

# Multi-generational Differences in Perception of Coercive Power in the Workplace: Senior Executive Coercive Power

by

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the perception of coercive power between Generation X born between 1965 and 1980, and Generation Y born between 1981 and 2000, within an organization's workplace environment, to determine whether differences existed in their perception of coercive power - Senior Executive Coercive Power: Participants perceive senior executives use coercive power more than supervisors to motivate performance and increase organization efficiency.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Generation X, Generation Y, Coercive Power

### **Significance of the Study**

The understanding and perceptions of generational differences can assist in the development of more collaborative work environments. This development of a more collaborative work environment can be obtained by enabling managers to leverage their strengths of each generational member. The outcome can lead to efficiency, decreased conflicts, increased productivity, improved team dynamites and enhanced employee retention. A more collaborative work environment will also lead to an increase in teammate job satisfaction. By increasing our understanding and perceptions of generational differences in the work place organizations will have the ability to reduce conflicts and be more efficient. This new understanding of generational differences will reduce turnover and improve employee retention. Understanding of generational differences will also increase commitment, increase employee job satisfaction, more effectively motivate employees, increase productivity, improve communication, decrease conflict, and improve team efficiency and effectiveness. (Patota, 2007)

Furthermore, although job performance has been abundantly studied allowing scholars to understand the predictive nature of job performance to organizational variables such as retention, commitment and absenteeism (Muchinsky, 2001), the research on generations and job performance remains ambiguous (Jurkiewicz, 2000). The results from his study, through thick description and ensuing deeper

understanding, shed some light on this ambiguity. Ultimately, the current study contributes to academic research in that it fills a gap and continues to augment the understanding between coercive power, job productivity and Generation X, Generation Y within the workforce.

John French and Bertram Raven, social psychologists conducted an astonishing study concerning power in 1959. French and Raven stated that power is divided into five separate and unique forms:

- Coercive Power
- Reward Power
- Legitimate Power
- Referent Power
- Expert Power

Power and leadership are very closely related and linked together. These five forms of power concept reveal how the different forms of power affect a person's leadership and more importantly a leader's success. Leaders in organizations frequently utilize the forms of power listed. Leaders throughout organizations use different forms of power with varied degrees of usage.

One of the key components of power is the concept of coercive power. The meaning behind this is someone forcing another person to do something that may be against that person's will or desire to carry out this activity. The fundamental goal of coercion is compliance. According to the fathers of power theory, French and Raven have identified other forms of power that can be utilized in a coercive fashion. These other forms of power are withholding expertise, withholding rewards, or using referent power to intimidate social barriers. All form the basis of power.

A limited amount of empirical research exists regarding coercive power and the role of power in any predictive relationships involving Generation X and Generation Y. Based on these limitations of information, this study provides new and original findings that expand the fields of inquiry. This study checks for the effects of coercive power on Generation X and Generation Y as first suggested by (French and Raven 1959).

### **Coercive Power**

Coercive power is a form of influence which emphasizes negative rather than positive reinforcement (Molm, 1997). It is characterized by the concept of forced compliance (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Coercion is defined as governing by force (Webster's 1988). The Institute for Management Excellence (2002) defines coercive power as "the ability to punish or to deprive the other of something of value." They suggest the

advantages of coercive power include rapid action, and absolute compliance, while disadvantages include resentment, fear, desire to withdraw from the situation, and the need for constant surveillance. In contrast to Plato's (360 B.C.) idealism in the story of Atlantis offered earlier, Aristotle (350 B. C.) argues that compulsion or forced compliance is required. He argues that coercive power is inevitable and necessary; that individual morality must be reinforced by law and governance (Aristotle, 350 ).

In *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 350), Aristotle suggests that there is more to governance than reliance on man's virtues. While virtues such as trust may exist in men, Aristotle suggests that it is difficult for a large number of men to reach these high levels of such virtues (Aristotle 350 B. C.). According to Plato, only the fear of punishment prevents a human being from breaking the law and unilaterally doing evil for the sake of his own self-interest (Plato, 350). Thus, some form of compulsion or coercive power is necessary to achieve order (Aristotle, 350).

Aristotle felt that coercive power was a positive aspect of governance. However not all parties agree with its benefits. In relational exchange, the parties upon which coercive power is being enforced may tolerate, but disagree with, the use of coercion. Unlike the shared constructs of trust, commitment and cooperation, the use of coercive power is unilateral rather than mutual; one firm exercising a differential advantage over the other. It is employed to impel behavior consistent with the goals

of the party employing it, rather than for the mutual benefit of the relationship. Thus coercive power is outside the elements included within the elements of a mutual bilateral relationship. When actions are unilateral rather than mutual, one firm may decide to act in a self-serving manner (Hardin 1968).

The study is a constructivist located project that seeks to extend our understanding of the nature and meaning of the lived experiences of a particular generational cohort namely, Generation X and Generation Y, within the context of the twenty-first century U.S. workforce; and, how they perceive coercive power as impacting their workplace performance.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research will utilize mixed methods research integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. Mixed methods research is more specific in that it includes the mixing of qualitative and quantitative data, methods, methodologies, and/or paradigms in my research study.

The research will be conducted in a written survey that will be administered to a target audience.

## SAMPLE

The group to be surveyed in writing consists of:

Segment:	MBA Candidates
Sample Size:	400 plus
Experience	0 - 3+ plus years

**Instrument**

The written survey had an open comment section to add richness to the research. These personal comments will provide clarifications and enhance the richness of responses in writing.

Participants will rate items on a 1-5 Likert scale with

1 - SA for Strongly Agree

2- A for Agree

3- N for Neutral

4- D for Disagree

5 - SD for Strongly Disagree.

**Data Collection**

The data collection began with the use of Qualtrics at New York University Data Services Laboratory. The research survey was designed, created, and distributed via Qualtrics to my 404 participants. The survey data was collected for 2 months. It consisted of a total of 19 questions including an open-ended comment field to be used for content analysis. Qualtrics is the leading global provider of data collection and analysis products for academic research. It offers an all-in-one platform to capture real-time insights and draw solid conclusions. The Qualtrics platform allows a researcher to construct a survey, distribute it to respondents, and statistically analyze and report on the results.

French and Raven's (1959) typology consisting of reward, referent, legitimate, expert, and coercive powers has served as the basis for more empirical testing than any other power base classification scheme. While numerous power studies have

employed French and Raven's typology, only a small number of researchers have used the typology in relation to Generation X and Generation Y; most of the research utilizing the typology has been conducted within other types of settings, making extrapolation of findings problematic.

### **Survey Design**

The multi-generational coercive power perception study employs a comparative research design and a quantitative research strategy. An online web survey for measuring coercive power perception was used as the main instrument for gathering data. This survey was conducted in the format of a self-completion questionnaire through Qualtrics, an online software provider, which has been used in several studies (Parket, 2012).

Studies that use a self-completion questionnaire survey have the tendency for lower response rates compared to other formats of surveys, such as structured interviews (Bell, 2011). According to Mangione (1995), 60 to 70 percent response rates to self-completion questionnaires would be an “acceptable” expectation, whereas 70 to 85 percent response rates could be considered “very good”.

This dissertation sets the stage for further discussions on coercive power and work place performance across Generation X and Generation Y by attempting to discover the strongest correlations (or lack of) between the Generation X and Generation Y perceptions of coercive power and work place behavior.

## Research Findings

This study focused on the perception of coercive in the work environment. The group of participants were from four categories:

- Generation X males
- Generation X females
- Generation Y males
- Generation Y females

Senior Executive Coercive Power: Participants perceive senior executives use coercive power more than supervisors to motivate performance.

Finding: Senior Executive Coercive Power: Participants perceive senior executives use coercive power more than supervisors to motivate performance.

Evidence: The Sig.(2-tailed) of .033 is only slightly smaller than .05. It's significant but not very significant.

It is statistically significant, however does not give a full picture of what is happening with the responses in relation organization's perception of coercive power and the impact on employee performance. It is an indicator, again, that participants are suggesting that senior executives view coercive power a particular way: motivate performance. How they view it is not entirely clear without follow up questions, but it's the basis for why follow up would be very elucidating. A value less than .05 means that the variability in my two conditions is not the same. That the scores in one

condition vary much more than the scores in your second condition. Put scientifically, it means that the variability in the two conditions is significantly different, however not by much statistical significant, but underwhelming.

We cannot read too much into this because we don't know the context beyond the participant's belief that executives view it to have an impact on performance.

Significance: The low significance, between participants in the perception of how senior executives use coercive power more than supervisors to motivate performance are a finding from this research. Additional details are found in Appendix II: Research Survey Results and Appendix V: Statistical Analysis.

Table 1: T test – senior executives use coercive power more than supervisors to motivate performance.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower
Senior executives use coercive power more than supervisors to motivate performance	Equal variances assumed	1.355	.245	-2.142	402	.033	-.227	.106	-.435
				-2.132	387.318	.034	-.227	.106	-.436

Figure 1: Responses Senior Executives Use of Coercive Power and Motivations

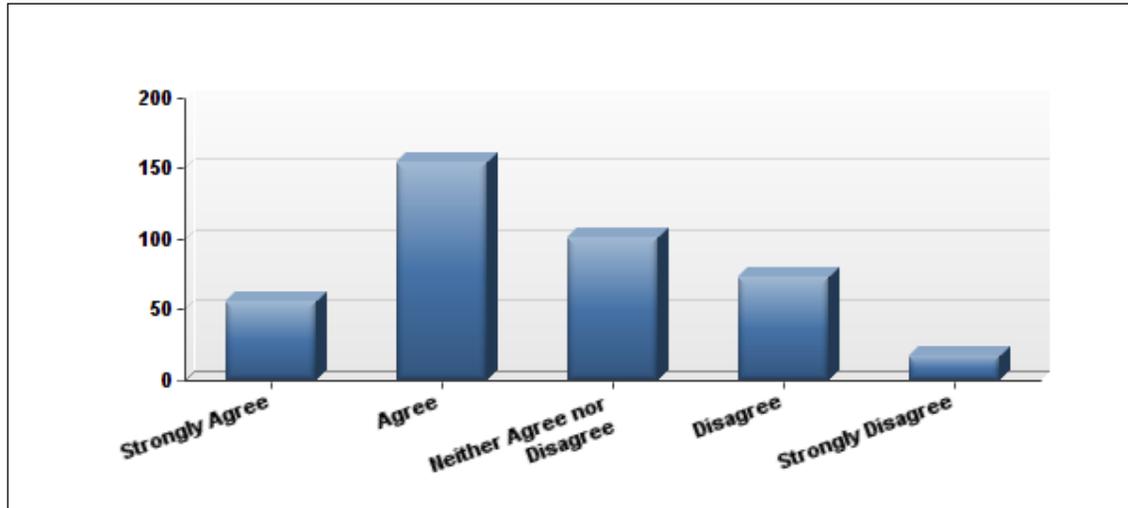


Figure 2: Responses Senior Executives Use of Coercive Power and Motivations- Stats

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Strongly Agree		56	14%
2	Agree		155	38%
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree		102	25%
4	Disagree		74	18%
5	Strongly Disagree		17	4%
Total			404	100%
Statistic			Value	
Min Value			1	
Max Value			5	
Mean			2.61	
Variance			1.14	
Standard Deviation			1.07	
Total Responses			404	

### Summary

Senior Executive Coercive Power: Participants perceive senior executives use coercive power more than supervisors to motivate performance. Statically significant, however underwhelming in its significance. The analysis statistically supports these findings.

These findings have ramifications in a time of rapidly changing technology, efforts to pursue a sustainable work environment, changes in work patterns and a new generation of employees are entering the labor force in large numbers. It is critical that leaders, organizations and workers understand the perception of coercive power if they want their employees and organization to thrive today and in the future.

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