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Managers' power in an environment of cultural diversity – in the opinion of managers from Poland, Spain and Italy

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aims of the article are to describe how managers of different nationalities understand the concept of “power”, to identify the sources of their power and ways of exercising it, and to determine the impact of managers’ power on different areas of managing people in a culturally diverse work environment.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The research problems are an attempt to answer the following questions: How do managers who work with multicultural teams define “power”? What sources of power and ways of exercising power do they use in managing their teams? What areas of people management in culturally diverse teams are significantly influenced by their power? The research methods are a review of the subject literature and the results of 24 individual in-depth interviews.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The theoretical part of the article explains the term “power” and describes the sources of power used by managers in managing people. The research part reports the results of a qualitative study (interviews with the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers).

RESEARCH RESULTS: Based on the subject literature and the results of the study, the author has demonstrated that managers’ power is of great importance as it affects employees and different areas of people management. This is very important in an environment of cultural diversity, in which employees from

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various cultural backgrounds can have different sensitivity to the sources of power used by managers.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Managers responsible for managing teams should pay special attention to the sources of power and the ways in which power is exercised, the impact of power on employees' attitudes and behaviours, their motivation to work and the decisions taken in different areas of people management. Managers' responsibility to use power appropriately is particularly important in work environment of cultural diversity.

KEYWORDS:

power, sources of power, managers, cultural diversity, multicultural teams

INTRODUCTION

The growth of economic activity of businesses on a global scale results in a situation in which an increasing number of employees and managers work in international companies and perform their tasks in multicultural teams. In today's work environment cultural diversity affects managers' attitudes and behaviours and the way they exercise power. Managers' power means that they are entitled to make decisions and enforce the implementation of these decisions. Thus, power should serve the objectives of an organization and should be exercised in such a way as to ensure that it operates in the best possible way. It should also take into account the interests of individuals and teams, whose work is crucial to the success of an organisation.

In an environment of cultural diversity, power exercised by managers who work with multicultural teams is very important, especially because of various – often totally different – expectations or habits of employees from diverse cultures. The study described in the article (individual in-depth interviews) on power and sources of power used by managers in a multicultural environment was conducted among the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers.

The main aim of the article is to identify the sources of power, the ways in which it is exercised by managers and the influence of this power on different areas of people management in culturally diverse

work environments as seen by the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers participating in the interviews.

In relation to the aim of the article, the following research problems were formulated: How do managers who work with multicultural teams understand the concept of "power" they exercise in managing people? What sources of power and ways of exercising power do they use in managing their teams? What areas of people management in culturally diverse teams are significantly influenced by managers' power?

POWER AND SOURCES OF POWER

Power has been a concept of great interest to researchers for many years. They see power as a key factor in shaping attitudes and behaviours and an efficient tool in influencing employees, their motivation and commitment to team goals, in coordinating relationships in a team, in resolving conflict or increasing productivity (among others: Dahl, 1957; French and Raven, 1959; Bachmann 2001; Lunenburg, 2012; Karkoulou, 2015; Belaya and Hanf, 2016; Winter and Michels, 2018; Kovach 2020).

Power is defined in various ways. According to French and Raven (1959), power is "the ability to manage the perceptions of the other party", and their definition fits well in the context of relationships between managers and employees because it indicates that the more powerful party (a manager) can use power to manage the relationships with the other party (employees).

Power means the ability to influence other people, that is the ability to bring about a change in the attitudes or behaviours of groups or individuals (Haugaard and Clegg, 2012; Peyton et al, 2019). Power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others (Galinsky et al, 2006; Pfeffer, 2011). Power is an interpersonal relationship in which one person, i.e. a subordinate, accepts decisions made by another person, i.e. a superior, allowing that decision to directly influence the subordinate's behaviour (Bednarski, 2001). Bachmann (2001) argues that power can be treated as a mechanism to efficiently coordinate social interactions and that it enables the development of relatively stable relationships between cooperating social partners. Such a definition

is useful for analysing the relationships resulting from a power relationship, i.e. those between managers and employees.

“Power is an individual’s relative capacity to modify others’ states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments” (Keltner et al., 2003, p. 265). Power is also described as the capacity of an organisation or a person to influence other parties’ behaviour (Freiberg, 2010; Gangl et al, 2015). Barnes states that power is possessed and influence is exerted through action, thus power is about entitlement, strength and authority and influence is about getting others to take action (Barnes, 2007).

Many researchers emphasise the role and importance of power. For example, Clegg (2010) points out that power is the foundation of organizations, while Singh (2009) argues that power is necessary to implement even the simplest aspects of organizations and projects. Vallas and Hill (2012) believe that power is crucial for organizational analysis, and for Fehr et al. (2013) power is the force constantly operating in organisations. Pfeffer (2013) argues that power facilitates the accomplishment of organizational goals. Power also implies the right to control and enforce employees’ obedience and also their obligation to be obedient to those who have legitimate power (Anderson et al. 2012; Biong et al, 2010). Moreover, power allows for certainty of behaviour, but it is not absolute. It consists in the ability of one person (manager) to influence another (employee) and, through this influence, to cause subordinates (employees) to perform desired actions and tasks in a company (Nowicka, et al., 2018, p. 168).

There are many publications devoted to sources of power (e.g. Raven and Kruglanski, 1970; Singh and Asce, 2009; Lunenburg, 2012; Karkouliau, 2015; Jones and York, 2016; Taucan, et al.; 2016; Hofmann, et al, 2017; Peyton, et al, 2019; Kovach, 2020).

Half a century ago, social scientists John French and Bertrand Raven (1959) listed five sources of power within organisations, namely: legitimate (also called formal or bureaucratic) power, reward power, coercive power, expert power, and referent power. According to, among others, Singh and Asce, French and Raven (1959) identified five fundamental sources of a manager’s power, which are still referred to today. The first three stem from a formal character of power, while the last two depend on a manager’s competence and qualities (Singh, Asce, 2009, p. 167).

Legitimate power is based on the conviction that a manager possess the right to influence employees who are obliged to comply to his orders (Lunenburg, 2012). This type of power, also called positional power, derives from the position a person holds and is linked to a person's title and job responsibilities (Reyes, 2014) and to a position in a power hierarchy. Legitimate power is the formal power, granted to a manager by virtue of legal regulations because of his position in an organisation. With such power, a manager is entitled to reward and punish employees.

Reward power is based on a person's position to grant rewards, such as job assignments, schedules, pay or various kinds of benefits (Reyes, 2014). Reward power is based on the right to offer people rewards, including social, emotional or spiritual ones, for doing what is expected of them. Reward power is also based on the right to deny rewards to others for not doing or refusing to do what is expected of them.

Coercive power is held by those who are in a position to punish others. Most people are afraid of the consequences of not doing what they are asked to do (Reyes, 2014). Coercive power is based on a threat of resorting to force to gain the obedience of another person. Such force can include a variety of coercive means: physical, social, emotional, political or economic. This type of power is based on the idea of coercion, i.e. someone (an employee) is forced to do something they do not want to do. Coercive power is fuelled by fear. An employee believes that he may be deprived of something if he does not follow the manager's instructions.

Expert power is based on the belief that a manager possesses abilities and skills that are valued by employees (Lunenburg, 2012). This power stems from a person's expertise, an acclaimed skill or particular accomplishments (Reyes, 2014). Expert power is built on knowledge, experience, competences or talents of a person (manager).

Referent power is based on employees' identification with and admiration of a manager. Referent power results from being liked and respected and those who possess such power can influence others through e.g. loyalty, respect, friendship, admiration, affection, or a desire to gain approval (Reyes, 2014). Referent power is based on identification of an employee with a manager.

Two other types of power are mentioned in the subject literature: connection power and informational power. The former is based on

who you know and who these persons know and who they are in good relationships with within an organization, while the latter stems from having access to valuable or important information (Reyes, 2014).

In management practice, the ways in which managers exercise power are very important. Three forms of exercising power by managers can be distinguished (Galata, 2004, p. 21). The first is related to showing one's superiority, which involves enforcing expected behaviours from subordinates through various types of sanctions. Managers who resort to this form of exercising power demonstrate their superiority to employees and choose formal business dependences in their mutual relationships.

The second form is linked with the manipulation of employees' behaviour, which includes situations in which managers withhold certain information from employees, e.g. those concerning organisational changes or new ways of working.

The third form is logical argumentation, which consists in justifying and convincing employees of the rightness of decisions taken by the manager. This form is used by competent managers who are not afraid of discussing their decisions with employees.

The role played in contemporary management by managers' power is crucial, especially in the context of managing multicultural teams in which employees from different cultural backgrounds can differently perceive their managers' power, the sources of this power and the ways in which managers exercise their power in practice.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted by the author of the article in 2021 and 2022. In the period between January and April 2021, she conducted eight interviews with the Polish managers (employees of international companies who manage culturally diverse teams whose members are of at least three different nationalities). Initially, the author planned to conduct ten interviews, but only eight managers agreed to take part in the interviews and answered questions about power in managing people in a multicultural work environment.

At first, the study was planned as the basis of a presentation given at a national conference entitled "Władza w perspektywie wyzwań współczesności" ["Power in the perspective of contemporary challenges"], which was supposed to take place online in May 2021 in Kraków and was organised by Ignatianum University. Unfortunately, the conference did not take place, and the author decided to extend her study to cover managers from Spain and Italy. During the period between June and September 2021 and in January 2022, she conducted further interviews with Spanish and Italian managers (with the same number of respondents, i.e. eight managers of each nationality, as was the case with the Polish managers, with whom such interviews had been conducted earlier).

The author conducted her qualitative study using the method of a semi-structured interview and the technique of an individual in-depth interview. The author often uses this method and this technique, especially when she conducts studies with managers from various countries. She developed a special research tool, namely an interview scenario, to be used for the purposes of this study. The interviews were conducted either directly face-to-face, by telephone or by the Zoom application (these interviews were held online).

Qualitative research is characterised by subjectivity, a flexible methodological structure, and non-probability sampling (Juszczak, 2013), in which respondents who meet specific criteria are selected deliberately (Nowak, 2007). The participants of this study were recruited using non-probability sampling by means of one of non-probability sampling methods, i.e. the snowball sampling.

Due to limitations related to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, most (six) interviews with the Polish managers were held online and two by telephone. The interviews were conducted in the period between January and April 2021 (these interviews were intended to collect the research material in view of the conference presentation).

In the case of the Spanish and Italian managers, some interviews were conducted with managers directly (during face-to-face meetings). During the author's stay in Italy, three interviews took place during face-to-face meetings at the turn of July 2021, while four further interviews with the Italian managers were held online between July and September 2021 and one interview in January 2022 (this interview was held by telephone). The interviews with the Spanish

managers were conducted during the author's stay in Spain in July 2021: two were held directly (during face-to-face meetings), four on-line in August and September 2021 and two by telephone in January 2022.

Table 1. The way of conducting interviews with the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers

Implementation of the interview	Poland	Spain	Italy
Face-to-face meeting	–	2	3
Online interviews	6	4	4
Telephone interviews	2	2	1

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers

The interviews were not long and lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. At the beginning, the managers were briefly informed about the chosen research method and technique and the rationale behind their choice, about the aim of the study, formal issues such as confidentiality of data and anonymity of answers, and the use of the collected information in the analysis prepared for the publication. A total of five interviews were conducted during face-to-face meetings with managers, 14 were online interviews and five were telephone interviews.

The author took notes while conducting five face-to-face interviews, and two managers agreed to have the interviews recorded. During 14 interviews conducted online, the author also took notes (in the case of these interviews, six managers gave their permission for recording the interviews). Similarly, the author took notes during five telephone interviews. The interviews with the Polish managers were conducted in Polish, and the interviews with the Spanish and Italian managers were conducted in English. Due to the qualitative nature of the interviews, the empirical material obtained was subjected to qualitative and quantitative analyses (where possible).

The table below presents the characteristics of the respondents who participated in the interviews. The criteria for selecting respondents (managers) to take part in the interviews were related to their experience of working in a managerial position for at least three years and managing a multicultural team whose members were of at least three different nationalities.

Table 2. Characteristics of the respondents (managers)

Criterion	Poland	Spain	Italy
Age	32–45	32–47	34–45
Women	4	2	3
Men	4	6	5
Number of years as a manager in an international company – work experience	3–7	4–10	4–8
Number of different nationalities in the team managed by the manager	at least 3 nationalities (3 nationalities)	at least 3 nationalities (4 nationalities)	at least 3 nationalities (4 nationalities)

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers

Sources of power used by managers in culturally diverse work environments

The aims of the interviews were to obtain information on the ways in which the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers define the term “power”, to identify the sources of power used by the managers and the ways in which they exercise their power in multicultural work environments as well as to indicate the areas of human resource management in which managers' power plays an important role. The table below shows the respondents' answers regarding the definition (explanation) of the term “power”.

Table 3. Managers' definitions of the term "power"

Power – definition of the term	Polish managers	Spanish managers	Italian managers
Manager 1	Ability to influence employees and enforce the way in which they perform their work (tasks and responsibilities assigned to them)	Using one's position to influence employees' behaviours, the way they work and the completion of tasks in the team	Influencing employees and changing their behaviours and conduct in order to achieve team and organisational goals
Manager 2	Ability to reward and punish employees due to the position of the manager (thus influencing employees)	Exerting influence on subordinates from a higher position that the manager holds in order to enforce tasks and achieve goals	Using tools such as: rewards, punishments, position and authority of the manager to influence employees and lead them to perform tasks as required by the manager
Manager 3	Using the manager's formal authority to influence employees	Influencing employees through the managers' authority (their position in the company/team)	Ability to use the manager's position to manage relationships with employees and enforce the manager's instructions
Manager 4	Influencing employees through the manager's authority, position and possibilities (they can reward and punish employees)	Ability to influence the team and employees to follow the manager's instructions due to his position and the means at his disposal (e.g. possibility to reward and punish his subordinates)	Influencing employees to change their behaviour, the way they perform their work (tasks), so that they carry out their work (tasks) according to the manager's will; the manager has the right to influence employees due to his formal position in the organisational structure

Managers' power in an environment of cultural diversity

Manager 5	Exerting influence on subordinates in order to bring about a change in their attitudes/ behaviours, not only from a position of formal authority which the manager has but also from a position of a relationship with the employees/team (informal authority which facilitates influence and the use of power)	Influencing employees, exerting influence on them in order to obtain the results expected by the manager who is responsible for the work of the team; influencing can be done by rewarding employees, punishing them but can also be based on the relationship with people that the manager has developed and his competences	Influencing employees through the position of the manager as a superior, coordinating work and tasks in the team through various means: penalties, rewards, appealing to competences, knowledge and experience to influence subordinates
Manager 6	Influencing employees through managers' formal position in the company's structure, but also through his competences and relationships with employees	Influencing employees' behaviour through rewards and punishments, so that they do what the manager expects	Influencing employees through formal authority (but also informal authority), so that they complete tasks according to the manager's expectations and will
Manager 7	The power that a manager has to influence employees to perform their tasks according to the manager's will	Influencing people, employees and their behaviour at work (task completion) through a variety of methods – the manager's authority (formal and informal), rewards, punishment or access to information	Influencing employees (through the use of various means, e.g. rewards, punishments, knowledge the manager has or information) to achieve team and organisational goals
Manager 8	This is the right that a manager has to control the work of his subordinates (the way tasks are performed and the way employees perform their duties)	Ability to exert influence, the way relations with employees are built based on different means (authority, competences or the manager's behaviour), so that employees perform the assigned tasks, according to the manager's expectations	Ability to change employees' attitudes and behaviours using different solutions that the manager has in the organisation (position, authority, the possibility of rewarding and punishing), in order to perform tasks and control their performance

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers

The managers' responses reveal their similar understanding of the term "power". The analysis of similarities and differences between their definitions, with reference to the cultural contexts of the countries of their origin, can be the basis for a future in-depth study.

Another aim of the interviews was to identify the sources of power used by managers (before asking the managers to answer this question, the author briefly described such sources). The respondents' answers are presented in the table below.

Table 4. Sources of power used by managers working with multicultural teams

Source of power	Polish managers	Spanish managers	Italian managers
Legitimate power	8	8	8
Reward power	7	8	8
Coercive power	7	6	6
Expert power	7	7	7
Referent power	6	7	7
Connection power	6	6	7
Informational power	7	6	6

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers

The respondents' answers reveal that the sources of power they most frequently use are: legitimate power (eight responses from the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers each) and reward power (seven responses from the Polish managers and eight responses from the Spanish and Italian managers each). Expert power was indicated by seven Polish, Spanish and Italian managers each and coercive power by seven Polish managers and six Spanish and Italian managers each. Referent power was chosen by six Polish managers and seven managers from Spain and Italy each. Connection power was selected by six Polish and Spanish managers each and seven Italian managers, while informational power by seven Polish managers and six Spanish and Italian managers each.

Another aim of the interviews was to identify the forms in which managers exercise power in a multicultural work environment (before asking the managers to answer this question, the author briefly described the essence of different forms of exercising power). The table below shows the respondents' answers.

Table 5. Forms of exercising power by managers in multicultural teams

Sources of power	Polish managers	Spanish managers	Italian managers
Showing one's own superiority	6	6	6
Manipulating employees' behaviour	5	5	5
Logical argumentation	7	7	7

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers

The third form of exercising power – logical argumentation – was indicated the most often: by seven Polish, Spanish and Italian managers each. The first form of exercising power, i.e. showing one's own superiority, was chosen by six managers of each nationality. The second form, i.e. manipulation of employees' behaviour, was indicated the least often (five answers from the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers).

The information collected during the interviews also allowed to indicate the areas of people management in which managers' power plays an important role; these areas are presented in the table below.

Table 6. Influence of managers' power on people management in multicultural teams

Different areas of human resource management	Polish managers	Spanish managers	Italian managers
Human resource planning	7	7	7
Recruitment and selection of employees	7	7	8
Motivating employees	8	8	8
Remuneration	7	7	7
Training and development	7	7	7
Employee assessment	8	8	8
Team communication	6	6	6
Conflict resolution	7	6	6
Competence management	7	7	7
Talent management	7	7	7
Dismissal	7	6	6

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers

Most managers indicated the following areas of people management: motivating employees (eight responses from the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers each), employee evaluation (also eight responses from managers of all nationalities) and recruitment and selection (seven responses from the Polish and Spanish managers each and eight responses from the Italian managers).

DISCUSSION

Studies conducted over the last two decades indicate that different forms of managers' power are directly linked with a range of positive and negative organizational and individual outcomes. For example, more extensive use of soft power techniques (expert, referent, and informational power) correlates with higher levels of employees' identification with their workplace, their greater commitment to a company, and deeper job satisfaction (e.g., Elias, 2008; Randolph and Kemery, 2011), whereas hard power techniques (coercive, reward, and legitimate power) are accompanied by higher absenteeism, lower productivity, lower self-confidence, and burnout (Elias, 2008; Randolph and Kemery, 2011).

The author conducted her qualitative study (individual in-depth interviews) in 2021 and 2022. The author has achieved research objectives and the results of the interviews she conducted with the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers provided answers to the research questions formulated in the introduction.

The first research question was as follows: How do managers who work with multicultural teams define "power" they exercise in managing people? The respondents' answers to this question are presented in Table 3. The next research question concerned the sources of power and the ways of exercising power used by managers. The information obtained from managers on this question is presented in Tables 4 and 5. Table 6 demonstrates managers' responses to the next research question: What areas of people management in culturally diverse teams are significantly influenced by managers' power?

In the author's opinion, managers define the concept of power without any problems. In practice, they use all sources of power described in this article. However, in managing their teams they mostly

use legitimate power (eight responses given by the managers of all nationalities), reward power (seven responses given by the Polish managers and eight responses given by the managers from Spain and Italy each) and expert power (seven responses given by managers of all nationalities). The managers' exercise of power is mainly based on the form which is described as logical argumentation (seven responses by managers of each nationality) and showing their superiority (six responses from the Polish, Spanish and Italian managers each). During the interviews, the managers explained that showing their superiority allows them to refer to their formal position to influence employees in different situations. The areas of human resource management in which managers' power is particularly significant (according to the respondents, they can really influence final decisions and concrete actions in these areas) are: motivating employees, employee evaluation and recruitment and selection.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A qualitative nature of a study usually is a limitation in the generalisation of the results, however, the author emphasises in her publications that she appreciates the possibility of conducting qualitative research as it offers an opportunity of establishing direct relationships with the respondents, which usually allows both parties to e.g. clarify doubts or ask about particularly interesting or problematic issues. In the case of in-depth interviews, the aspects that seems particularly important are trust, assuring respondents that their answers will remain anonymous (despite, for example, recording part of the interviews) and that the collected information will be used only for research purposes.

The interviews with the Polish managers were conducted in Polish and the interviews with the Spanish and Italian managers in English, which in the case of two interviews with the Italian managers proved slightly problematic, but with the commitment of both parties (the researcher and the respondents) the interviews were successfully completed.

In the author's opinion, further directions of research in this area should include obtaining information on the analysed issues also from managers of other nationalities and investigating the issue of managers' power in the opinions of employees of different nationalities and their perception of the sources of power used in people management as well as the forms of exercising power by managers of different nationalities.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature review and interviews conducted by the author were the basis for identifying the sources and methods of power used by the managers and the impact of this power on different areas of people management in a culturally diverse work environment. The analysis of the concept of power, in the context of people management, leads, among others, to the following conclusions: power is connected with interactions which take place between people (employees-manager); power is connected with a specific dependence relation (e.g. the greater dependence of employees on a manager and his decisions, the greater the manager's power); power affects two parties (the party that exerts influence, i.e. the manager who exercises power, and the party that is influenced, i.e. the subordinate who is subject to the manager's power); the manager's power comes from various sources and is exercised in different ways.

Summing up, power in people management is the exercise of managers' influence over employees to make them take certain actions and achieve planned goals. Power is the foundation for respecting certain rational rules that apply in an organisation. It also legitimises the organisational order in which the manager primarily has formal authority. His position within the formal structures gives him the authority to make decisions, give orders and control employees.

In the author's opinion, however, to manage people effectively, formal power is not enough and informal power – which is based on experience and personality traits that a manager should possess – is also necessary. This is particularly important in work environments characterised by cultural diversity of employees, as employees from different cultures may have different sensitivities to formal and

informal power as well as to the sources of power and forms in which managers exercise their power.

When managing multicultural teams, managers should be concerned about the compatibility of actions taken with the expectations of their subordinates who come from different cultures, they should understand the needs and expectations of employees related to the way power is exercised and the sources of power used by managers. They should also have the ability to individually apply different solutions related to their authority in relation to their subordinates. Inappropriate use of power by managers who work with multicultural teams may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, weaken team relations, cause stress and lower employees' motivation.

In the author's opinion, managers' self-improvement in the field of knowledge about power, sources of power and managing people using different forms of exercising power is particularly important in a culturally diverse work environment. Managers working in such environments should avoid impulsive behaviours and overreliance on their formal power, should skilfully and in a balanced way use power as a factor which is, on the one hand, necessary for individuals and teams to perform tasks and achieve organisational goals, but, on the other hand, may be a factor negatively influencing attitudes, behaviours and the quality of work. Power, especially when working with employees from different cultures, cannot and should not be used against them. It should be prudently and constructively used primarily to increase efficiency and effectiveness of management.

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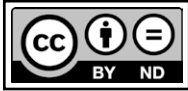
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