

## **Coercive Power—Weapons of Force**

Coercive Power is an individual's ability to control or force someone to comply. Such power includes intimidation, manipulation, scare tactics, threats, deceitfulness and lies. Coercive Power could come in the form of mafia protection fees, constant threats of being fired, blackmail, physical force, economic dependence or emotional control. Why do people use coercive power? Why is coercion the power we see most often? Because Coercive Power is the easiest power to learn and use. Many people have seen great examples of Coercive Power in their personal lives. For some, it may be the only type of power they know. It doesn't take much talent or skill to threaten, pressure or scare someone else into submission. When people can't get compliance with their persuasive skills, most will resort to coercion. They hit desperation and frustration either because they are unable to use the higher forms of persuasion or because they lack knowledge of a better way.

Coercive Power is seductive and you usually get instant results by employing it. Coercive Power is fundamentally grounded in bringing others down instead of lifting them up to a higher level of thinking. Instead of climbing the highest mountain, Coercive Power players will climb the smallest one and then blow up all the others so they are the only one on top. Such power also requires the least amount of planning and time investment; there is no need to convince someone with words when you get immediate results with force or coercion. As the great mobster Al Capone said, "You can get more with a kind word and a gun than with a kind word alone!"

This type of power causes unwanted long-term consequences. Coercive Power is grounded in fear, and fear only lasts while the threat is present. When the threat disappears, so does the power. This type of power does not require the creation of a belief in or an inclination for true influence to work. I have seen coercion kill creativity, numb the human spirit and create resentment and rebellion. Trust me when I say that coercion will always eventually backfire.

In one study, researchers tested the use of coercive power in fraternity pledges. They wanted to see if they could get people to volunteer to perform an unpleasant task by threatening them with varying levels of punishment. A fraternity member participating in the experiment explained to his pledges that they had to help him collect research data for his psychology class. As their contribution, they would have to copy numbers for three hours straight. He explained to them that even though it would be an extremely boring and tedious task, it had to get done. If the pledges did not agree to perform the task, some were told they would be paddled (low coercion), while others were told they'd be called before a tribunal or even be restricted from joining the fraternity altogether (high coercion). The results demonstrated that the more coercion was used, the more the pledges were dissatisfied with the assigned task, and conversely, that the less coercion was used, the more the pledges were content to comply. When you use Coercive Power, people will resent or find more dissatisfaction in what you are forcing them to do than they would if you used some other forms of power or influence.

A study conducted by Aronson and Carlsmith researched similar issues as the one illustrated above. In a group of small children, half of the youngsters were told not to play with a certain popular toy that was placed on a nearby table. The other half were told the exact same thing, except they were threatened with the warning that playing with the toy would make their supervisor (one of the experimenters) very, very angry and upset and that they would be severely punished for doing so. The experimenter then left the room. The results of this experiment proved that the more severe the threat, the more the children readily gave up playing with the toy. When the threat was mild, however, they were more inclined to go ahead and play with the toy despite requests not to. There is no doubt that coercive force works in the short-term. It is the long-term results that have a drastic and detrimental effect on one's ability to persuade and influence.