LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

7 Rules of Power

by Jeffrey Pfeffer

To change anything, you need power. Pfeffer's seven research-backed rules show how to build it and use it.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Rule 1: Get out of your own way.**

Stop describing yourself with small, apologetic words and lead with your credentials and impact instead. Modesty, Pfeffer says, is a luxury only the already powerful can afford - and acting confident reshapes how you feel, not just how you look.

02 **Rule 2: Break the rules.**

The rules were written by people already in power, so playing by them protects them, not you. Act first and create a fait accompli - finished results are rarely reversed, and visible rule-breaking itself signals power.

03 **Rule 3: Show up in powerful fashion.**

First impressions form in seconds and stick: stand tall, take up space, speak up, and apologize less. Research Pfeffer cites shows employees who display anger strategically earn more promotions and higher pay, because anger reads as status.

04 **Rule 4: Create a powerful brand.**

Control the narrative about yourself before someone else does - one clear story of who you are and what you have done, repeated in every room that matters. Visible ties to high-status people help too: proximity transfers status.

05 **Rule 5: Network relentlessly.**

Advancement runs on relationships, sponsors, and central positions that bring information and visibility - not on quiet performance alone. Most people underinvest because networking feels 'dirty'; that discomfort is exactly your opening.

06 **Rule 6: Use your power.**

Power is not spent like money: used well, it grows, because acting builds allies and a reputation for getting things done. Move fast while you hold it - put your people in key roles, move blockers aside, and reward supporters.

07 Rule 7: Success excuses almost everything.

Once you have acquired power, what you did to get it will be forgiven, forgotten, or both: people rationalize winners' pasts because they want to be near success. Knowing this should free you to act instead of worrying about judgment.

08 Power is a tool - blame the user, not the tool.

Power can serve good or evil ends. Refusing to learn it does not make the game fair; it just leaves the field to people less scrupulous than you. Pfeffer argues good people owe it to their causes to get powerful.

09 Power pays - in salary, health, and years of life.

The research he cites links higher position and job control to higher pay, greater happiness, and better health: in the famous Whitehall studies, people higher up the hierarchy had lower rates of heart disease and death, largely because control is the opposite of stress.

10 Do not just learn power - practice it, with backup.

Pfeffer's closing prescription: treat it as a project with a written plan, and recruit a personal board of directors or a coach to hold you accountable. Power behaviors feel uncomfortable before they feel natural, and nobody sustains them alone.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

Jeffrey Pfeffer has taught power at Stanford's business school for over four decades, and his students kept reporting that the lessons changed their careers within weeks. This book is that course on paper. His opening claim: if you want to change your job, your organization, or the world - Stanford's motto is 'change lives, change organizations, change the world' - you need power, and pretending otherwise just hands it to people less scrupulous than you.

The seven rules, each backed by social science research and classroom stories, start inside. Get out of your own way: replace diminishing self-descriptions with ones built on your credentials and impact. Break the rules: norms protect the already powerful, and acting first - creating a fait accompli - beats asking permission. Show up in powerful fashion, because posture, voice, and even a strategic flash of anger confer status. And create a powerful brand: one clear, repeated story about who you are, amplified by association with high-status people.

Then the rules turn outward. Network relentlessly, because careers run on relationships, sponsors, and central network positions far more than on quiet good work. Use your power once you have it: power grows by being exercised, so act early, staff key roles with your people, and reward those who support you. Rule seven is the uncomfortable closer: once you have power, what you did to acquire it is forgiven, forgotten, or both, as people rationalize the pasts of winners they want to be near.

Pfeffer knows this advice makes readers uneasy - some call it depressing, even 'dark.' His answer is that power is a tool, neither good nor bad, and a valuable one: the research he cites links it to higher pay, greater happiness, and better health. His stated goal is that readers never have to leave a job involuntarily again. The only real choice, he argues, is whether you learn how power works or let it work on you.

DO THIS WEEK

Run Pfeffer's own assignment this week - a small 'doing power' project. (1) Rewrite how you introduce yourself: two sentences leading with your credentials and impact, no apologies and no shrinking. (2) Use it once, out loud, in a real conversation. (3) Reconnect with three people - one old contact, one peer, one person above you - and offer each something useful. (4) Ask one person you trust to be your sounding board and call you out when you slip back into playing small.

By Jeffrey Pfeffer, first published 2022. Read it if you do great work that nobody notices and want the research on why that happens.