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### When your authority fluctuates throughout the day

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## When Your Authority Fluctuates Throughout the Day

by Eric M. Anicich, Michael Schaerer, Jake Gale, and Trevor A. Foulk

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### Summary

For many of us, the power we feel at work — how much, when it occurs, and around whom — can fluctuate. This can result in a surprising increase in stress and a decrease in well-being. To address this, consider these strategies for making power imbalances more manageable. First, be deliberate in scheduling your tasks to cluster activities with similar levels of power together. Second, give your work a routine and consider “theming” together days with similar activities. Third, create a role-transcendent identity in order to embrace your different levels of power. And finally, work to actively manage your well-being.

Most of us have answered the following question countless times: “What do you do for work?” If you’re like most people, you would probably respond with something like “project manager,” “IT support specialist,” or “vice president of sales.”

But job titles are not verbs. Although they may communicate something about your formal standing in the organizational hierarchy, they don’t necessarily reflect how powerful you feel, day-to-day and moment-to-moment, at work.

For example, consider the following quotes from two different people in our personal and professional networks — Nina and Morgan — about their sense of power on the job.

“I set and enforce project deadlines for each integrated project team, communicate deliverables, and approve funding decisions. ... A lot of people come to me with questions or looking for advice, including the head of engineering. I have a lot of responsibility and often feel quite powerful.” -Nina

“I try to keep the office kitchen clean. I’ve sent emails and posted signs. Nothing I do seems to influence people. What ends up happening is I just wash everyone’s dishes. ... When I’m not in the office, I am usually on the road trying to organize in-person outreach events for prospective customers in unfamiliar cities. I have spent many late nights sending invitations to people I didn’t know only to have five people show up. There are a lot of anxious evenings watching the doors and hoping more people will walk in! It can be embarrassing. I feel drained and powerless in those moments.” -Morgan

Based on the experiences described above, you may have assumed that Nina is a powerful executive, while Morgan works in a low-level position. However, Nina’s official job title is “administrative assistant,” while Morgan’s official job title is “vice president and managing director, North America.”

Why do Nina and Morgan have perspectives on their sense of power that aren't reflected in their titles? And why does it matter? Our research reveals that first-person experiences with power at work can differ greatly from the level of power our job titles suggest. We find that these power experiences can fluctuate on a day-to-day basis. Importantly, this fluctuation can come at a cost: decreased well-being.

### **How Power Shifting Can Lead to Stress**

The experiences Nina and Morgan describe are seemingly incompatible with their formal positions, but are not atypical. Specifically they reflect the difference between objective positional power and the subjective sense of power. Positional power involves control over valued resources (hiring and firing employees, allocating budgets, managing subordinates, etc.) and is typically reflected in one's job title and position on the organizational chart. A subjective sense of power, on the other hand, is individuals' internal understanding of their own power in relation to others.

Job titles and other indicators of positional power are static snapshots that reveal more about an employee's career stage than their day-to-day subjective experiences. In reality, employees are likely to encounter a dynamic stream of experiences that implicate a wide range of feelings related to their subjective sense of power. For most, the experience of fluctuating between psychological states of high and low power (or vice versa) across situations is relatively common. For instance, in our own lives as academics, we may publish an article in the Harvard Business Review on the same day that a research project we have invested years in is rejected by an academic journal editor and anonymous peer reviewers.

Recently, we sought to better understand how power fluctuation impacts employee well-being at work. Across four studies, we found that this experience is associated with reduced well-being. In one study, for example, we had a sample of 616 undergraduate students go through a computer-based organizational simulation involving different amounts of power fluctuation. We found that the more participants had to switch back and forth between a high and low-power mindset, the more they reported experiencing psychological distress. In another study, we asked 100 employees about their daily experiences over a 10-day period. Each day, the employees reported their perceived power multiple times, how distressed they were, and how many somatic symptoms (headache or eyestrain, for example) they reported experiencing. We found that the more employees' sense of power fluctuated throughout the day, the more distress and somatic symptoms they reported experiencing later in the day.

These findings suggest that job stress may be more a function of what we do, and how powerful or powerless what we do makes us feel, than our actual positions at work. Why might this be the case?

One potential explanation is that a job is actually a dynamic bundle of roles, each of which is associated with a certain set of prescribed responsibilities and ways of acting. When these behaviors feel incompatible with each other, or when the amount of time someone is available to fulfill all of the role-based demands is insufficient, employees are likely to experience stress and other forms of reduced well-being. High- and low-power roles, in particular, are associated with fundamentally different behavioral expectations and ways of thinking, creating role tensions which can be challenging to navigate successfully if you're constantly shifting between the two.

For example, powerless employees are often expected to be timid and quiet, to look for direction from more senior colleagues, and to avoid rocking the boat. Powerful employees, on the other hand,

are often expected to be assertive and boisterous, to take control of situations, and to impose their will on others. If your job requires you to do both, you may experience distress because you (and others in your organization) expect these feelings to be mutually exclusive. That is just what we found in our studies: Employees whose sense of power fluctuated more (vs. less) experienced greater tension between their conflicting high and low-power roles which, in turn, was associated with increased psychological and physical harm.

### **Strategies to Reduce the Frequency of Power Fluctuation**

Fortunately, there are ways to address the negative fallout from such emotional rollercoasters. Below we provide a few strategies to help you reduce the frequency of power fluctuation in your own life and to cope with the inevitable power fluctuations you may experience on a daily basis.

#### **Be deliberate with scheduling tasks**

Consider reviewing your calendar from the past week to identify the types of experiences (meetings, tasks, etc.) that prompted you to feel more and less powerful. In the future, try to schedule tasks in clusters according to how powerful or powerless they tend to make you feel.

For example, cluster tasks like giving advice or meeting with a subordinate on the same day of the week if possible. Similarly, consider grouping tasks on your calendar that are likely to make you feel unimportant and powerless — like asking for help or talking to your supervisor. You probably don't have control over how busy you are, but you likely have some control over when certain experiences occur during the work week or day and should take advantage of this scheduling flexibility to minimize power fluctuation frequency.

#### **Give your work a routine**

In one of our studies, we found that power fluctuation was particularly harmful when employees were working on novel and unfamiliar tasks instead of routine ones. Because of this, we suggest doing your work in a way that is consistent and repetitive when possible. Take Jack Dorsey, the CEO of Twitter as an example. He uses a "theming days" approach, where he devotes each day to one area of his business (Monday is for management meetings, Tuesday is for product development, etc.). Doing so helps him focus on the essential task at hand and allows him to deal with interruptions more effectively.

There are many other ways to create a routine at work: arriving and leaving work at the same time each day, setting aside the first 15 minutes to plan your day, or sticking to regular break intervals. Creating routines not only increases the predictability of your work flow, but it also makes it easier to navigate the multiple roles you have to play in your job.

#### **Create a role-transcendent identity**

Power fluctuation harms well-being, in part, because it can generate cognitive dissonance. However, you can break out of this either/or thinking by creating a role-transcendent identity that emphasizes both types of power as necessary parts of yourself.

Instead of thinking that you're a "boss" or "subordinate," try to embrace the nuances associated with being a "problem solver," "relationship builder," or "change enabler." Integrating your different work-related selves into a single role-transcendent identity will help prevent you from experiencing disparate and conflicting mindsets. The circumstances of your day-to-day work are here to stay; try to accept rather than resist them.

### **Actively manage your well-being**

As much as we'd like to avoid power fluctuations and their associated distress at work, some amount of it is inevitable. Fortunately, there are a variety of steps that employees can take, including expressive writing exercises, social sharing, taking short work breaks, and mindfulness exercises, to name a few. Importantly, all of these interventions are easy, cheap (or free), and can be done just about anywhere.

Many employees — ourselves included — have been on an emotional rollercoaster over the past year as the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted power dynamics and exacerbated work-related stress in unprecedented ways. Ultimately, however, it is important for all employees to recognize that power fluctuation-induced stress is normal; just about everybody feels this way at one point or another. So, when this happens, it's okay to cut yourself some slack and use some of the strategies we recommend. We all deserve a little extra self-compassion these days, even when it comes to managing how our fluctuating power makes us feel day-to-day.

### **About the Authors**

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