



## Creating Referent Power in your Own Life

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*“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” - John Quincy Adams*

As James MacGregor Burns wrote in his seminal work, “Leadership,” not everyone with power demonstrates leadership, but all leaders possess power. The question, therefore, is: how can we use power to support our efforts as leaders and ultimately have a positive influence on the lives of others?

One possibility lies in the concept of referent power. In 1959, John French and Bertram Raven outlined five forms of power, one of which they called referent power. Referent power exists when followers respect a leader, identify with the leader, and want to or are willing to follow the leader. Referent power comes into play when the essence and character of the leader are attractive to those who would follow. Some scholars believe only celebrities and public figures have referent power; but, the basic principles of referent power are grounded in every day actions available to anyone. What, then, can we do in our day-to-day lives to create referent power?

Referent leaders demonstrate respect for others and the individual worth of a person. By seeking common ground with others and serving, referent leaders connect with people, regardless of similarities or differences. Referent leaders also accept the responsibility for mentoring others. By respecting, serving, and mentoring, referent power can be developed.

Achieving referent power can begin today; here are some simple ways:

- Begin your day by thinking about ways to help someone else.
- Be willing to share your skills and talents with others and help others who want to develop the same talent.
- Mentor someone. This can be done in a few ways. Think about becoming an RA, help out a younger sibling or cousin, or show someone something that you know well that they may not know at all.
- If you see someone eating lunch by themselves, invite them to join you.
- Network, network, network! Networking is not a bad thing; networking can really connect people and build stronger relationships.
- Take five minutes per day to introduce yourself to someone you may not know in class, at lunch, etc.
- Before you want to prejudge someone, consider their issues in life, and try to see if you can understand where they may be coming from.

While this description of referent power may sound like an elementary reminder to be a good person, consider:

- Connecting with people and developing relationships are vital to successful leadership
- Referent power encourages the ideology of helping people without the need for something in return
- Everyone needs a mentor
- Everyone is looking for someone who is willing to help them in their job, schoolwork, relationships, hobbies, or any other aspect of life.
- The world would be a much better place if we demonstrated greater respect and less judgment

Referent power is achievable in every day life by trying to be a caring and trustworthy person, helping others become successful, and becoming a mentor to those in need of direction. If the world had more referent leaders, we would have less hostility and selfishness and greater humanity for all.

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