

Power Over vs. Power With

Probably no idea is more essential to Follett's thinking than her distinction between power over and power with. Power over is a traditional relationship in which one person has power over another person or one group over another group or one nation over another nation. It is a traditional relationship in the sense that dominance and coercion are used time and again before other alternatives are sought. One side vies for power over another, at best trying to influence the other to concede its position, at worst using brute force to have its way. Power over is a relationship of polarity, opposite views and differentials in power forever attracting each other from a posture of suspicion if not downright contempt.

Power with is at once relational and collective. It creates new possibilities from the very differences that might exist in a group. Unlike brute force, which must be continually reinforced to sustain itself, power with emerges organically from the participants involved and grows stronger the more it is put to use. Power with is an organizational form of collaboration, an idea central to what today is called stakeholder engagement, multisector approaches, and cocreative power. Power with has the boldness to believe that acting from immediate self-interest is not always the wisest course of action, nor that one person or one group should be in a position to know what is best for another. Follett believed instead that reciprocal influence could lead to a creative synthesis. What is remarkable about Follett's approach is that she did not advance power with as a utopian solution. Rather, she asked a far simpler and subtler question: How could our dependence on relationships of *power over* be diminished?

Her inquiry led to three associated insights. First was seeing the possibility of integration, a way in which key desires from both sides of a polarity could be discerned and addressed. For this to

arose, becoming common ground for further action. “Throughout history,” she wrote, “we see that control brings disastrous consequences whenever it outruns integration.” Integration was achieved through relationship, candor, and an ability to see one’s actions as part of a greater whole. She held that new organizational structures must be created to reinforce circular relationships of influence and was an early advocate for labor/management partnerships, still viewed as innovative today. Her point, however, was not that two sides find new ways to fight over their prerogatives but rather that they find shared ground and learn together from the transparency of data about their system.

This led to her second insight, which involved what she called the “law of the situation.” Instead of marshaling outside experts and facts to bolster one side over the other, Follett proposed using information to advance transparency of operations. She saw the power of the scientific method, still nascent in her day, as useful in creating a shared pool of data that everyone could access. Trust could be gained by remaining true to actual operations, depending on those nearest to the situation, and mitigating errors before they could mushroom. She held a bias toward action, recording the consequences, and calibrating new behaviors based on learning. Follett saw this in the service of bringing forth a collective will that could generate innovation and overcome obstacles by honing a shared purpose.

Finally was her insight about leadership itself. She understood that true leaders do not command obedience through force or manipulation but rather by giving expression to external realities and the interior aspirations of others. She wrote,

The skillful leader . . . does not rely on personal force; he controls his group not by dominating but by expressing it. He stimulates what is best in us; he unifies and concentrates what we feel only gropingly and scatteringly, but he never gets away from the current of which we and he

has struck fire out of me, aroused me to action which I should not otherwise have taken, he has been my leader.

Mary Parker Follett embodied the commitments and convictions that give rise to collective wisdom. She foresaw how critical was seeing the whole system, seeking diverse perspectives and the role of respect in group discernment. She believed deeply in what we have called the stances of deep listening, suspension of certainty, welcoming all that is arising, and trust in a transcendent mission. Most pointedly, she understood how and why reciprocal relations matter. Her work permeates our best thinking about power to this day.