THE ISSUE IS

Positioning for Power

The materials from the January 1990 Directions For the Future (OFF) Symposium held in San Diego contain few overt references to power. Yet power was a critical theme of the symposium, in which 200 of the profession's leaders engaged in a comprehensive discussion of practice and educational issues and identified hundreds of planning and implementation strategies to resolve these issues. The factor underlying the success of all of the strategies is power. The recognition of the role of power in the process was not stated but was woven throughout the symposium. For occupational therapy to be viable in the 21st century, we need to acknowledge our existing power, develop our power sources, and use the power we acquire.

"To feel powerful! To be powerful! To act powerful!" (Josephson, 1980, p. 3). With these words, Josephson challenged women to understand their needs, aspirations, and rights to power. In 1991, we as occupational therapists must meet this challenge if we are to position ourselves so that the plans of the OFF Symposium can be realized. Achieving our power potential depends first on understanding power, then on acknowledging the sources of our power, and, finally, on taking action to develop those sources.

Understanding Power

Traditionally, power has been defined in terms of forcefulness. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1977) offers several definitions that reinforce this view: "power: possession of control, authority, or influence over others; legal or official authority, capacity or right; physical might; political control or influence" (p. 902). An alternative view of power exists, however. Power is increasingly seen as effectiveness, that is, the ability or capacity to act or perform effectively and ultimately, so as to be empowering (Josephson, 1980).

Both types of power exist, perhaps along a continuum from forcefulness to empowerment. We as occupational therapists need to understand the continuum for our own development and to increase our awareness of power in others. Each of us should be aware of how we typically view and use power. Along with this self-awareness, we must also recognize that we will encounter people with different views of power. Situations will arise in which we must exercise our power differently to be successful. In our overall awareness of power, we need to appreciate the differences along the continuum, recognize the behaviors associated with different views, and be prepared to engage in a variety of power exchanges. Our understanding of the power continuum must be supported by the development and use of the interpersonal and personal skills of power, such as negotiation, conflict management and resolution, group facilitation, and public speaking.

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Sources of Power

Loden (1985) related the two opposing views of power in her discussion of external and internal sources of power. Power is proposed as a combination of external and positional factors and internal and personal qualities. In Loden's perspective, external sources of power are frequently those associated with traditional definitions of power, whereas internal sources are more likely to be compatible with the view of power as empowerment or effectiveness. This view provides us with a helpful framework within which to understand our power.

Part of our power as occupational therapists is external, that is, the power derived from the profession of occupational therapy. Our professional power includes our knowledge base, our place and role in the health care system, our legal status, and our public image. Additionally, power is acquired through internal and individual sources. Individual, or personal, power is viewed as stemming from task competence, interpersonal competence, and charisma (Loden, 1985). In occupational therapy, our individual power is influenced by our skill as practitioners or educators, by our ability to communicate effectively in a variety of situations, and, perhaps, by that elusive quality called charisma.

Developing Our Power

Achieving our profession's power potential rests in our acknowledgment and development of professional as well as personal sources of power. In occupational therapy, our professional power and personal power are interdependent. Our professional power is achieved through the collective efforts of individ-
The power of individuals is ultimately limited or facilitated by the power of the profession.

The dynamic relationship between these power sources can be illustrated by the role of research in the development of both professional and personal power. Collaborative research between academicians and clinicians contributes to the development of our knowledge base. Research that documents the outcomes of clinical practice and supports theoretically validated practice strengthens the credibility and autonomy of occupational therapy in both clinical and academic settings. This translates to a stronger professional self-esteem and confidence in the profession but also to a stronger reimbursement potential in the clinic and increased research funding opportunities in academia. Consequently, the renewed professional image and stronger financial bases support continued growth in the clinical and academic settings. As our clinical and academic programs achieve recognition in their environments, individuals are encouraged to acquire new skills, seek greater challenges, and influence the growth of the profession.

Such a positive, iterative cycle is a realistic scenario if we take action now to position ourselves for power in the 21st century. The responsibility for the development of our professional and personal sources of power is shared by every occupational therapist. The responsibility begins with the recruitment of the best and brightest students into our educational programs. Academic and clinical educators must then oversee the development of technical knowledge and skills as well as of critical thinking skills, knowledge of professional civics, and skills in systems analysis and politics. Supervisors and administrators carry on the development of reflective, skilled, and caring therapists who understand the role of the occupational therapist with the individual patient and within the health care system. The final responsibility belongs with the individual. Each of us must evaluate our own strengths and weaknesses; develop our clinical, educational and research skills, and proactively contribute to the development of our personal and professional power sources.

**Taking Action**

The DFF Symposium materials contain outlines of numerous strategies that can influence the power position of occupational therapy. A message throughout DFF is the need for academicians and clinicians to work collaboratively on the issues facing the profession. We are more powerful as a unified whole with a multifaceted view of the profession and a myriad of skills. No one person can have all of the power skills. We can and must collaborate with each other. We must also have the skills to form alliances with powerful persons and groups external to occupational therapy. Finally, all occupational therapists should have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to position themselves to gain influence, power, and control of the systems in which they operate (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1990).

To move upward in the power hierarchy, we must have knowledge (i.e., expertise), knowing (i.e., process skills), competencies, and credentials (Josephson, 1980). We as occupational therapists must work to develop the profession's knowledge base, individually acquire the interpersonal and personal skills of power, master the technical competencies of our settings, and earn the credentials required of our academic and clinical environments. With the development of our professional and personal power sources, we can be positioned for power in the 21st century. We can feel, be, and act powerfully!

**References**


