

# Power increases cognitive functioning



Life is filled with distractions. Information floods in. Situations change. To successfully navigate these challenges, individuals need to use a set of fundamental mental processes known as executive functions to regulate their thoughts and behaviours. Those with weak executive functions get distracted by temptations and overwhelmed by information; those with strong executive functions stay focused on their goals, and adjust their behaviours when situations demand so. What affects a person's ability to regulate their behaviours and thoughts? A large body of research suggests that having power improves a person's executive functions relative to lacking power.

There are three core executive functions: inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. These form the backbone for higher-order processes such as planning, problem solving, and decision making. Having power improves these three core functions, which are all important for optimal performance in the workplace.

Inhibitory control is overriding impulses and controlling one's attention, thoughts, and behaviours to do what one chooses. For example, to focus their attention on the task at hand in a noisy work environment, individuals need to inhibit their automatic impulse to listen to what other people are saying. High-power individuals are better at directing their attention to things relevant to their goals and inhibiting attention to other, irrelevant things than low-power individuals.

Working memory is holding information in memory and mentally processing the information. For example, in negotiations, new information comes in constantly. To decide whether to reject or accept an offer, individuals need to integrate new information with existing information and make a decision quickly. High-power individuals perform better in tasks with a high demand for working memory than low-power individuals.

Cognitive flexibility is changing perspectives or ways of thinking flexibly. In creativity tasks, in order to come up with something new, individuals need to change their usual way of thinking. High-power individuals are more creative and better at adjusting their attention, thoughts, and behaviours in accordance with situational demands. This flexibility is likely related to their greater ability to inhibit previous situational demands and update them with new demands in working memory.

## How to improve low-power individuals' executive functions

Why do high-power individuals have better executive functions? It is likely a result of feeling more independent from others and facing less constraint in the environment. Thus, one way to improve low-power individuals' executive functions is to give them power. Leaders can achieve this through delegation. Subordinates who have access to more resources and assume more responsibilities should feel a sense of efficacy and independence.

It is also possible to elevate low-power individuals' sense of power without giving them actual control over others. For example, recent research found that low-power individuals who had a chance to affirm the self, such as by writing about an important personal value, felt more efficacious, and thus no longer showed decrements in inhibitory control. Another possible way to increase low-power individuals' sense of power is to give them more choices about what to do in their daily life. Choices, like power, fulfil people's need for control. As such, giving low-power individuals control over things like how to decorate their workspace may elevate their sense of agency and power, and as a consequence improve their executive functioning.

### When having power does not lead to better performance

High-power individuals do not always process information more thoroughly than low-power individuals. Powerful people pay less attention to tasks or individuals that are not relevant for their goals because they are better at controlling their attention to do what they choose. Thus, organisations need to ensure that their leaders' goals are in line with the organisations' aims.

A group of high-power individuals does not necessarily perform better than a group of low-power individuals. Such high-power teams tend to have more in-group conflict due to heightened concerns about the distribution of power. In fact, unless the task involves working alone or little group coordination, groups of high-power individuals tend to perform worse than groups of low-power individuals. Hence, for an organisation to capitalise on high-power individuals' enhanced executive functions during group decisions, these individuals need to see the task at hand as relevant, and the distribution of power in the group needs to be handled transparently.

Additionally, high-power individuals may experience increased cognitive load due to their heightened responsibilities and the number of subordinates they must supervise. In this case, the cognitive benefits that accompany having power may be balanced out by the increased load. In fact, these cognitive benefits may be what keep leaders above water when stress and demands are high.

Power perpetuates itself through improved executive functions: Power differences lead to performance differences, which in turn increase the legitimacy of those power differences. This means that sometimes low-power individuals underperform not because they lack the ability, but because they lack the power to function optimally. Delegation may create a win-win situation, by reducing the cognitive load of high-power individuals and improving the executive functions of low-power individuals.



#### Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Power and cognitive functioning](#), in *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Volume 33, June 2020, Pages 95-99
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