



Leadership

The Essentials Of Staying In Power

Jeffrey Pfeffer 08.12.10, 12:20 PM ET

Jamie Dimon, at the helm of JPMorgan Chase, seems to be the one banker who has emerged from the financial meltdown with his reputation enhanced--yet earlier he lost his job at Citi when his former mentor, Sandy Weill, turned on him. The Miami-Dade County school board fired Rudy Crew just months after he was named the best school superintendent in America. Mark Hurd was the savior of Hewlett-Packard until he was undone by an expense account scandal. Even the now mythic Steve Jobs left Apple in the 1980s when John Sculley prevailed over him in a power struggle there. Attaining a high position doesn't mean you'll keep it. And there's more to holding on to power than doing a good job, though that's obviously important.

It's a shame when people have to leave a position involuntarily, and doubly so when they have worked long and hard to attain it. But leaders don't have to become replaceable and get replaced. The late Jack Valenti served as the unchallenged head of the Motion Picture Association of America for well over three decades, only stepping down in his 80s, and continued to be influential even out of his formal role, though he held his job at the whim of the heads of the major motion picture studios--individuals with colossal egos and volatile tempers. If you understand how and why some people lose power and others hold on to it, even in seemingly precarious circumstances, you can chart your course accordingly.

Research demonstrates that the old saying "power corrupts" is partly true, although not in the way people often think. Study after study shows that putting people into positions of power--even when the power is temporary, randomly assigned, and not very great--alters their behavior in predictable ways. They become less sensitive to the needs and social cues given off by others. They violate norms of appropriate behavior, as when a study found that the most powerful people in a group would take more than their share of cookies, chew them with their mouths open and spread crumbs, or as when former president Bill Clinton went so far as to have sex in the Oval Office.

Power encourages people to attend to their own needs, to become extremely focused on their personal goals and insensitive to what others might want. And no wonder. As Harrah's Chief Executive Gary Loveman has said, the higher you rise in an organization, the more you will hear people telling you you're right. The more power you have, the more others will tell you what they think you want to hear. So you will live in a cocoon, until it all comes crashing down around you.

It's possible--although rare--to avoid these problems. Mitch Maidique held his job as president of Florida International University in Miami for 23 years. Few university presidents last a decade, let alone more than two. The key to his success was having the patience to hold his tongue when

students, parents, alumni and board members, who didn't necessarily know what they were talking about, offered advice on how to do his job better. Another source of his longevity: recognizing that relationships with key people in the community were important, and that those relationships were built and maintained partly by attending people's important life events, such as weddings, funerals, confirmations and bar mitzvahs.

There were many days when he would rather have been doing something else, but Maidique understood that regardless of his formal position or how long he had held it, he still encountered others whose enmity could bring him down. So he patiently, steadfastly maintained ties with people, even some he did not particularly like or respect, who were important to his organizational longevity.

Valenti, too, always knew who his bosses were and, following a practice he began when he was an aide to President Lyndon Johnson, complimented them on their abilities while also doing his best to serve their needs and interests. He was a tireless advocate for the motion picture industry and its interests, willing to travel regularly between Los Angeles and Washington (and for that matter, internationally) to advance causes such as avoiding censorship, maintaining copyright protection and ensuring Hollywood access to foreign markets. The fundamental principle is a simple one that is apparently difficult to implement: Keep doing the same things that brought you to power in the first place, and don't let success and power go to your head. You will have a much better chance of maintaining your position.

Staying in power requires one other difficult thing, too: maintaining your vigilance. Patricia Seeman, an executive coach to high-level Swiss executives, has told me that she has seen few senior management teams where many of the CEOs' direct reports didn't think they could do a better job than their boss. Some would be content to wait for their chance, but not everyone is that patient.

Understanding that your "friends" may really be nothing of the kind requires that you be sufficiently paranoid--that in your organizational life you implement the strategic wisdom offered by Andrew Grove in his book *Only the Paranoid Survive*. Maintaining vigilance is tiresome, and people lose focus and energy when they've served in powerful positions for a long time. But when you lose the desire or ability to watch out for those around you, you might as well go gracefully, as your end may be near.

You don't have to do what I have described to keep your job at all organizations, but you do in most. And this isn't about how the world should be or what conditions might make organizations more effective. Nor does everyone falls victim to the disinhibitions that often accompany holding great power. But as a guide to understanding power dynamics and how to retain power, both research and case examples present a consistent picture of what you need to do and watch out for.

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