

Power and authority: the original vision of Mary Parker Follett

Mary Parker Follett was a management prophet for her early 20th century vision of power and authority, as relevant today as it was then.

February 6, 2015

Power and authority are two key concepts in management, yet they cause great confusion. Usually, people focus only on the division of power or on how to achieve power.

This is a limited view, say IESE professors [Domènec Melé](#) and [Josep Rosanas](#). In their paper, "[Power, Freedom and Authority in Management: Mary Parker Follett's Power-With](#)," published in *Philosophy of Management*, they go back in time to rediscover the innovative vision of Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933) on the subjects of power and authority.

Known as a prophet of management, Follett wrote about business in the early 20th century, but her ideas are as relevant today as they were then. Melé and Rosanas believe that Follett's views can help modern managers better understand the notions of power and authority and how they should be used in business.

Follett was a contemporary of Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915), considered the father of Scientific Management. While Follett accepted some of Taylor's concepts, her ideas on power and authority differed greatly. Taylor viewed power as "the boss knows best" and he should give subordinates orders based on his scientific analysis of the situation. Follett, on the other hand, focused on getting people to cooperate. She believed that genuine power was not power-over but power-with.

In the world of business, managers, unions and workers constantly strive for power over one another. Workers resist management having power over them and employers resist the

efforts of unions to invert the situation.

Power-with a better goal than power-over

In Follett's view, power-over is an inadequate goal, for two reasons.

The first was a legal distinction. The prepositions *over* and *with* were used to mark a distinction in law, as in the following example: one had rights *over* a slave while one had rights *with* a servant.

The second reason that power-over does not work is that people simply do not want to be lorded over or patronized.

As an alternative, Follett proposed power-with. By jointly developing power *with* workers, managers set the stage for fairness. "That is always our problem," she wrote, "not how to get control of people, but how all together we can get control of a situation."

While power-over is *coercion*, power-with is *coactive*. Sharing control provides personal enrichment for everyone and boosts morale. "It is all right to work with someone," she wrote, "what is disagreeable is to feel distinctly that you work under someone. Executives as well as workers object to being under anyone."

To solve conflicts, seek a union of interests

The meaning of jointly developing power can be further illustrated by her concept of circular response or circular behavior.

Imagine this example, which she gave: In a game of tennis, A serves. The way B returns the ball depends partly on the way it was served to him. A's next play will depend on his own original serve plus the return by B, and so on.

Likewise, in social relations, there are linear responses as well as circular ones. In the business environment, employees respond both to their employers and to the relationship between them. In other words, according to Follett, "a reaction is always a reaction to a relation."

To eliminate power-over, Follett recommended using integration to solve conflicts. She also maintained that managers should look for the authority or law of a situation and seek a union

of interests.

When a person feels overpowered by another, he or she seeks freedom. Cooperation, and what Follett called “functional utility,” will make these feelings vanish. “We are seeking an integrative unity as the foundation of business development,” she wrote.

Authority comes not from being on top but from involving those below

On the subject of authority, Follett pointed out that ownership, or just the fact of holding a certain position, does not give a top manager authority. Real authority, which people obey, comes from function and experience.

The challenge of good management is giving authority to those who have real responsibility for their function. She summarized her thoughts this way: “The one who gives an order should try to bring those ordered into the situation.”

Follett’s management writings help shed light on concepts of power and authority today. As she said, power is something that managers should jointly develop with their colleagues in the workplace.

www.iese.edu/insight