

6 Covert Power Moves to Control Frames

The Power Moves | 7 February, 2019 | by Lucio Buffalmano

Social power moves increase the [social status](#) of the attacker/perpetrator and decrease the status of the receiver/victim.

[Some of these power moves](#) are obvious and anyone can recognize them as attempts at asserting dominance.

But some other social power moves are so common and/or so socially accepted that many don't even recognize their effects on [the dynamics of power](#).

And some people, because they take them at face value, even mistake them for words of submissiveness. I call them "covert power moves" (note: I renamed them from "hidden power moves").

This article will show what these covert power moves are, and what you can do to address them.

Contents

- [1. "I Was Busy"](#)
- [2. "I'm Sorry"](#)
- [3. "I Don't Remember You"](#)
- [4. "Why Did You Want to Do X.."](#)
- [5. "How Can I Help You"](#)
- [6. "That's Why I Like You"](#)
 - [SUMMARY](#)

1. "I Was Busy"

This is one of the most common and pervasive power moves out there.

But don't let the pervasiveness fool you, because this is the rule of thumb: **the more people are too busy for you, the more subservient to them you are.**

This is what "too busy" says:

| I was busy (with more important things) to take care of your (less important) thing

You, or your task, were not high priority enough for them to take care of.

"Sorry I was busy" says that they have more important things to do and, ultimately, that they are more important than you (higher social status).

But could it be that they were really just too busy?

Of course!

But even then, it's *still* a power move.

Just think about it: would anyone who cares about their job be too busy for their boss? Or for the man/woman of their dreams?

Exactly.

It's never a matter of business, it's always a matter of priority. Telling someone you were too busy is akin to saying "you aren't high enough a priority".

Similar expressions are:

I didn't have time
Sorry if I was late
I had to take care of a few things
I meant to get back to you, but then a few things came up..

Beating *"I Was Too Busy"*

Imagine this dating scenario:

You: Hi Gina, I wrote you the other day to schedule a coffee
Her: Yes, sorry I was crazy busy these days

Let's analyze a few ways most people reply to that:

You: what were you busy with?

This is not ideal because she is now expanding and focusing on everything which is a higher priority than you are. Also, it's possible that she wasn't busy with anything, which is forcing her to make up stories now. That reinforces in her mind you are a bothersome man she is bending over backward... *In order to avoid.*

Not what you want.

Here is another typical reply:

You: No worries, life happens

This is the neutral reply.

Helping her making excuses takes her off the hook and does not make you a burden.

But it's still not ideal. You are downplaying her non-reply, but you are also still the one down.

The best ways to reply are:

You: Yeah, that's too bad. Sorry that I didn't remind you either, sometimes life just gets too hectic

Start in honesty and sincerity.

You confirm a certain interest and then level the playing field by implying she wasn't high priority enough to pursue harder.

You: All cool. I just got back in town and was looking forward to catching up with someone around here to see what's happening in this city.
You seemed like a gal who's into the good life here.
But how have you been

First raises his own value and downplays his interest by implying he only wanted to be social.

Then raises her value again saying she seems one of the cool people. This part is important otherwise you sound like you're bragging and trying too hard to devalue her.

"but how have you been" ends with a slight deprecatory note. It implies she hasn't been doing anything nearly as exciting as you have.

And if you two aren't very close, here is the power move reply:

You: That's how life goes most of the times. (looking at her with a fake embarrassed expression) Sorry... I'm really bad with names...
Oh yeah right, of course Gina!

And, of course, there is also the reframing + collaborative frame approach.
See an example here:

This is a mixture of "power aligning": "we were both late", and then redirecting

2. "I'm Sorry"

Would you ever think that "I'm sorry" could be a power move?

In many, many occasions, that's just what it is.

Think of the power relationship it entails: it means that someone has hurt you or caused you harm.

And, from a social power point of view, it's the one who has the most power to hurt the other who usually has also most overall power.

Imagine all these situations:

Her: I'm sorry you felt hurt that I and Max spoke for so long

That "I'm sorry" is also saying this: *"I'm sorry (that I am so attractive and above your league that you get hurt because of it)"*.

Or imagine this one:

Coach: I'm sorry that I yelled at you in front of the team

That "I'm sorry" also says *"I'm sorry that I (can) yell at you (while you have to take it) in front of the team (and destroyed your reputation so easily because I can destroy you)"*.

Boss: I'm sorry that I said you're useless in front of the customer

And this one says *"I'm sorry I'm the boss and you are the underling, and even if you bring the customers in, I can still pull rank on you any time I want"*.

Look at this example from Spread:

Him: "I'm sorry for what happened (I called you an asshole, I kicked you out, I called you a whore... I'm sorry"

With that "I'm sorry" he is reminding her that he kicked her out (very dominant) and that he made her feel bad (very powerful).

In the movie, she is a very socially skilled woman, and she doesn't commit the obvious mistake of saying "it's OK" or "no problem", which could confirm his power over her.

Instead, she cuts right past the "I'm sorry" power move. Not bad.

When There's No "I'm Sorry": Only Power Move

First example in this video:

Beating "I'm Sorry"

How do you react to "I'm sorry" power moves?

Don't say "thank you for saying that", don't look like you were indeed hurt by their behavior and, most of all: **don't let the exchange linger on the apology phase for too long.**

Instead, minimize it, rebuild your own status with a quick comment and then move on as quickly. Something like this:

You: nono, it's all good, I'm (doing) great. Anyway, I've heard that... ”

If you want to answer to it with another power move back, you can use this one:

You: I forgive you

By saying "I forgive you" you shift the power from them to you. *You* could decide whether or not to forgive, and *you* decided to grant absolution.

If you want to go down harder, you should make the apology a *real* apology.

Like this:

Boss: I'm sorry that I said you're useless in front of the customer

You: Do you understand why that was wrong and how it makes us lose credibility?

Boss: I do, and that's why I'm telling you I'm sorry

You: If you understanding why it wasn't cool, then we can move on. But make sure it won't happen again please

Boss: You have my word

You: I am really glad to hear that, thank you boss. Back to doing some great stuff together now. Let's do lunch as soon as we're free, cheers!

Exception: there are situations when a simple "I'm sorry" is enough. Even when you want to go down "hard".

For example, if the coach screamed at you in front of the team and *you* requested him to apologize to you in front of the whole team, then it's *your* power move. In that case, you can take charge of it and build upon it.

Say "it's OK coach, I'm glad you are making up for it. As long as you understand that wasn't cool and it won't happen again, we can move on".

3. ***"I Don't Remember You"***

We dedicated one of the very first articles to this one in "[what to do when people pretend to forget you](#)"

The dynamic is the same as with being busy: **the less people remember you, the more important they make themselves to be.**

When someone doesn't remember or, sometimes, pretend they don't remember you, they are saying that you are a low priority in their life -or that their life is so full of important things that they are obviously [higher quality](#) than you are-.

The mistake that many do here is trying to feed the power mover with information to help them remember you.

When you do that, you are communicating that they are a high priority for you.

Dealing With Forgetful Power Movers

Look at this scene from the movie "Play the Game", and reflect on what he is doing wrong:

Notice that as he feeds her information about him one issue becomes more and more obvious: she didn't care enough to remember.

On the other hand, he remembered everything about her, thus communicating it was a big thing for him. He is heavily invested, she is not.

What's the solution, then?

It's pretending not to remember.

If he had pretended not to remember either, it would have been a neutral interaction instead.

Alternatively, after he had already admitted he knew her, he could have pretended it was a vague memory.

Or if you already told them where do you remember them from, then say it's just a vague memory and move on right away.

Or, finally, you can say you are confusing them with someone else. For example, you might add that "there are lots of blondes in this city", or whatever peculiar characteristic they have, which is also slightly demeaning.

4. "Why Did You Want to Do X.. "

Loaded and leading questions are not exactly the same, but they're similar enough that we can consider them together.

Both of them are designed to wrestle control of the interaction and push you either into a defensive position, or into the position the asker has chosen for you -which rarely if ever is a position you want to be in anyway-.

Sometimes loaded questions are obvious, but many more times they are not as easy to spot. An example of a loaded question could be your partner being super emotional and asking you

| **Her:** how could you do such a terrible thing to me

If she says it very emotionally her words sound congruent, and many people miss the preconceived frame behind that expression.

The preconceived frame within that expression is that you did do something *terrible*.

Of course, you *might* have done something bad.

But who says it was "terrible"? Maybe it was just "bad" or it was a "terrible mistake", which is much different than just "terrible".

By accepting the adjective "terrible" though, you are immediately cast as the evil one, and at that point you can only explain, defend and hope to make it up to your partner.

Beating Leading Question

Do you remember framing from the first module?

Leading questions are attempts to lead you, or trick you, into accepting the interrogator's [frame of reference](#).

And when you do accept it, it doesn't even matter how you reply to a leading question. Whether you agree, defend, or push back, you are still buying into their frames.

The only way to answer leading questions is by rejecting them.

And two particularly effective ways of rejecting the frame are to:

1. Explain you don't agree with their choice of words and change it to what's most suitable
2. Explain them -and to everyone around- what their game is with the leading question

You want to use the first one when you want to be kind and understanding.

The above example with your partner would look something like this:

Him: How could you do such a terrible, terrible mean thing to me

Her: Honey, I have no words to say how sorry I am. Let me just say it wasn't mean, or out of meanness. It's an issue I have with controlling my spending. And taking your credit card was the biggest mistake of my life. I have an issue I need to cope with, I do realize that.

In this case, he didn't even go after her words in his reply, since that would have led to a different kind of escalation. But embedded in his own reply there is a reframing of the situation from "terrible and mean" to "issue and mistake".

And here is an example with the second one:

Calling out the covert power move and explaining it is a very effective technique

5. ***"How Can I Help You"***

It is *seemingly* nice and polite, but outside of a shop, it's often now what you want to hear.

Here they are framing you like the one who needs help.

And the one who needs help might also be the one who has to bend over backward to secure that help.

Or, at least, to give something back.

6. ***"That's Why I Like You"***

This sounds like a compliment, but it's nothing more than judgment (masked as positive).

Remember that judging flows from the most powerful person towards the subordinate?

If not check [social power](#) or read [soft power](#) and [power in intimate relationships](#).

Then the person who says they like you is passing judgment towards you. The compliment receiver is basically doing a good job *to be liked* by the more powerful compliment giver. Not really an enviable power position, is it.

Here is an example from the movie *The Wolf of Wall Street*:

"that's why I love you", while he puts his hand around him. Right there you know Di Caprio is the most powerful man in the room.

This is also a move Trump often engages in.

He often goes around telling people "good job". He often has no idea whether they are actually doing a good job, because he uses it as a power move only.

He even said it to [Comedy](#) before firing him. When Trump says "good job" he is simply [positioning himself as the judge](#) and as the most powerful man who is checking up on others.

SUMMARY

Power and power dynamics are not all about blatant and obvious attacks.

As a matter of fact, obvious and blatant attacks are few. The vast majority of the times, you will be

dealing with apparently smaller and inconsequential things.

As we saw in this post, sometimes power moves [that put you in the one-down](#) hide behind seemingly helpful and kind words.

This post helped you recognized -and act- on the more covert power moves.

Archived from theredarchive.com