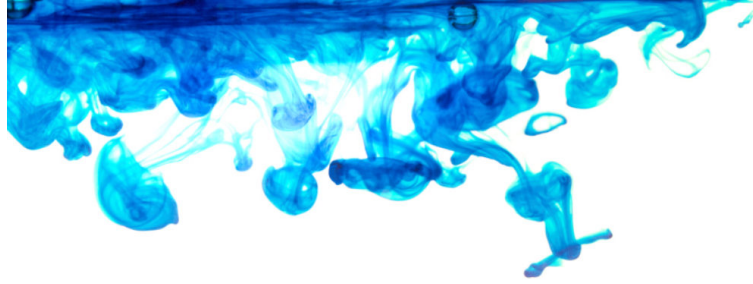


# Mixing Power Right

Published on Nov 19, 2014 by Niko Canner



Jeremy Heimans, cofounder and CEO of [Purpose](#), a social business that builds movements, and Henry Timms, executive director of the 92nd Street Y and founder of [#GivingTuesday](#), a global philanthropic movement, have done us all a service with [Understanding “New Power”](#), their *Harvard Business Review* piece published this week. Their article delineates the two constructs of old and new power explicitly, framing the questions of how each works and of what happens when they clash and when they combine.

[Understanding “New Power”](#) helped me to identify three universal challenges that face anyone seeking to use power well:

- **Direction:** how to channel people’s activity towards “intended effects” (Heimans and Timms cite Bertrand Russell: power is “the ability to produce intended effects)
- **Cohesion:** how to keep actors together as a “we,” operating within a shared construct
- **Efficacy:** how people’s sustained activity translates into the desired results

These three challenges feed into one another. When people believe in a leader’s efficacy, they will often be more cohesive followers or participants than when they come to doubt the leader can deliver on her promise.

Addressing these three challenges generally involves mixing right the models of “loose” and “tight” control. Many advances in the organization of societies represent useful shifts in this mix. The Chinese imperial examination system represented a relinquishing of the power to direct appointments at the individual level in favor of a system that would have better long-term properties of efficacy and cohesion. The institution of common law achieved an advance in adaptability over civil law systems by combining “loose” elements of decision-making lower in the judiciary building on adversarial debate with “tight” elements regarding procedure, admissible arguments, certification and judicial hierarchy. The US Constitution is a cocktail of “loose” and “tight” elements mixed (and remixed) to bring disparate actors together into a lasting whole.

There’s nothing new about the collision of old power and new power. The Protestant Reformation was a far more dramatic collision than the digerati versus the old economy. However, this collision is renewed at each turning point of history with new tools and new dynamics, which is why it is so

valuable for Heimans and Timms to have taken stock of what this collision looks like now.

Heimans and Timms share important insights about the vulnerabilities of actors living in “castles” who deploy old power models in service of old power values. Actors on the opposite side of this map are “crowds” like Occupy. The crowd model can grow very big very fast. When the dimension of direction is both loosely held and intensely felt, as was the case with Occupy, there can be a strong impulse to join and an easier cohesion than organizations with a stronger need for focus and exclusion experience. The greatest challenge is then one of efficacy. People persist in their allegiance to a cause for as long as it is worth the candle. Too much looseness and that candle can be hard to light, particularly when the changes sought are difficult and the systems at stake complex.

Whatever one’s “intended effects” are, achieving them at scale requires a mix of the old and new power models that sufficiently addresses the three challenges of direction, cohesion and efficacy. Heimans and Timms write about the power of moving higher on the participation scale: from consuming to sharing, shaping, funding, producing and co-owning. Kickstarter and Wikipedia are powerful examples of entrants who used technology to introduce new power models that have expanded the field of human possibility. Kickstarter illustrates as well the importance of old power in enabling new. Kickstarter’s continued difference is in the “tight” curation of their ecosystem, which in turn is enabled by the tightly-held ownership of the company and tightly-aligned objectives of those owners. To look at the innovators of a couple of generations back, while McDonald’s is as good an emblem as any of consumerism, perhaps the most important design choice Ray Kroc made in shaping the company was to create one of the most powerful co-ownership models in corporate history, drawing on the entrepreneurial drive of franchisees channeled through a rigorously specified operating construct. Uber uses one set of technologies - GPS, mobile apps, etc. - to bring a large number of business owners into a coherent and consistent experience. McDonald’s uses a different set of technologies - franchise agreements, operating manuals, Hamburger University, and so on. Both are elegant cocktails of old and new, loose and tight.

The political questions of old power and new power values are of great importance in our time, as they have been of great importance in all prior times. Heimans and Timms are actors, not just commentators, with Heimans building Purpose as a firm that harnesses new power in the service of a range of progressive causes. I believe that in the next decade the tools and the patterns of action that Purpose and others like them pioneer will prove to be as durably important as public relations proved to become, after Edward Bernays and others developed PR as a profession. I don’t know whether there will be a lasting shift to new power models and new power values. What I do know, all the more clearly from engaging with this new analysis of an eternal question, is that the collision between different mixes of old and new will continue to be a central dynamic of economic and political life. Those who get the mix right will flourish. Those who settle for received assumptions, whether in favor of “old” or “new,” will continue - as has always been the case - to live in a dangerous world.