

Authority (the right to make decisions) is often mistakenly considered to be synonymous with leadership. Unclear delegation, or inappropriate use of authority, is likely to undermine the emergence of effective leadership. This brief paper outlines how this typically occurs and how it can be avoided.

Authority and Control

Formal or positional authority is a form of power (the ability to make things happen). It is different from leadership, which may be also based on non-formal power, influence, or authority based on expertise/ability (people taking your opinions/views seriously).

Formal authority is closely linked to accountability and is usually associated with structural roles or positions within the organisation. Leadership need not be linked to role or position. Formal authority, like leadership, can be exercised in an autocratic, shared, or delegated manner.

The extent of authority of an individual or team may be explicitly defined or loosely delineated; for example policy and legal matters rest with the board, operational matters are vested in the staff.

Investing formal authority clearly and explicitly with defined level, limits, and extent of authority:

- Increases the legitimacy of the leader
- Empowers members of the organisation
- Makes it easier to test/adapt the distribution of authority to meet organisational challenges

Increasing people's authority boosts morale better than increasing wages. Increased authority and responsibility yields greater initiative and creativity, which are critical to adaptation and competitive edge in a fast moving business environment. In such an environment, rigid centralised authority is dysfunctional and undermines the emergence of leadership.

Positional leaders – those with formal authority, need to be honest about how they derive and maintain their power. Many do so by controlling or by withholding authority (for example in the form of discretion, information, access) that would enable others to do their work more effectively: **Power-Over**. Others derive their power through personal wisdom, capability, and learning from experience: **Power from Within**. Yet others derive and maintain power through collaboration with their contacts, networks, allies, etc: **Power With**. Some use a combination.

It is common for positional leaders never to define the limits of their own or their team's authority. Not doing so allows them to take what they think they need, and to change what they take, according to their perceptions or evaluations of different situations.

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The consequence is that others are left dangling, uncertain whether they have the authority to decide or lead in particular situations. Such leader behaviour may be driven by anxiety, lack of trust or inability to delegate effectively, but it invariably results in conflict, undermining of initiative and disowning of responsibility.

Organisations often fail to define the authority of their leaders, so the distribution of authority varies according to the willingness of the leader to share it.

Lahey, et. al (1995)¹ compare authority to a **window with a shade** (Figure 1) that can be pulled up and down to reflect the extent to which authority is shared in a given situation.

If things are going well, the positional leader raises the shade to reflect a greater sharing of authority. In difficult circumstances, or when trust is low, the shade is lowered and authority of other's restricted. Such leaders typically hold on to more authority than they need thus reducing effectiveness and flexibility, which is at the core of the adaptive/ leadership challenge.

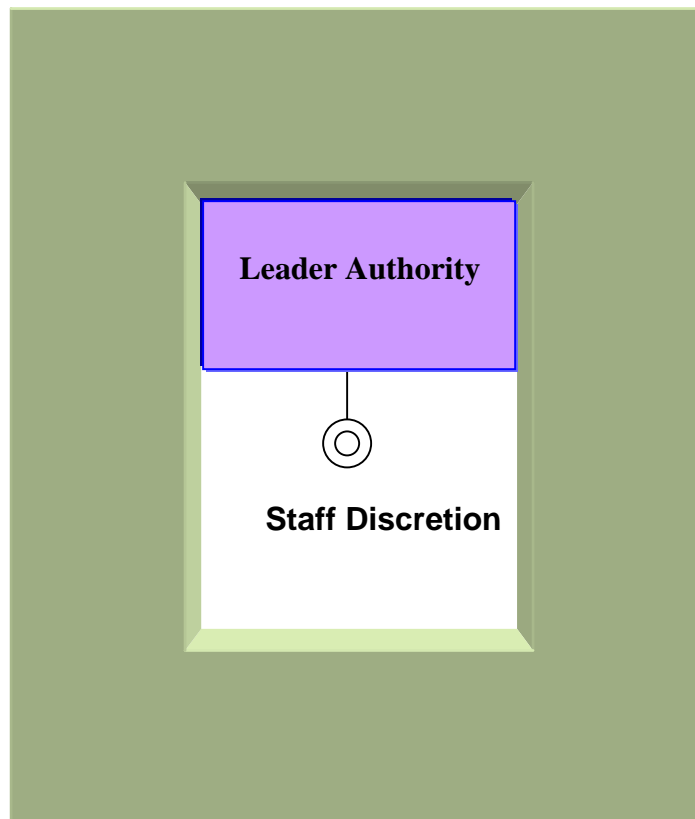


Figure 1: WINDOW OF AUTHORITY WITH SHADE

¹ *Grassroots and Nonprofit Leadership*, New Society Publishers

Continued and unpredictable raising and lowering of the shade induces low self-esteem; attitudes of compliance and a parent-child, 'what the boss wants, avoid mistakes', low-risk, CYA, type of culture. This in turn, demands a more dissonant, time-consuming, command and control style of management, which, even if it were feasible, would result in an ever-decreasing spiral of control and productivity.

The antidote, although challenging, is transparency in the delineation and distribution of positional authority.

This involves a kind of meta-decision making – **a decision about decision-making**, e.g. what decisions, how and by whom should decisions be taken in the organisation. This would include an ongoing review of decision-making and the circumstances that might require change or adaptation in the mode and location of decision-making. It may be done by the executive team or by a representative (non-executive) steering group who help prioritise decisions and make recommendations as to how and by whom they are made.