who will feel "elevated" or "enlightened" by the
experience and thus become more active themselves, thereby,
creating new cadres of leaders. Transcending leadership is
leadership engage. Naked power-wielding can be neither
transactional nor transforming; only leadership can be.

Burns argues further that transforming leadership address
followers' wants, needs and other motives, as well as their
own, and thus they serve as an independent force in changing the
makeup of the followers' motive base through gratifying their
motives.

If one takes up Burn's argument that leadership is both a
relationship and a process; and that a leader can only be
appreciated fully in terms of how his followers respond to his
leadership, then one can propose a matrix of leadership and
followership styles as follows (see figure 3).
As can be seen from the matrix, a transactional interaction implies a bargaining situation. Corrupt politicians may simply desire people's votes and buy them. People may be more interested in money than good government and therefore they may simply sell their votes.

On the other hand, if the followership is more enlightened that its formal leadership, then a rebellion is likely to break out sometime and a new leadership may emerge, that is if the rebellion wins. More often than not, a systematic repression of of the rebellion conducted and if the balance of forces is on the side of the leadership, then the conflict ends up with subjugation of the people's will.

Note: The concept of transformational followership is not necessarily a contradiction in terms. Formal leaders retain their status even if they are influenced by their followers.
A transforming leadership confronted with a transactional followership faces the challenge of a "long march". In this situation, transformational leaders would have to make extreme sacrifices necessary to transform themselves and their followers, specifically to raise them to the level of transformational followership, capable of self-actualization and self-determination.

An interaction between a transformational leadership and transformational followership, of course, is the most desirable situation. Through the synergy established by leaders and followers working together, genuine and optimal people power is achieved.

The implications of these insights for the effort to encourage greater people participation in planning and implementing development programmes are profound:

a) A transactional leadership approach will not work for participative planning and implementation in development programmes. One can go through the motions of legitimizing already completed plans through an exercise of "participation" but this will not achieve optimal mobilization of people power.

b) A transformational leadership style is needed if a meaningful participation of people in development programmes is desired. Such a leadership will have to present in concrete steps:
1. How to neutralize opposition to a reallocation of power in society to allow a more meaningful participation of people.

2. How to systematize and institutionalize the mechanisms for participation.

3. How to share the requisite skills needed for meaningful participation such as analytical and communication skills, ability to process information and arrive at objective and sound decisions.

4. How to increase people's appreciation and demand for information and sharpen their skills in searching for information.

5. How to provide people with an adequate power base through organization, and perhaps later on with property and personality.

6. How to manage conflict through an appreciation of a conflict management technology available to all parties concerned. Research has established that the probability for achieving favorable outcomes is enhanced when all parties know and practice sound negotiating techniques. Such situations help ensure the use of fair tactics and help mediate differences without the use of manipulative or violent methods.
A Greater Focus on Transformational Participation

It may be argued, therefore, that participation is best seen not just as an instrument for accomplishing certain development project objectives but mainly as an instrument for transforming both development workers and the people so that both reach high levels of self-actualization and self-determination.

I would suggest an initial conceptualization of transformational participation to have four stages.

1. The stage of opening and unfreezing people and development workers so that they look forward to change.

2. The information input stage where all relevant information are solicited, analyzed and evaluated.

3. The design stage where people and development workers gather to plan the appropriate courses of action required by the situation.

4. The action stage where plans are translated into concrete actions.

The stage of opening and unfreezing the minds of people is a crucial initial stage. Too many information campaigns have failed simply because people were not ready to receive information dissonant to their present view of the world.

It may be hypothesized that people's participation in a dialogue and planning exercise need to be seen from a time frame longer than the planning exercise itself. For people to speak
honestly, they must have some assurance of what will happen after the dialogue and planning exercise.

Similarly, the designers of current and past policies and programmes must be provided with sufficient assurance that participative planning will not result in them being crucified for their past errors.

In this regard, people must be taught how to think in a design mode (Bono, 1985). Just as an architect designs a house without being paralyzed by over-analyzing the past and the present, participative planning and action can be enhanced if people are taught and constantly encouraged to think in a similar design mode where focus is laid on what needs to be done rather than on determining blame for present problems.

As Bono clearly points out, argument, negotiation and problem analysis tend to look back whereas design is always looking forward at what may be created.

The development of trust and an enduring work relationship between development workers and people is a necessary precondition for moving to the information input stage. This can be achieved when people perceive a high trust and low threat environment.

Participation must carry within it the element of transformation. Only by building in the idea of transformation in participation can people realize that power is meaningfully being shared with them.
Participation is intrinsically linked with development because by definition, development occurs when people gain more control over their environment. Seen in this light, empowerment through greater participation in planning and action is both an end and a means for motivating people to do something about their lives and others.

What is needed most of all is a leadership that boldly interprets a society's conscience and lifts people out of their everyday selves. Such a leadership need not be provided by great men for history shows that great deeds are mostly done by simple and ordinary people who have transformed themselves into heroes. These ordinary people transformed themselves by resolving the inner conflicts and contradictions present in every human being and by doing so, gain the freedom to act and make choices.

Indeed, people are not mere recipients of development services. They are a development programme's most important assets and its only hope that action and change will occur. Ultimately, true development is the one that people bring about for themselves and others.