

## **Authority by Position**

Those who have authority based on the position they hold within the community have Positional Authority. Such authority figures include your boss, the U.S. President or a police officer. A landmark study conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale University illustrates just how powerful Positional Authority can be. In his experiment, Milgram had some participants pose as “teachers,” while others portrayed the “learners.” The “teachers” were told that they were going to help the researcher test the learning levels of the “learners” by giving those “learners” progressively more intense shocks each time they answered memory questions incorrectly.

Of course, no real shock was administered, but the “teachers” were not aware of the false premise and the “learners” were instructed to act as though the pain were real. In other words, it appeared to the “teachers” as though the “learner” were suffering from intense pain each time a question was answered wrong. The purpose of the study was to see how far the “teachers” would go in obeying the head researcher’s authority, even if it meant inflicting great pain on a fellow human being. The results were astounding: Two-thirds of the subjects delivered as much pain as they could (450 volts), pulling all 30 of the shock switches, even when the acting “learners” pleaded, begged and even screamed for them to stop the experiment.

This experiment strikingly demonstrates the concepts we’ve made about Positional Authority. Consider the following key points. First of all, the “teachers” were noticeably uncomfortable with what they were doing. In fact, they hated it. Many of them asked the researcher to please end the experiment. But when he refused, they continued on nonetheless, trembling, perspiring and sometimes even laughing nervously. In spite of their extreme discomfort, almost all of the “teachers” continued to obey the head researcher until the experiment was over. The converse is also revealing: When the scripts were reversed and it was the “learners” ordering the “teachers” to deliver more shocks while the researcher protested, not even one single person disobeyed their superior! One hundred percent of the “teachers” refused to obey the “learners” over the researcher. After obtaining the shocking (no pun intended) results of this experiment,

Milgram wrote, “It is the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority that constitutes the chief finding of the study.”

When someone has a higher position or more authority than you, the automatic trigger in your mind is that whatever that person says must be true. In another study, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) found that many errors made by flight captains were not challenged or corrected by other members of the crew. This blind obedience to position and authority sometimes resulted in catastrophes. One airline, concerned about this evidence, tested their own flight crews via flight simulators. They created conditions that would lead to mental overload and emotional stimulation. As a result, the captains (in one study) made fatal mistakes at critical moments. In those cases, the airline was shocked to discover that 25 percent of the flights would have crashed because the subordinates did not take corrective action and challenge the position of the plane’s captain.

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