Paths to Power

FACULTY BIOGRAPHY

Eliot Sherman is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior at the London Business School. His research primarily examines gender inequality in the workplace, with an emphasis on designing feasible organizational solutions. An additional stream of work assesses hiring and intrapreneurship. His work has been published in leading sociology and management journals, including the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Management Science*, and *Organization Science*.

Dr. Sherman has worked as a research associate at Harvard Business School and as an investigative analyst for the AON Corporation. He holds a BA from the University of Pennsylvania and a PhD from the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley.

COURSE SUMMARY

This course could credibly—albeit reductively—be distilled into three central messages. The first is an imperative to "get out of your own way" as you pursue your career goals. Most of the students I teach are too timid in this regard, due in large part to cultural norms proscribing self-promotion and purposefully strategic social interactions. (Conversely, the students who are most enthusiastic about this message tend to proceed with insufficient empathy and nuance, to their own detriment.) The second message is to embrace flattery as a reliable influence tactic. Flattery, as I mean it, is distinct from obsequiousness, and when correctly (and authentically) deployed, signals an alignment of interests and values. Do not underestimate its effectiveness. The third message is to immediately, and I mean *as you read this sentence*, abandon the idea that there are functional systems of reward allocation operating within any organization you have been—or ever will be—a part of. There is no such thing as objective merit; the people who should be paying attention to your performance will do so haphazardly, if at all; and, as a result, some of the most significant contributors to your firm will toil unrecognized in relative obscurity. My goal is to help you avoid this fate.

As should be immediately evident, this course is therefore rife with theoretical tension and the potential for contradiction. Embrace this. It is a feature, not a bug, of this course and of your careers as well. What is good for you may not be good for the company, and vice-versa. The fulfilment of our own personal ambition should be weighed against the debts you owe to others. We all seek actionable advice based on sound scientific evidence, yet must sometimes rely on anecdotes that may not generalize widely. And to pre-emptively answer a frequently asked question: Yes—what works in one cultural context will certainly fail in another. Yet sadly, there are no immutable laws of nature upon which we can rely when adjudicating between conflicting perspectives. Exceptions, contingencies, and heterogeneity are the order of the day. It will therefore be incumbent on you to digest the course material and determine where, when, and how it applies to your own career progression. In other words, to quote a great organizational theorist, we left the easy problems to the physicists.

The searing tragedy of COVID-19 has only heightened these contradictions. The first-order concerns are, in and of themselves, almost too much to bear. How can I stay safe and protect my loved ones? How can I avoid financial precarity in a battered economy? And above all, how did we let things get this bad? Taking nothing away from the magnitude of these concerns, the pandemic also presents questions that are specifically relevant to our course content. To wit, the organization of work and the pursuit of organizational goals will look very different for the foreseeable future, even conditioning on the most optimistic forecasts regarding vaccine development. What do these changes mean for you, and for society? Concrete answers are few and far between at this juncture, but we will nevertheless address these questions as best we can.

COURSE FORMAT

The B stream of this course for the 2020-2021 academic year will be taught in the Hybrid format. Updates regarding the format of subsequent streams will follow Program Office guidelines.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment Table:

Type	Weight	Group/Indiv	Req to Pass	Timing	Length
Power Road Map	100%	Individual	Yes: 50% or better	November 1, 2020 at 11:59 PM	1,750 words or more

Minimum requirements to pass this course:
1) minimum 50% in the weighted final numerical score AND ☒
2a) minimum 50% in the aggregate of the individual components OR ☐
2b) minimum 50% in the largest weighted individual component ☒

Attendance

In line with the published school regulations, your timely arrival and on-going video presence for all online sessions is required. **Please keep your video screen on for the duration of each class. Your peers in the A stream communicated a strong preference for this requirement.** Please refer to the Program Office guidelines regarding class absences, and what to do in the case of extenuating circumstances.

Class Participation

Due to Program Office stipulations, class participation will **_not_** comprise a portion of your final grade. Nonetheless, please keep in mind that the quality of your comments are primarily determined by two factors:

- Your ability to provide new insights and draw on relevant personal experience, and your ability to move the discussion in productive directions.
- Your ability to accurately and insightfully incorporate the lessons from the readings into class discussions. This is why it is essential, as a necessary step, to complete the readings in full.

Final Project: Power Road Map

You are required to submit, before midnight two days after the completion of Session 10, a written final project for this course comprising no less than 1,750 words, or approximately seven double-spaced pages. Please include the word count on the first page.

The purpose of this project is to outline a "road map" of your path to power. In other words, describe a career goal and articulate a strategy for achieving it that explicitly incorporates slide content and assigned readings. You could, for example, explain how your strategy draws more from a "Pfefferian" or a "Keltnerian" approach to power acquisition, or some combination thereof. The key is to be very specific about how you would apply the principles you have learned in class, particularly in relation to your own interpersonal style. That is, if you believe you can achieve your goal by "stirring others in your social network," as Keltner suggests, describe some specific examples of how you might do this and how it leverages some of your own personal qualities. Or, if you believe you can use flattery, as we define it in the course, to align with an organizational sponsor, be very specific about what steps this approach requires. These are merely suggestions; the details are entirely up to you.

Please select a career goal that is both *proximate* and *personally meaningful* to you. This means you should describe a goal that you could realistically achieve within the next few years while also explaining why doing so is important to you.

I will pay particular attention to:

1. The quality of your analysis. Is it thoughtful? Realistic?
2. The specificity of your examples. See above.
3. Your degree of introspection. This exercise is a rare opportunity to sit down and comprehensively map out the next phase of your career. In the words of Stephen King, *do not come lightly to the blank page*.
4. Your use of course concepts. I have assigned this project primarily for your own development, but it is also useful for me to see what course material resonates.

5. The quality of your written presentation. Please do your best to excise typos and grammatical errors from the finished product. The inclusion of these mistakes is not a dealbreaker, but it does make your paper more difficult to follow. (And you should be aware that some people will make negative attributions regarding your competence if your written communications consistently include them.)

Lastly, I will offer one recommendation, particularly for block weeks. It may be prudent for you to select a particular goal at the *beginning* of the class, and write the paper sequentially as you consider course concepts in relation to your career—instead of waiting until the last day to write the entire thing.

LAPTOP/MOBILE PHONE POLICY

This course will be conducted in the Hybrid format. The use of an electronic device is required for all students.

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

All students completing this course should be aware that in submitting any assignment for this course, you agree to the following declaration:

"I certify that the coursework that I have submitted is entirely my own unaided work, and that I have read and complied with the School's guidelines on plagiarism and referencing as set out in the School handbook.

I understand that the School may make use of plagiarism detection software and that my work may therefore be stored on a database which is accessible to other users of the same software."

Students should be aware that, where plagiarism is suspected, a formal investigation may be carried out under the School's Student Disciplinary Procedure. This may result in penalties ranging from mark deduction to expulsion from the School.

Course Outline

Session 1: Diagnosing Power

Topics and Goals
- Motivating the approach to power acquisition in this course

Class agenda
- Introduction to the course and course concepts
- Diagnosing sources of power in organizational contexts, particularly hiring
- What we mean when we talk about flattery

Readings/Preparation
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey. (2011). *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*. Chapter 1.
- Rivera, Lauren. (2015). *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Jobs*. Chapter 1.
- Markovits, Daniel. (2019). *The Meritocracy Trap*. Chapter 1.

Discussion Questions
- What is the best strategy for succeeding in an interview?
- To what extent do you think merit predicts professional success? To what extent do you think you will succeed or fail as a result of merit?
- Will attaining power make you happy?

Session 2: Expert Power and Emergent Leadership

Topics and Goals
- Emergent leadership and interpersonal bases of power

Class agenda
- Lost in the Desert exercise and debrief

Readings
- Keltner, Dacher. (2016). *The Power Paradox*: Chapter 2.
- Tenney, Elizabeth R., Nathan Meikle, and David Hunsaker. (2018). "When overconfidence is an asset, and when it's a liability." *Harvard Business Review.*

Discussion Questions
- How does power emerge in small groups? What are its interpersonal bases?
- Why do some organizations fail to leverage individual expertise?
- How can you ensure that your voice is heard by others? Why is it important to ensure that other voices are heard?
- What are the pros and cons of displaying overconfidence in small group settings?

Session 3: Managing Reputations

Topics and Goals
- How to form a positive reputation and fight back against reputational damage

Class agenda
- The science of first impressions
- Jeffrey Sonnenfeld case

Readings
- Gladwell, Malcolm. (2005). *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. Chapter 1: The Theory of Thin Slices.
- Case: Jeffrey Sonnenfeld A: The Fall From Grace
- **To be read after class:** Case: Jeffrey Sonnenfeld B: The Road to Redemption

Discussion Questions
- Why do you think Sonnenfeld 'fell from grace'? What mistakes did he make? How much was his fault?
- How would you recommend he respond? What do you think he did?

Session 4: Acting with Power

Topics and Goals
- Learning to be yourself, strategically
- Power and interpersonal demeanor in a virtual world

Class agenda
- Interpersonal strategies for the acquisition and maintenance of power, with a focus on virtual self-presentation

Readings
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey. (2011). *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*: Chapter 7.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince: Chapter XVIII*, "How far a Prince is Obliged by his Promise."

Discussion Questions
- What are the benefits of expanding your behavioral range? What are the detriments?
- How does our non-verbal behavior influence the manner in which we are perceived by others?

Session 5: The Science of Influence

Topics and Goals
- Understand basic tactics that are used to influence others
- Be prepared to strategically employ these tactics
- Be prepared to defend yourself against these tactics

Class agenda
- The Kidney Exercise
- Introduction to persuasion and influence strategies

Readings
- Cialdini, Robert B. (1993). *Influence*: Chapter 3, "Commitment and Consistency: Hobgoblins of the Mind."
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey. (2011). *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*: Chapter 4.

Discussion Questions
- Which influence tactics are you most likely to use? Which ones are you most comfortable with using, and why?
- Which ones do you think would be the most effective, with respect to a challenging situation you recently faced at work?

Session 6: The Role of Gender

Topics and Goals
- Understand a critical contingency that governs how power is perceived and attained

Class agenda
- Introduction to gender as it pertains to power and influence

Readings
- Thompson, Clive. (2019). The Secret History of Women in Coding. *The New York Times*.
- Perez, Caroline Criado. (2019). *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. Chapter 3.

Discussion Questions
- What are the obstacles faced by women on their path to power?
- What can men do to eliminate these obstacles? What should they do?

Session 7: The Promise and Peril of Alliances

Topics and Goals
- How alliances work

Class agenda
- Managing your most important ally
- The psychology of stewardship
- Maintaining "flexible opportunism"

Readings
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey. (2011). *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*: Chapter 6.
- Executive Summary of Padgett, John and Christopher Ansell. (1993). Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici. *American Journal of Sociology*.
- Hewlett, Sylvia Ann, Melinda Marshall, and Laura Sherbin. (2011). The Relationship You Need to Get Right. *Harvard Business Review*.

Discussion Questions
- How effective are you at forming and maintaining alliances?
- In what ways can alliances be constraining, as opposed to enabling?

Session 8: Hierarchies

Topics and Goals
- Understand power hierarchies; how they are formed and maintained

Class agenda
- Discussion of case and assigned readings

Readings
- Keltner, Dacher. (2016). The Power Paradox. *Chapter 5*.
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey. (2011). *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*: Chapter 12
- Hewlin, Patricia Faison, and Anna-Maria Broomes. (2019). Authenticity in the Workplace: An African American Perspective. Chapter 6 in *Race, Work, and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience Roberts* by Laura Morgan Roberts, Anthony J. Mayo, and David A. Thomas.

Discussion Questions
- In your opinion, are hierarchical structures inherently good or bad? What are their costs and benefits?
- What is the economic impact of informal social hierarchies?

Session 9: Ethics and the Consequences of Power

Topics and Goals
- The consequences of power
- The relationship between power and ethical behavior

Class agenda
- The effects of power
- Summary and review

Readings
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey. (2011). *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*: Chapter 11.
- Carryrou, John. (2018). *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup*. Prologue.

Discussion Questions
- In your opinion, is power inherently good or bad? Does power corrupt?
- What is the relationship between power and being able to violate social norms?
- What are the ways in which unearned advantage/disadvantage has played a role in your life?

10: Final Project—Power Road Map

The final project is an individual contribution worth 100% of your grade. You are allocated the class time in Session 10 to work on it. However, as noted above, I recommend at least beginning the paper prior to the final day of the course.