

# Seven ideas to change how power looks

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*By Alison Maitland*

What can we do to change how power is perceived? It's become an even more urgent question in the face of widespread accusations of abuse by men in positions of power – the latest being the repugnant antics [revealed by the FT](#) at the men-only Presidents Club charity dinner in London. These follow a spate of revelations in recent months about abusive behaviour from Hollywood to the Houses of Parliament.

There is a spectrum of abuse of power. There are the most flagrant cases of bullying, rape or sexual harassment. And there are more banal, everyday inequities, such as when a woman is talked over in a meeting, or left out of a crucial conversation, or brushed off when she challenges a sexist comment with the response: ‘Where’s your sense of humour?’

Professor Mary Beard, the Cambridge classicist, has published a timely manifesto, *Women & Power*, examining how women have been violated and silenced in western culture over the ages. It is not women who must change, she says, but power that must be redefined. ‘You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male. You have to change the structure.’

Margaret Heffernan, author of *Wilful Blindness*, notes that people often turn a blind eye to abuses of power, or use the excuse that someone else will do something. At a talk I attended by Heffernan, she said: ‘There’s a mental model of power which women don’t fit. We have to change what power looks like. Power is pretty male, it’s pretty white, and it’s always tall.’

Many women, not surprisingly, don’t particularly like the concept of power, and rule themselves out of the running, whether in the political or the corporate world (although there are signs that may be changing). Even when women hold influential roles, they do not necessarily see ‘power’ as applying to them.

How would power look if we were able to redefine it? How different it would be if ‘power’ were always driven by values and the collective good, rather than by self-gratification or self-aggrandisement – if power were shared *with* people, rather than exercised *over* them.

Here are seven ideas for how we can change what power looks like:

**1. Exercise courage.** Challenging abuse of power often starts with the courage of a single person. There are amazing examples of courageous whistle-blowers, such as the young software engineer Susan Fowler, whose public blog about sexual harassment at Uber went viral, leading to a crisis at the company and an ongoing cultural clean-up.

**2. Add collective power to singular courage.** Lone whistle-blowers or campaigners get a rough time, often losing their jobs, sometimes their careers, or becoming victims of abuse. Perhaps it's the build-up of years of anger over enforced silence, combined with the power of social media, but something has shifted. That's clear from the extraordinary, worldwide #MeToo campaign, which has revealed the huge scale of the abuse problem.

**3. Put the onus on the powerful to change.** People who belong to the 'in-group' in organisations are often unaware of their privilege. This makes it incredibly hard work to push to increase representation of those in the 'out-group'. Why not flip the argument and follow the principle that no more than 60% or 70% of any leadership team should consist of the same kind of people, e.g. male, or white, or privileged? (There is more about this approach in the *Inclusion Nudges Guidebook*, Nielsen & Kepinski)

**4. Remove traditional trappings of power at work.** Pioneering companies have been doing this over the past decade, recognising the need for power to be more evenly distributed. Examples are the abolition of private offices, including for senior leaders – or moving the C-suite from the top floor to the ground floor to symbolise a shift to a more equal culture.

**5. Enable people to speak up.** Having a hotline to report abuses of power – whether sexual or ethical – is a necessary step, but it's also crucial for leaders to reassure people personally that they will

not be punished or silenced if they speak up. That message has to be repeated frequently, and shown to be true, if it is to be believed.

**6. Adopt different styles of leadership.** Some organisations are giving much more importance to leadership that demonstrates authenticity, vulnerability and fallibility. One way to nurture these traits is to practise leadership collectively, with people stepping in when the team needs their particular strengths, and stepping back when it requires other talents.

**7. Stop venerating the powerful.** Power is attractive as well as corrupting. We must remember that even the most powerful people are mere mortals. Those who have accumulated the greatest power should be treated with caution, not adulation.

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