



# POWER DOES NOT COME IN HARVEST GOLD

Dr. Nita Mosby Tyler  
2017

There is much to say about power, in and outside of organizations, and most often...it's negative. When we look at the historical construct of the United States, it has been a white, male dominated culture with (sorry brothers...) power attributes that have been associated with oppression and coercion. Because of this historical framework, we have developed groupthink about types of power. Oftentimes, and especially if you feel/are oppressed, we delineate power into two categories: (1) those who have it and (2) those who don't.

I'm not naïve. I do know there are "have's" and "have not's." America wasn't built with equity in mind. It wasn't built with inclusion in mind. It wasn't built with equality in mind. Our country was designed to do exactly what it is doing. My thought is since we know that the system is doing what it was built to do, it might be time for a remodel.

My mother's kitchen is a great example of what I'm talking about. My parents bought their home in the height of the 1970's. The kitchen was cool and modern. The appliances were Harvest Gold. There was a trash compactor - it was important that people could smash their trash into strange cubes back then. There was even an appliance garage. Yes. It was a counter-sized garage to hide your blender, toaster, etc. I don't know what we had against small appliances at that time, but we were serious about keeping them hidden. I learned a lot about privilege then. Some people didn't have a place to park their car. Our appliances had their own garage.

Recently, I went to visit my mother. The kitchen looks exactly like it did in 1970. Everything is still Harvest Gold.

The compactor still works, though she now uses a waste basket instead. The appliance garage is still doing its job – the blender and toaster are still in the witness protection program. My point in all of this is that her kitchen was built to do exactly what it is doing. It allows cooking, refrigeration and all the things that a kitchen does, but it is doing it with irrelevancy and poor taste. The appliances work, but many are senseless in today's world. And the color...well, Harvest Gold can be a little overwhelming. It's time for a remodel.

To begin the remodel in this country, we must start with a discussion about power. My favorite way to discuss power comes from French & Raven (1959), two psychologists who identified Five Bases of Social Power. I love this construct because it challenges the notion that power only comes from titles/positions/ranks and from our ability to punish other people (although that is 40% true).

I'll start with what we know best – **Legitimate Power** – the power that we have based on our title, rank or position. This is that historically dominant power base that I described when I started this article. It is tricky. I don't have to tell you that there are many people who have legitimate power, but struggle in the area of competency and expertise. Insert uncomfortable pause, here. Whew, that was awkward. I'll move on.

The next power base is **Expert Power** – the power that we have based on our skills, abilities and knowledge. It saddens me that so many people possess this power, but don't actually know that it is power. Legitimate Power fooled us into thinking it was the only power, so all this time we've had people moving about the world with expert power without even knowing it. This one can be tricky, too. As I shared in that awkward moment in my explanation of legitimate power (you know, that basically it is possible that

you can have a title without having competency), in expert power you don't have to have a title, position or rank to hold this type of power. I don't know about you, but some of the brightest people I know aren't the ones holding traditional titles and ranks.

The next power base is **Reward Power** – the power that we have based on our ability to give rewards or perks. This one is leveraged a lot depending on what you're doing. If you're a parent you probably know this one well. It gives us the ability to give and take away rewards. This one is tricky, too. If you manipulate this power base (the giving and taking away of rewards) you can likely come off as coercive. It can become the carrot-and-the-stick leadership style and people grow wary of it over time.

Next is **Referent Power** – the power we have based on reciprocity or mutual respect. I love this one because it is grounded in relationships and respect. If we can forge relationships and foster respect with each other, that is the greatest power of all. The key, here, is we really have to begin to call this power. That is what it is.

Lastly, there is **Coercive Power** – the power we have in our ability to punish other people. I mentioned this one at the beginning of the article. There are people who wield power

because they have managed to scare others into submission. It isn't pretty, but it is power.

To remodel our systems, we must begin to teach people that who and what they are (and what they are doing) has a power label. In many ways, Legitimate and Coercive Power remind me of Harvest Gold appliances. They are still around, but they look and feel outdated. They appear irrelevant and in poor taste when not leveraged with grace. In many cases that type of power base combination seems senseless in today's world. Like Harvest Gold appliances, legitimate/coercive power (when used together) can also be overwhelming.

The remodel likely elevates Expert and Referent power. Why? Because frankly, those are the only two power bases that I feel are in the complete control of the individual – no one can take away your expert or your referent power. You have the power over your power! In addition, this power base combination is all about illuminating the way in which people shine – in their knowledge and in their relationships.

So...shine! Like stainless steel. It's powerful. Harvest Gold really doesn't shine, you know.