

Activities to Deepen Your Power-Building Analysis

[humanimpact.org/
power-analysis-guide](https://humanimpact.org/power-analysis-guide)

CHAPTER 1

Assessing Your Power

Why talk about power?

Power imbalances and structural oppression — including racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and others — are the root causes of health inequities. They are interlocking and interdependent: structural oppression creates power imbalances, and power imbalances reinforce structural oppression. These forces work together to maintain the current conditions that keep many of us from accessing the collective resources we need to thrive and live free and healthy lives.

Because power imbalances and structural oppression are the most upstream root causes of the inequities we seek to change, they are the most impactful sites for intervention. Change starts with understanding our own power at the individual, team, organizational, and system levels.

What is power?

A brief overview

While we can't always see it, power operates everywhere at all times. Power is not fixed, but fluid; it is dependent on various factors, and relative to whatever space or community we're in.

At a personal level, identities, relationships, connections, institutional affiliations, structural access, access to resources and safety nets, job titles, and many other factors all shape how much power we have in a given situation. At an institutional level, the breadth and depth of our networks, a shared vision and goals, shared histories and

political analysis, the ability to mobilize many people towards a shared purpose, and other factors (described more below) shape how much power we have to effect change together.

As Dr. King stated, power itself is neither good nor bad. What matters is how power is used, and for what outcome. The ability to



Power is the ability to achieve a purpose. Whether or not it is good or bad depends on the purpose.

REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

achieve a purpose, or use power, is deeply tied to systems of advantage and oppression like structural racism. We can't talk about power without talking about these systems.

What kinds of power exist?

There are many different frameworks for understanding power. Below are some distinctions to keep in mind, all of which can make power more visible and help us use it to achieve systems change.

Personal Power vs. Collective Power

When we think about power, we often think about personal empowerment, which typically means helping individuals to better navigate a system or condition as it is. For example, a public health campaign might focus on how to empower individuals to make healthy choices (e.g. eating healthy foods, exercising, not smoking) through health education, or help people navigate the confusing maze of our public health system's support services.

While supporting the empowerment of individuals is important, it has limited impact — particularly for those who are most affected by inequities. Nutrition education doesn't work if the recipient isn't paid a living wage and can't afford fresh food. Exercise recommendations aren't helpful for someone whose neighborhood has no safe outdoor green space. These band-aid fixes ultimately put the burden on people and communities already experiencing inequities.

That's why we need structural change to truly support health and wellbeing for all. Personal empowerment and provision of better services are not sufficient to achieve that goal. We need collective power, where many people are working together in an organized, aligned, and strategic way to change the systems and conditions that affect their lives. Collective power is good for one's health in and of itself, in addition to having a bigger impact on the social determinants of health. Individual power is most useful when it catalyzes a group of people to work together (collective power) for the larger system-level changes needed to eliminate health inequities.

For government agencies, moving toward collective power means working to support and form deep partnerships with community based power-building organizations ([CPBOs](#)).

Power Over vs. Power With¹

In our society, we see "power over" play out all the time. A select few groups have enormous capacity to shape laws, shrink government services, control the narrative, and actively repress legislation, policies, and protests that threaten their hold on political and economic power.

Using a "power over" mindset in our work will perpetuate inequities rather than address them.

1 *Making Change Happen: Just Associates, Making Change Happen: Power; Concepts for Revisioning Power for Justice, Equality and Peace.* Just Associates, 2006, justassociates.org

In a “power with” framework, we accept that power is actually infinite — and the more we share it, the more it expands. Shifting to this mindset helps us conceive of how to share power with community members and organizers. When we share power, we create space for centering the voices of those most impacted by health inequities and shift the power imbalances that cause inequities in the first place.

For more information on power over vs. power with, see this table from [Dare to Lead](#) by Brené Brown.

Three Dimensions of Power

There are many different ways to categorize the various forms of power. The [Grassroots Power Project](#) outlines three distinct (though related) forms of power. There are many ways to express or take action on these forms of power, some of which are outlined in the table in Activity #2, page 9 of this resource.

1. Organizing people and resources to influence decisions

This form of power is the most visible. It includes actions like educating, advocating, lobbying, registering voters, and organizing campaigns to influence policies and elections. This form of power tends to have a short-term timeframe.

2. Power and infrastructure to influence what’s on the agenda

This form of power is hidden. It is used to influence which issues get addressed and who is at the decision making table. Actions include shifting or expanding the political agenda through building collective infrastructure and coordinating strategic alliances and networks. This form of power has a mid-term or long-term timeframe.

3. Shifting narratives and worldview to shape what is possible

This form of power is invisible. It is used to influence how people consciously and unconsciously interpret the world around them, shaping ideology. Narratives impact what people see as problems and possible solutions. Actions include using communications to activate key values and beliefs and challenge the dominant worldview to shape the public debate. This form of power has a long-term timeframe.

Benefits of assessing our power

Taking time to assess your individual, team, and/or organizational power can:

- Combat feelings of powerlessness by identifying what you do have control over
- Help government employees process the paradox of feeling powerless within the system/hierarchy while also having relative power within the community
- Pull back the veil on power structures impacting your work and help you hone in on the most effective strategies to make change
- Increase awareness of the responsibility of having power and improve accountability
- Help you identify ways to share your power with those who have been structurally blocked from that power due to their personal identities and lived experience

Power Assessment Activities

Activity #1:

How powerful are you?

Why:

The purpose of this activity is to get your team primed to consider how powerful they are as individuals and as a group (team/office/agency/organization/coalition) working to catalyze systems change.

While we've found that this activity yields fruitful discussion for people at any place in their journey, it is a particularly helpful conversation starter for those who are just beginning to think about power. This activity can be revisited (e.g., when power dynamics shift or new members join the team), and works well as an opening practice before power mapping.

Who:

Any group that seeks to reduce inequities would benefit from this activity. It is particularly fruitful to include partners across government and outside of government, such as community power-building organizations (CPBOs).

Discussing power can be uncomfortable and bring up difficult feelings. For this activity to be successful, it's important that the group already have established relationships and a basic level of trust with one another. For example, can folks participating lean into difficult conversations with compassion and thoughtfulness? You might decide to do this activity several times, adding in new layers of partners over time.

What you'll need:

If Virtual:

- A copy of this [Jamboard](#)
 - To make a copy of the [Jamboard](#), open the link, click "File," "Make a copy," and "Entire presentation," then click "OK."

- A list of scenarios you'd like to use (see examples below)

If In Person:

- A list of scenarios you'd like to use (see examples below)

Time: Depending on how many scenarios you present and how deep you want to take the conversation, this activity could take between 30 minutes to an hour.

Instructions

- 1. Set expectations:** Explain to the group that this activity is meant to ease us into conversations about power. It isn't going to get us to concrete conclusions today, but it is going to help us expand how we understand and perceive power.
- 2. Power as an individual:** First, ask the group to answer the question, "How powerful are you as an individual?" If virtual, ask participants to place a marker on the spectrum of 1 through 10. If in person, designate one side of the room as representing 1/least powerful, and the other side representing 10/most powerful, and ask them to physically place themselves on the spectrum.
 - a. If participants ask clarifying questions about what context(s) they should consider, tell them to weigh whatever factors they'd like.
 - b. Once everyone has placed themselves, engage the group in the following discussion questions. Do not require everyone to answer every question; instead, have people respond to what they feel compelled to answer. We call this "challenge by choice."
 - What do you notice about the markers on the Jamboard?
 - How did this activity make you feel?
 - How did you decide where to place yourself? What factors, identities, or other context did you take into account?
- 3. Power as a group:** Next, ask participants to answer the following questions *as a collective* (e.g., as an office, agency, organization, coalition, etc.) Select 3-4 scenarios and tailor them to your context.
 - a. How powerful is your organization...
 - In a meeting with your funder?
 - In a meeting with your grantees?
 - In a meeting with community members?
 - In a meeting with the mayor or other relevant elected official?
 - When convening your advisory committee?
 - When implementing work with community partners?
 - When developing your strategic plan?
 - In mobilizing others to advance or block policies?
 - In setting the public agenda?
 - In shaping the public narrative about your issues?

- b. For each scenario, name any patterns you see emerging on the Jamboard or butcher paper. Debrief with the group and be sure to invite opposing opinions.
 - Who would like to share why they placed their marker where they did?
 - Who would like to share a differing opinion?
 - Does anyone feel moved to shift their marker based on the discussion?

4. Wrap up:

- a. Brainstorm next steps based on the types of power that were identified through this activity. What might you do together next? Write down the next steps, along with the time frame and roles.
- b. Thank participants for their engagement and vulnerability. Remind them that this was just a first step toward deepening conversations about power, and that power shifting is an ongoing, dynamic process.

Activity #2:

Identifying your powers

Why:

Get explicit with your team about the kinds of power you hold as an office/agency/organization/coalition.

Who:

Any group that seeks to reduce inequities would benefit from this activity; it can be particularly helpful for those who work in government agencies and systems.

What you'll need:

If Virtual:

- A copy of this [Jamboard](#)
 - To make a copy of the [Jamboard](#), open the link, click “File,” “Make a copy,” and “Entire presentation,” then click “OK.”

If In Person:

- Butcher paper or giant sticky notes with the table from slides 1 and 2 of the Jamboard drawn on it
- Colorful dot stickers

Form of Power	Description	Do we have this?
POSITIONAL	Comes from organizational authority or position – often overlooked by people with the power, rarely forgotten by those without it	
REFERRED	Comes from connections to others (e.g. a staff member without formal positional power but who has known the ED for years)	
EXPERT	Comes from wisdom, knowledge, experience & skills (e.g. someone who is widely respected because of their skills as an organizer)	
IDEOLOGICAL	Comes from an idea, vision, or analysis... it can be the original idea of an individual, an ideal such as “democracy” or “liberation,” or a developed ideology	
OBSTRUCTIVE	Stems from the ability to coerce or block – whether implicit, threatened, or demonstrated. Those without other sources of power may depend on it. Many activists are experts in its use.	
PERSONAL	The manifestation of an individual’s energy, vision, ability to communicate, capacity to influence, emotional intelligence, psychological savvy, etc.	

Form of Power	Description	Do we have this?
CO-POWERING	A term from the Latinx community that articulates the responsibility of individual leaders to mindfully work toward supporting the personal power of others through modeling, validating, and giving feedback	
COLLABORATIVE	Our ability to join our energies in partnership with others in pairs, teams, organizations, communities, coalitions, and movements	
INSTITUTIONAL	Economic, legal, and political power directly wielded by institutions – whether a corporation, police department, or your own organization. It exists apart from the individuals who work there at any one time, i.e. brand, membership, skills, etc.	
CULTURAL	The cultural norms and conditioning regarding race, class, sexual orientation, gender identification and age that accrue power and privilege to the dominant group... from the perspective of oppressed peoples, is also a consciousness of community or culture that serves to empower	
STRUCTURAL	Power covertly or implicitly exercised through the dominant institutions of society (e.g. resistance to alternative medicine from the AMA and insurance providers or racism expressed and maintained through structures like red-lining by lending institutions)	
TRANSCENDENT	Comes from our connection to something larger than ourselves: to the Creator or Spirit, the natural world, our ancestral lineage, or the arc of history	

Time: Depending on how deep you would like to take the discussion, this activity could take 25 to 45 minutes.

Instructions

- 1. Review:** Review the different types of power listed in the table so everyone is acquainted with the terms.
- 2. Identifying powers:** Ask participants to move one of the markers (if virtual) or add a dot sticker (if in person) to the “Do we have this?” column for each power they think your office/agency/organization/coalition holds.
- 3. Discussion:**
 - Where do we seem to have consensus about our power? (*i.e., powers with a lot of markers/dots or none*)
 - Ask the group to elaborate on how and where those powers show up and are exercised.
 - Where do we seem to disagree about the powers we have? (*i.e., powers with only few markers/dots*)

- Ask the group to elaborate on how and where those powers show up and invite opposing opinions. Allow folks to add or remove markers based on the discussion.
- c. Starting with where there is consensus on the sources of power, ask: How can we do more to share these powers and employ a “power with” framework instead of a “power over” one?
 - Take notes on the discussion.
 - Identify some next steps based on the discussion, specifying time frame and roles.

About Human Impact Partners

[Human Impact Partners](#) transforms the field of public health to center equity and builds collective power with social justice movements.

For more information about this resource, please reach out to info@humanimpact.org.

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