

How to talk about power

A practical framework for understanding social power

Part 1 – Introduction and Overview

Part 2 – The Challenge of Talking about Power

Part 3 – The Framework for Talking about Power

Part 4 – Capability in Power

Part 5 – Status in Power

Part 6 – Sense of Power in Power

Part 7 – Summary and Further Perspectives

How to talk about power

A practical framework for understanding social power

Part 1 – Introduction and Overview

- Uses of the Framework
- Development and Guiding Concepts
- The Taboo Against Talking About Power
- Power and Social Connectedness
- What this Training Is and Isn't

Uses of the framework

Interpret power psychology and dynamics

See Capability, Status and Sense of Power separately and in combination.

Develop personal power

Identify what may be limiting or what can increase effective action.

Recognize manipulation and abuse

Recognize when power is being used for someone's benefit at someone else's expense.

Understand systems, groups and organizations

See where power comes from, how it is distributed, and how people experience it.

Improve interactions

Identify and respond to power dynamics as they arise in conversations and meetings.

Increase awareness and choice

Make previously undeclared power processes easier to work with.

The framework doesn't tell us what to do with power. It helps us see more clearly what is happening and gives us more choice about how to respond.

Development and guiding concepts

The framework has been developed over several decades of observing power in systems, organizations, politics and relationships, from a systems perspective.

Three ideas are central:

Power is necessary for any system to operate.

People make mental models of social power, and those models influence behavior.

We must include those mental models in the system.

It is an experiential framework, not a scientific theory.

Parts of the framework are supported by established research, other parts are original formulations.

The framework is constructed from elements that can be recognized and examined in everyday experience.

It uses a functional perspective to describe how power operates psychologically and socially.

The invitation is to compare the framework with your own experience and decide whether it helps you see power more clearly.



**Mental
Models of
Social Power**



The taboo around talking about power

The training makes the case that a **taboo** actively suppresses talking about power.

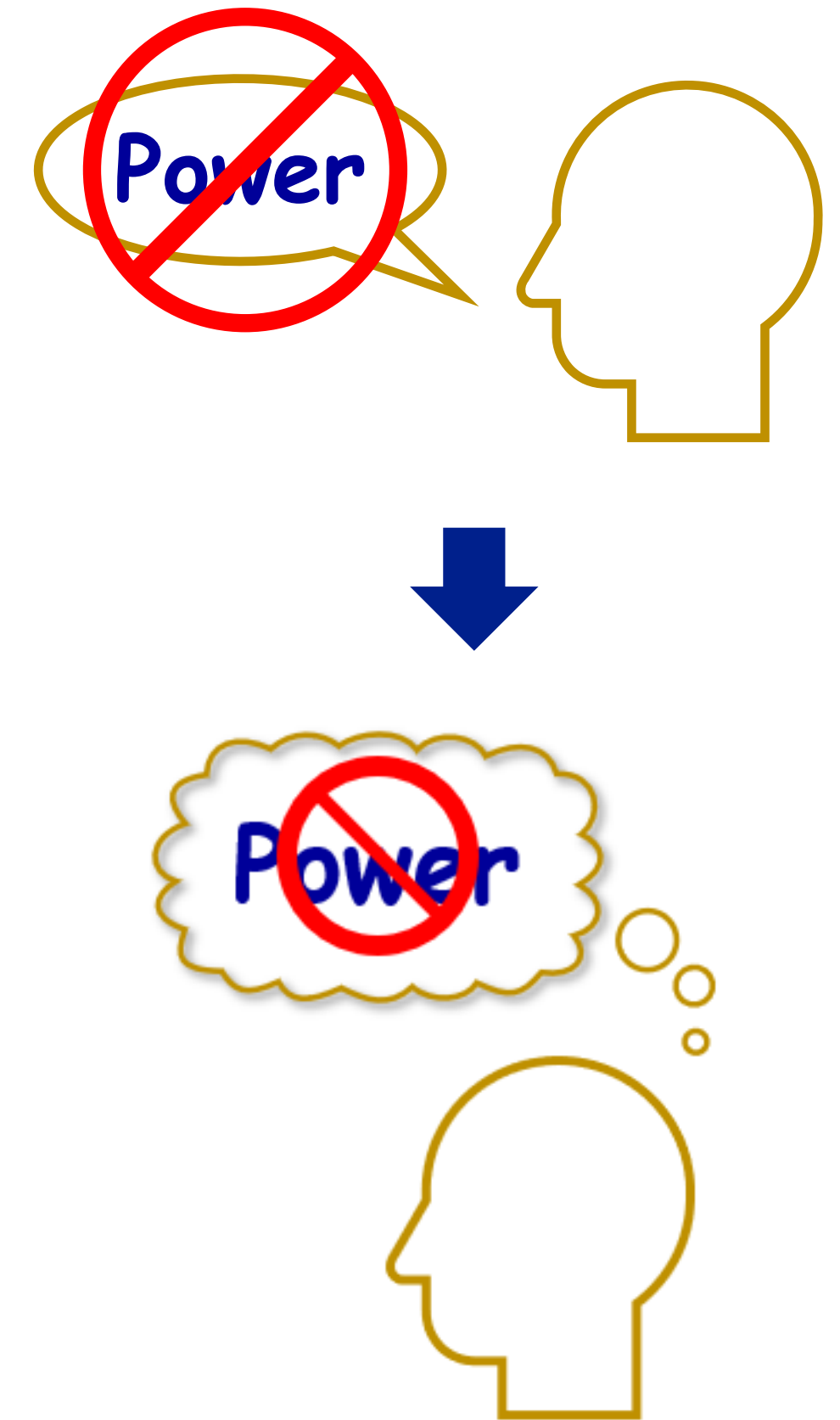
- A “taboo” is a social rule and active function that supports avoidance of a particular topic, in this case power.

A major assertion of this framework is that this taboo has become internalized, suppressing thinking about power as well as talking about it.

- We will examine that in detail.
- You can start here by asking yourself how you would feel about starting a conversation in any group with "Let's talk about power dynamics here."

One consequence of the taboo is a general lack of ability to recognize, conceptualize, and discuss how social power operates.

One goal of this framework is to help fill that gap.

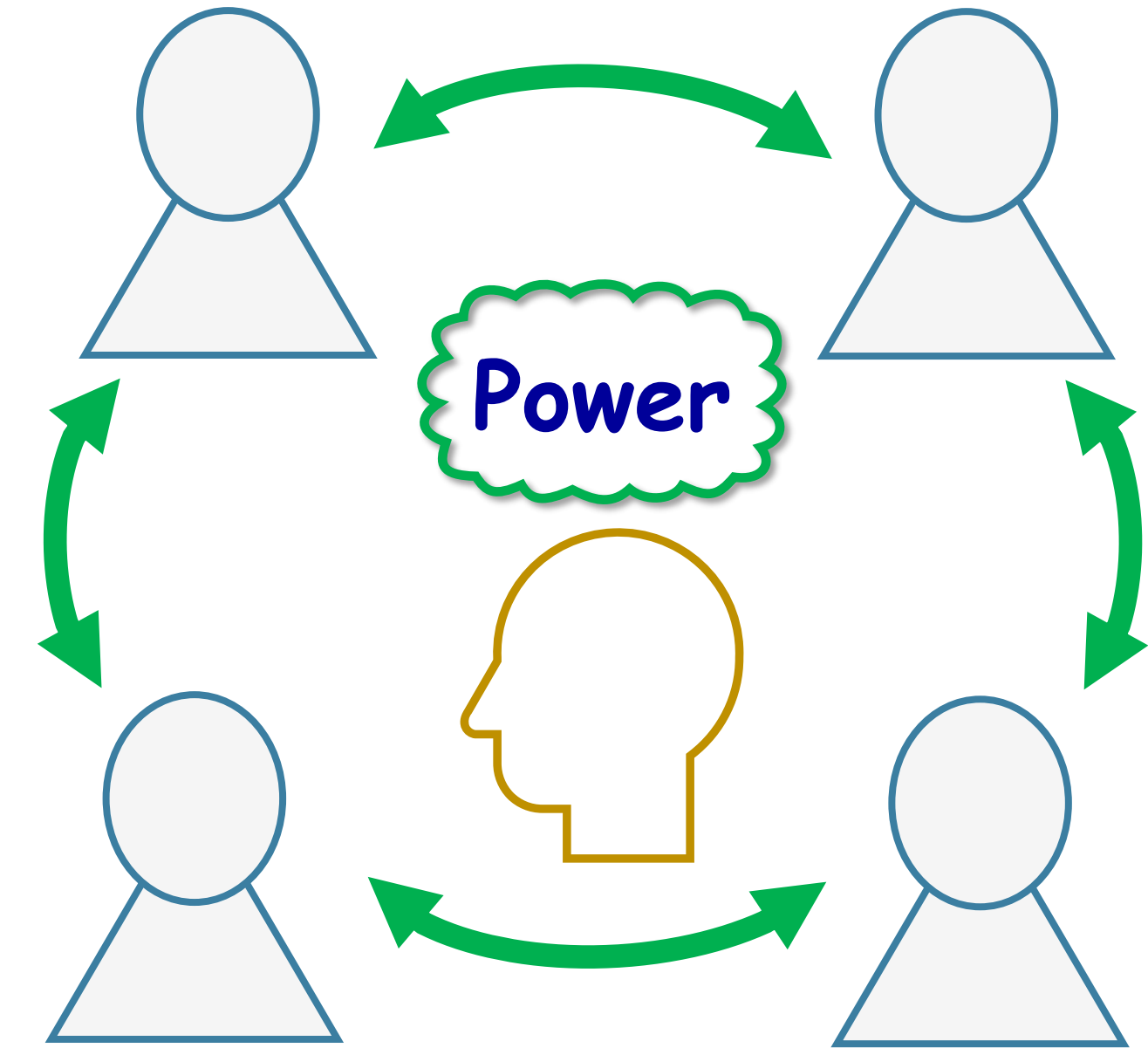


Power and social connectedness

Social power is not limited to domination or conflict. Much of it is exercised through cooperation, coordination, and productive activity.

People also exercise power together — through families, organizations, communities, workplaces, and other forms of collective action.

When power is difficult to talk about, it can also become harder to recognize and develop this **positive collective agency**



About this training

Talk About Power™ Training is an ActionMap Inc. learning resource for understanding the role of power in systems, organizations and relationships.

It presents a framework for exploration and discussion, not psychological, medical, legal, or other professional advice.

Some of the ideas and exercises in this training may connect strongly with personal experience.

- You can simply leave an exercise or line of thought alone if it becomes uncomfortable.
- Take notes on the side for yourself if you don't feel comfortable adding comments in an interactive discussion.
- The purpose of the framework is exploration and learning, not individual psychological diagnosis or treatment.

Part 1 – Introduction and Overview - Complete

- Uses of the Framework
- Development and Guiding Concepts
- The Taboo Against Talking About Power
- Power and Social Connectedness
- What this Training Is and Isn't

Continue with Part 2 – The Challenge of Talking about Power

How to talk about power

A practical framework for understanding social power

Part 2 – The Challenge of Talking about Power

- Why Talk About Power
- Narrow and Broad Views of Power
- Why Does Power Matter
- The Context of Power

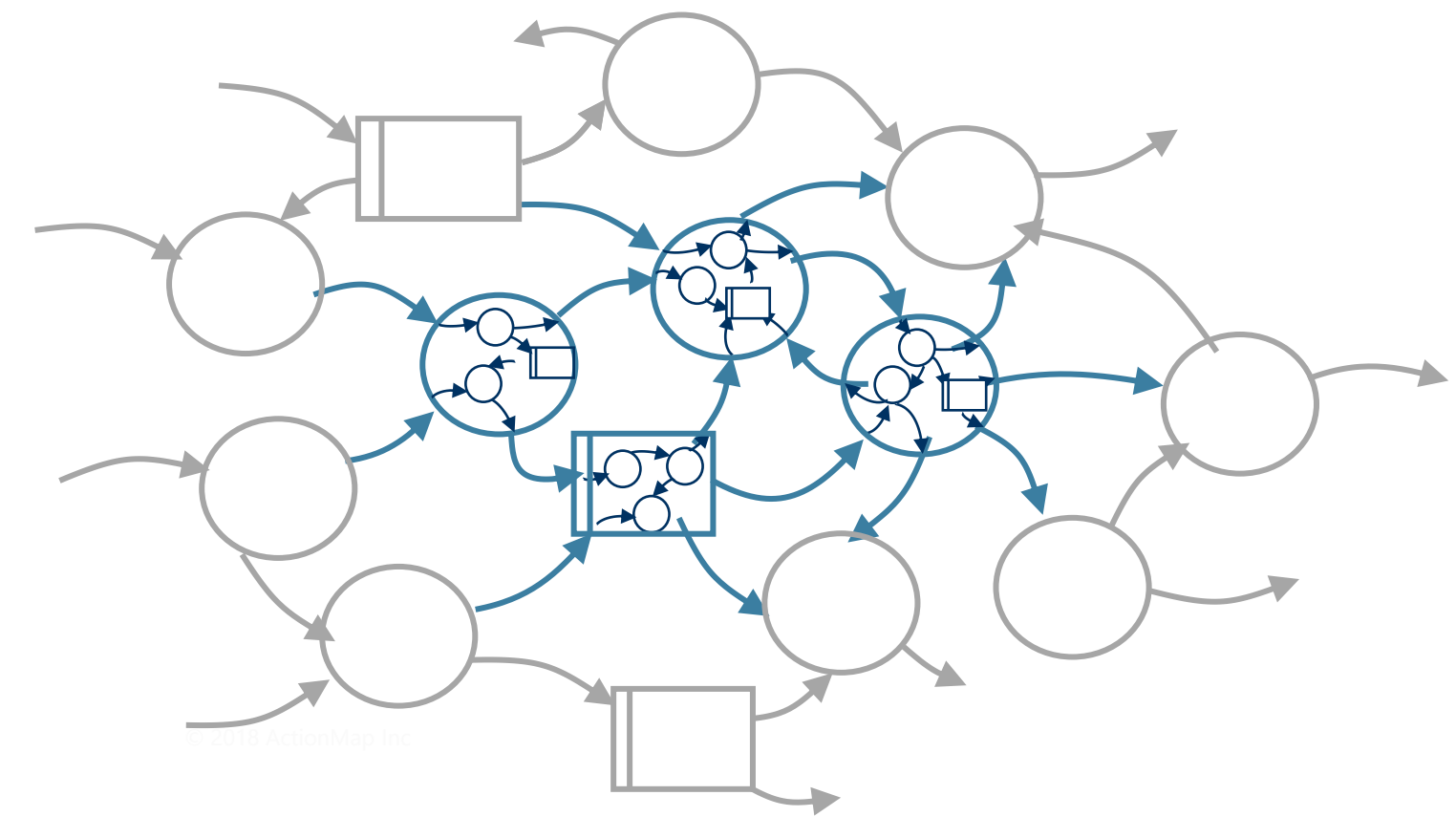
Why talk about power - 1

Power shapes what happens.

- Activities, processes and systems depend on power to **make things happen** and to **maintain their patterns** (which means sometimes to keep things from happening.)

If we want to understand or change what is happening, we need to see how power is operating.

- But power can be difficult to see when we don't have ways to talk about it.
- That is one major reason to learn how to talk about power.



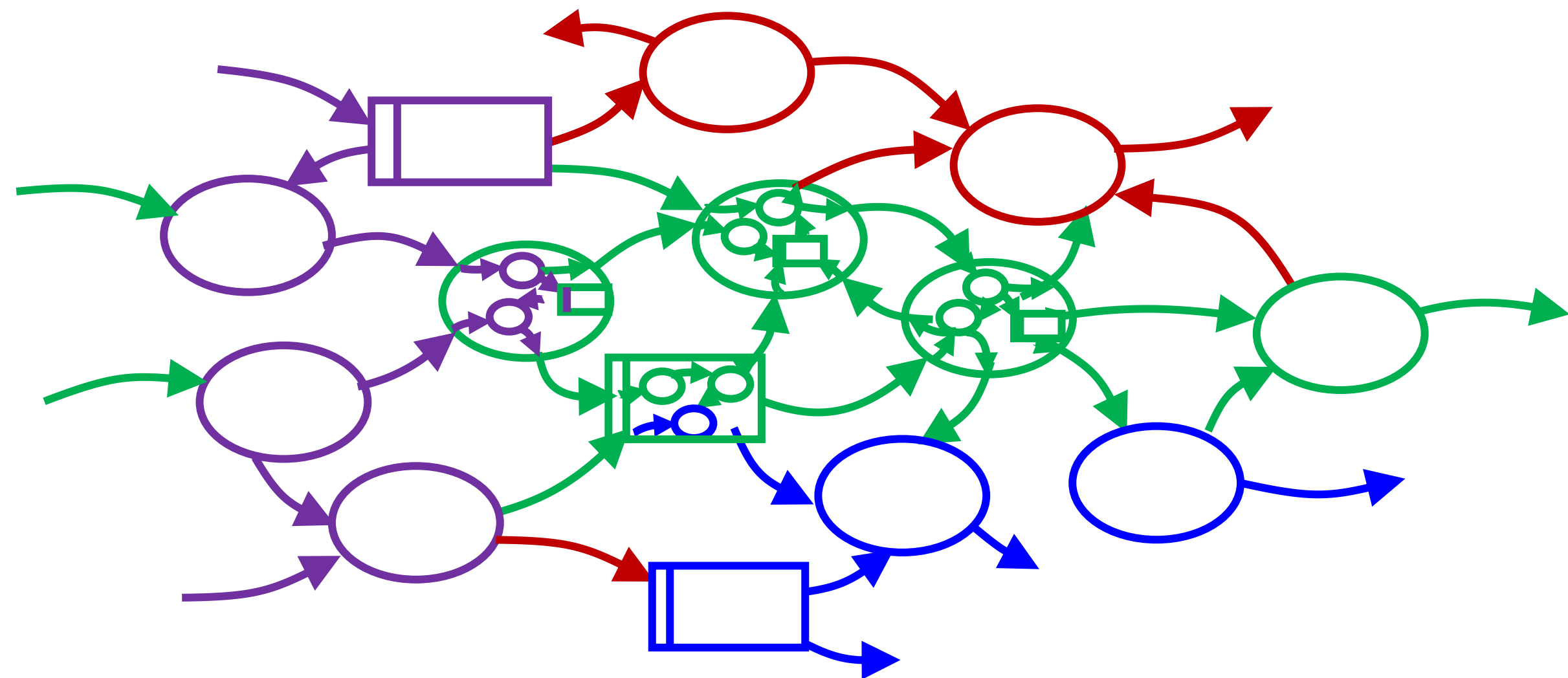
Why talk about power - 2

Talking about power *is itself a form of power*.

- It increases our power to perceive, understand and act.

If you're going to *understand* systems, you need to *understand* power.

If you're going to *work with* systems, you need to be able to *talk about* power.



The traditional narrow view versus a broader view of power

Traditional view of power

Narrow and limited
(“Concentrated View”)

**Organizational
and
interpersonal
dominance**

Control, authority,
and influence over
others

The full spectrum of power

The human ability to have effect (“Distributed View”)

Power is the ability to have an effect in the world.
It includes far more than dominance over others.

In this broad sense, power has three major interacting components.



Capability

Ability to cause
change



Status

Social standing

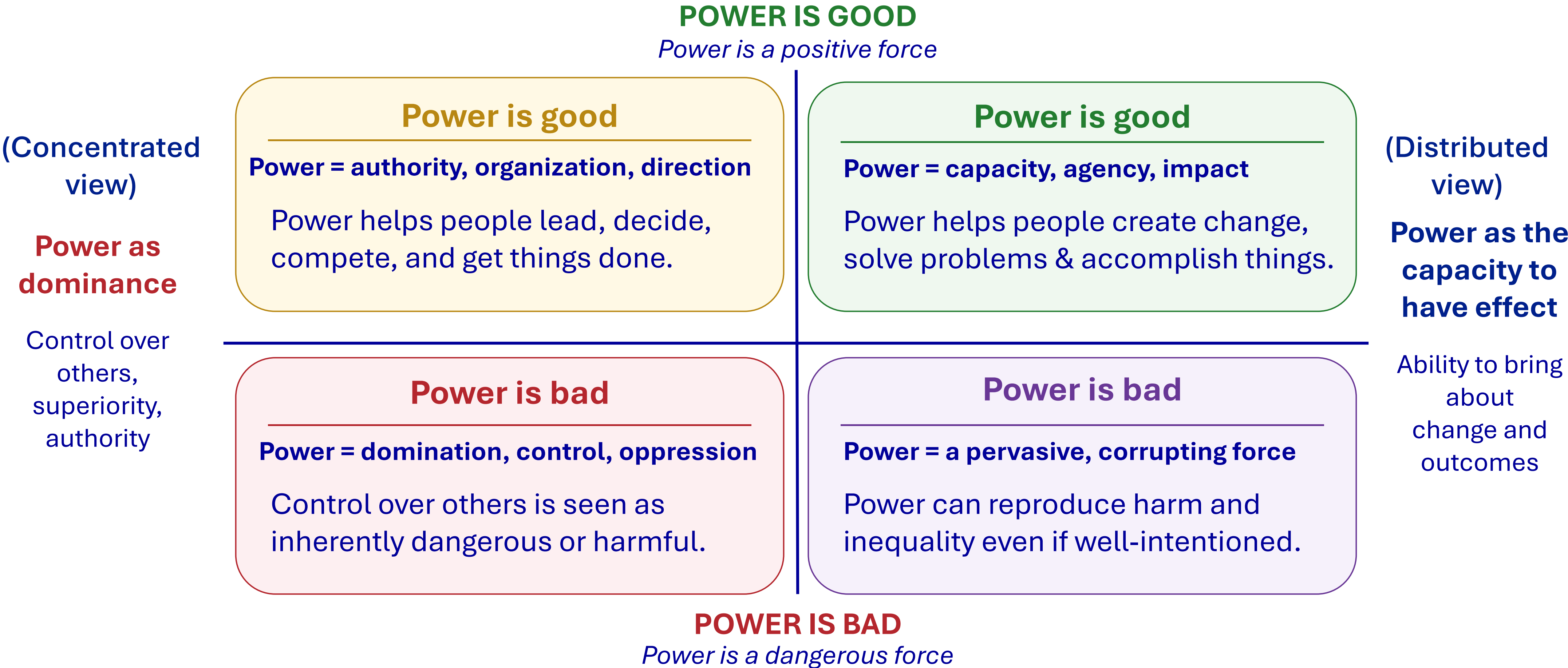


Sense of power

Perception of one's
power

This is what we're going to be talking about.

Is power good or bad?



Power itself is neither good nor bad; what matters is how it is acquired, distributed, and used.

For this training, we will use the broad meaning: power is the ability to have effect.

Stories

Project Lead (Concentrated & Good)

Situation: A drifting project lacks decisions. The project lead sets priorities and assigns responsibilities.

Change: The group becomes coordinated and starts making progress.

Vector: Authority  → Group capability 

The New Tool (Distributed & Good)

Situation: An employee learns an AI tool that turns several days of analysis into an afternoon.

Change: She can now produce results previously beyond her available time.

Vector: Capability  → Ability to have effect 

The Intimidating Manager (Concentrated & Bad)

Situation: A manager humiliates people who question him. Employees stop raising problems or offering alternatives.

Change: His control increases while other people become less willing and to act.

Vector: Dominance  → Others' status  → Others' Sense of power 

The incentive that backfires (Distributed & Bad)

Situation: Managers are rewarded entirely for short-term production. They cut training and delay maintenance.

Change: Output rises initially, but skills, reliability & long-term performance decline.

Vector: Incentive power  → Short-term output  → Long-term capability 

Interaction

Think beyond control, authority and domination.

Where do you see power operating in everyday life?

Put a few words in the comments.

Why does power matter?

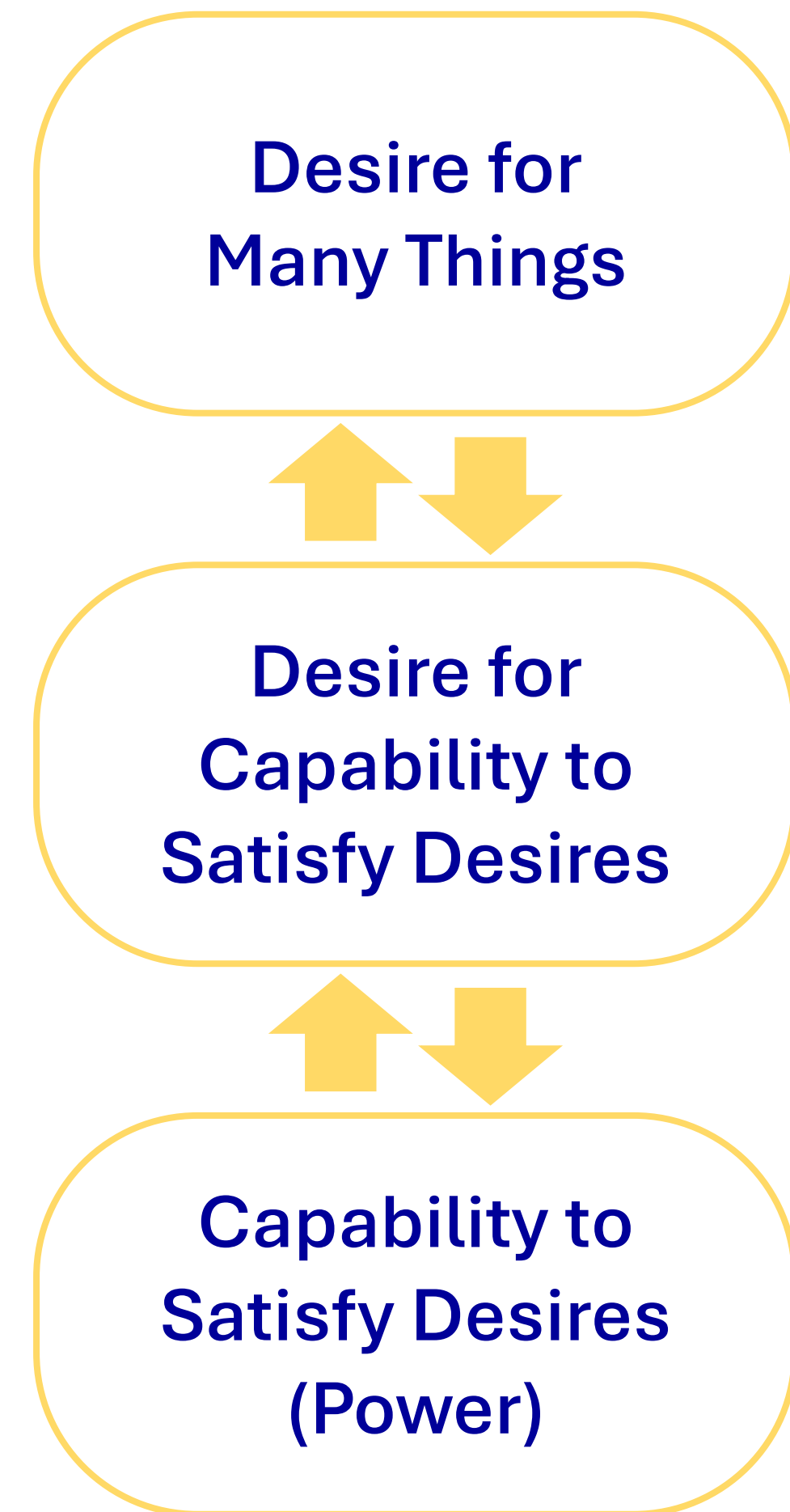
Power is *usually* not the thing we ultimately want.

We want material things, convenience, security, freedom, achievement, connection, and many other things.

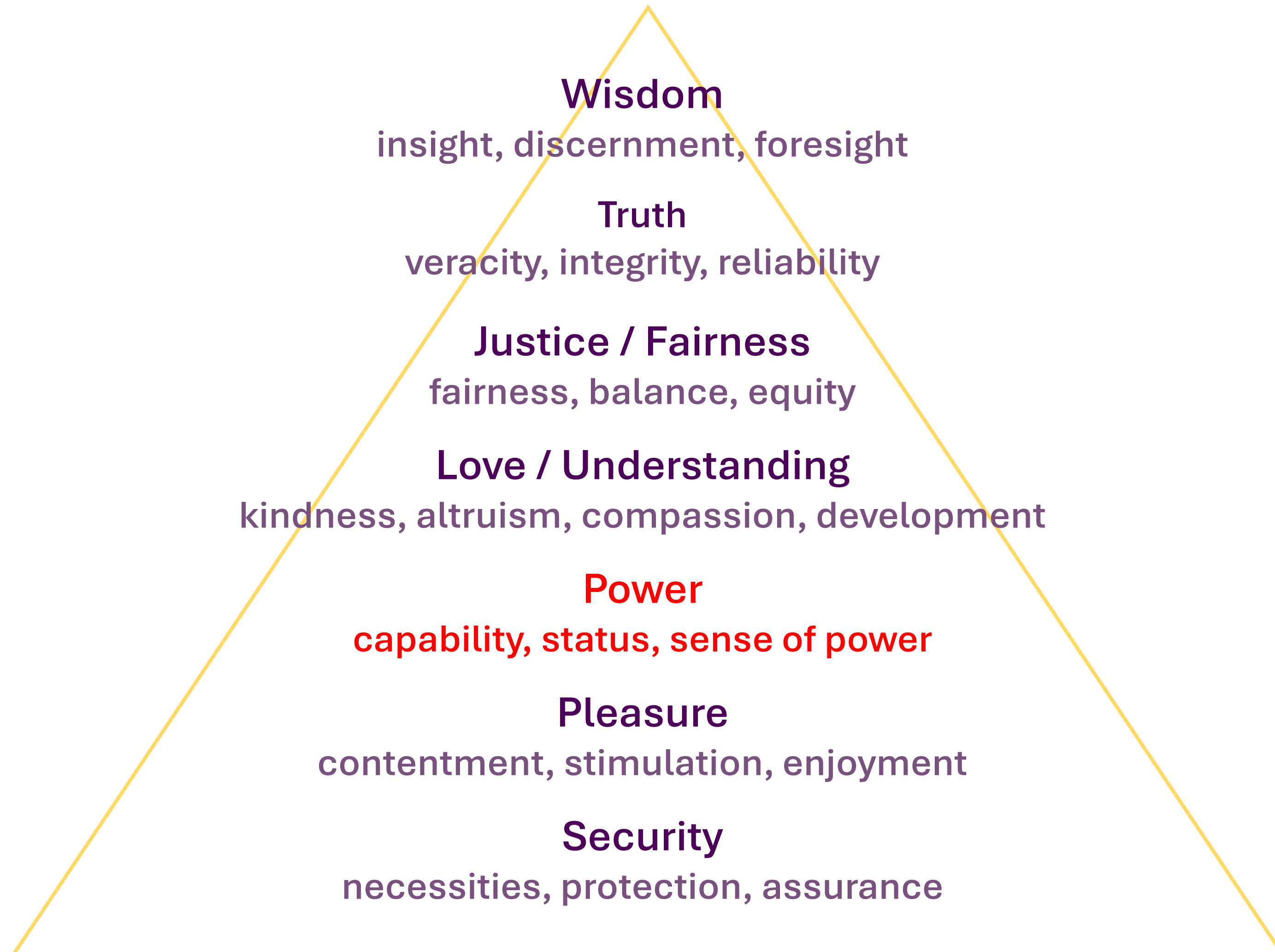
Getting those things requires *capability*.

Power is capability in relation to what we want.

One result of increased capability is **autonomy**: having options and being less dependent on a particular person or institution in order to act.



Where power fits among human goals



Part 2 – The Challenge of Talking About Power - Complete

- Why Talk About Power
- Narrow and Broad Views of Power
- Why Does Power Matter
- The Context of Power

Continue with Part 3 – The Framework for Talking about Power

How to talk about power

A practical framework for understanding social power

Part 3 – The Framework for Talking about Power

- The Matrix of Components and Areas of Activity
- The Taboo Against Talking About Power

Basic components of power

Capability (Objective)

- Skills
- Knowledge
- Resources
- Network

Making things happen

Status (Social)

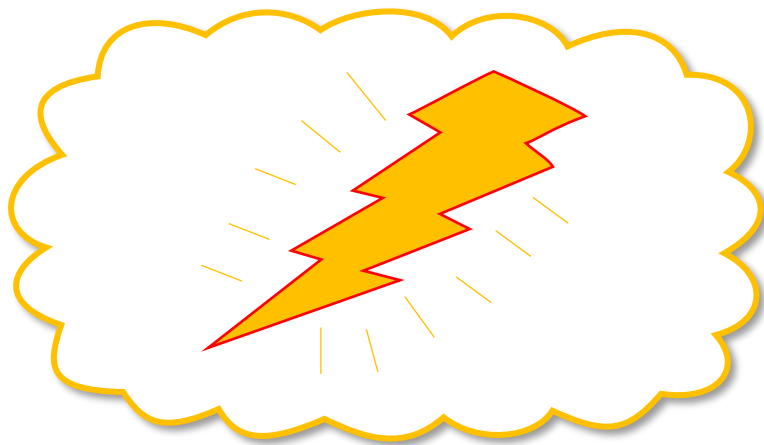
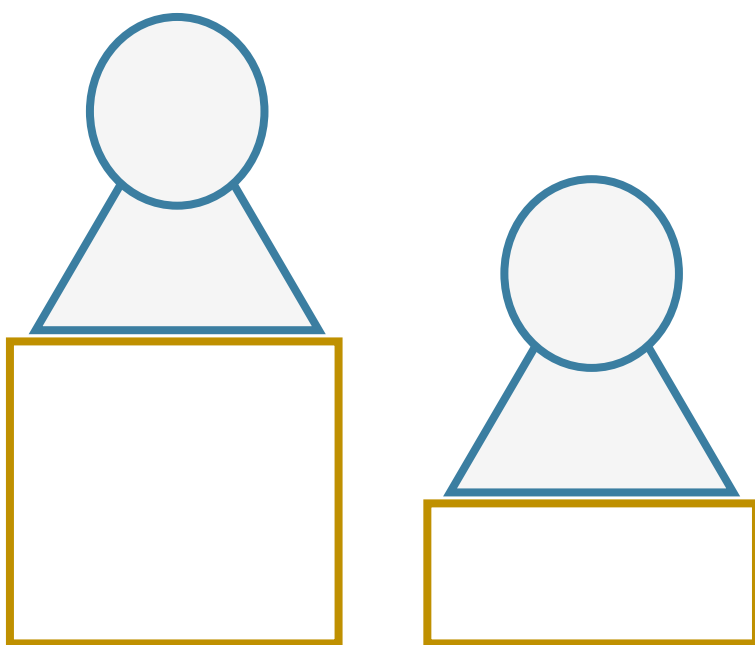
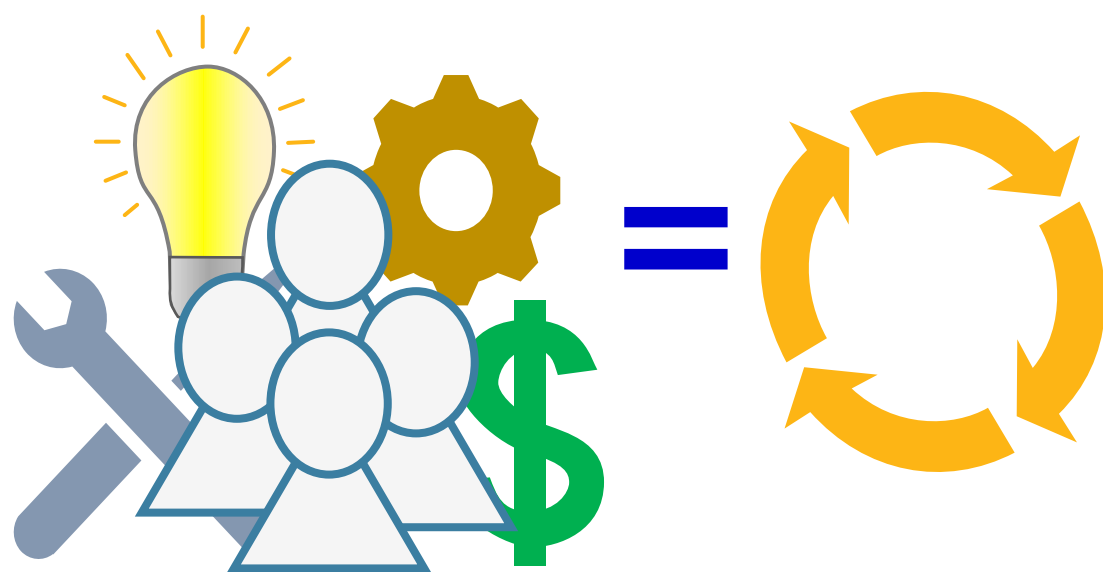
- Reputation
- Titles
- Prestige
- Rank

Relating to people

Sense of Power (Personal)

- Strength
- Confidence
- Ideas
- Intent

Feeling you can do it



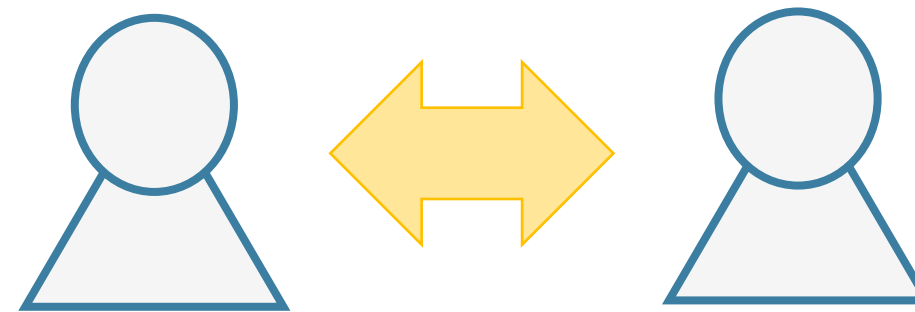
Power operates in three major domains of activity

Individual



Power in what a person can do, experience, and choose.

Relationship



Power in relationships and interactions between people.

Group



Power through groups, organizations, communities, and other social systems.

Power operates through a matrix of interacting components and areas of activity

Components → Areas of Activity ↓	Capability	Status	Sense of Power
Individual	This framework gives us a way to locate and describe what is happening with power.		
Relationship			
Group			

Power is situational and relational: it changes with the people, setting, relationships and capabilities involved.

Stories

Note: the matrix can highlight both positive and negative experiences.

(Individual × Capability)

The skilled mechanic

A mechanic can diagnose a problem from the sound of an engine and repair it with tools and skills developed over years.

(Individual × Status)

The recognized expert

A senior engineer enters a technical discussion and people immediately give considerable weight to her judgment because of her reputation.

(Individual × Sense of Power)

Frozen at the interview

A capable applicant becomes anxious, loses confidence, and has trouble expressing ideas he knows well.

(Relationship × Capability)

The complementary pair

One colleague understands the technology and another knows the customer. Together they can solve a problem neither could handle alone.

(Relationship × Status)

The discounted junior colleague

A junior employee makes a useful suggestion, but it receives little attention until a senior person repeats it.

(Relationship × Sense of Power)

The difficult conversation

An employee who usually hesitates with her supervisor feels unusually confident and able to speak clearly about a disagreement.

(Group × Capability)

The unprepared committee

A committee has responsibility for a problem but lacks the information, expertise, and coordination needed to act effectively.

(Group × Status)

The respected committee

A committee known for sound work finds that its recommendations receive attention and access that another group might not receive.

(Group × Sense of Power)

The team that believes it can

After several successes, a community group feels capable of taking on a much larger project and approaches it with energy and confidence.

Power often operates across multiple cells in the matrix

Would you rate any of these differently?

The promotion

A manager is promoted over former peers. Her formal standing rises, she feels more confident making decisions, and her relationships with former colleagues begin to change.

	Capability	Status	Sense of Power
Individual		↑	↑
Relationship		↔	
Group			

The new project team

Several people with different skills are brought together for a difficult project. Their combined expertise and coordination create capabilities none had alone, and early success increases the team’s confidence.

	Capability	Status	Sense of Power
Individual			
Relationship	↑		
Group	↑		↑

Lost contract

A small firm's largest client cancels a contract. The firm loses revenue, employees become less confident about the future, and suppliers become less willing to extend favorable terms.

	Capability	Status	Sense of Power
Individual			
Relationship		↓	
Group	↓		↓

Interaction

Think of one situation involving power, at work, at home, in a group, or anywhere else.

Where do you see capability, status, or sense of power operating?

Is it mainly individual, relationship, or group, or more than one?

Put a few words in the comments.

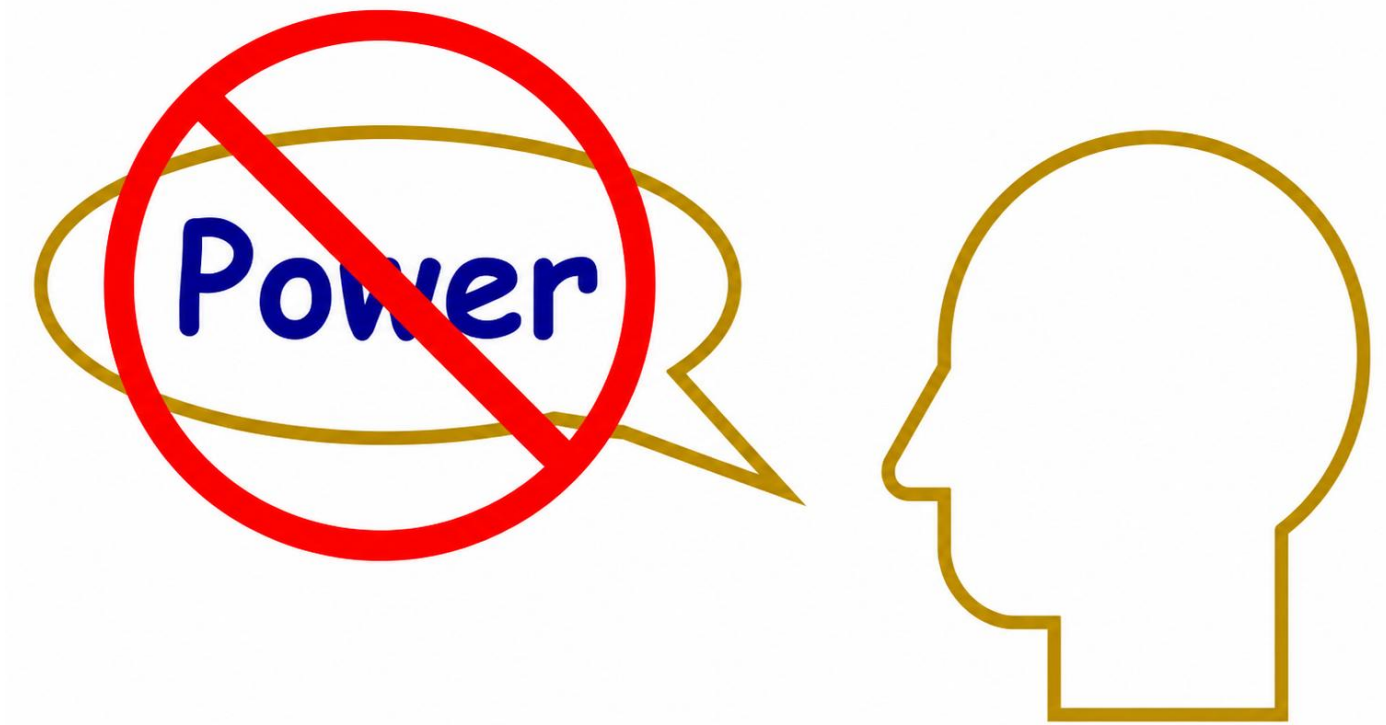
The taboo against talking about power

Overview and evidence of the taboo

A “taboo” is a social rule and function that supports avoidance of a particular topic, in this case power.

Does the taboo exist?

- Power is operating everywhere, but direct conversations about it are relatively uncommon.
- Power is often a sensitive, loaded topic.
- People with power speak more frequently in terms of ideas, values and policies.
- The test: imagine any social situation, and saying, *“Let’s talk about the power dynamics here.”*



What is your reaction to that thought?

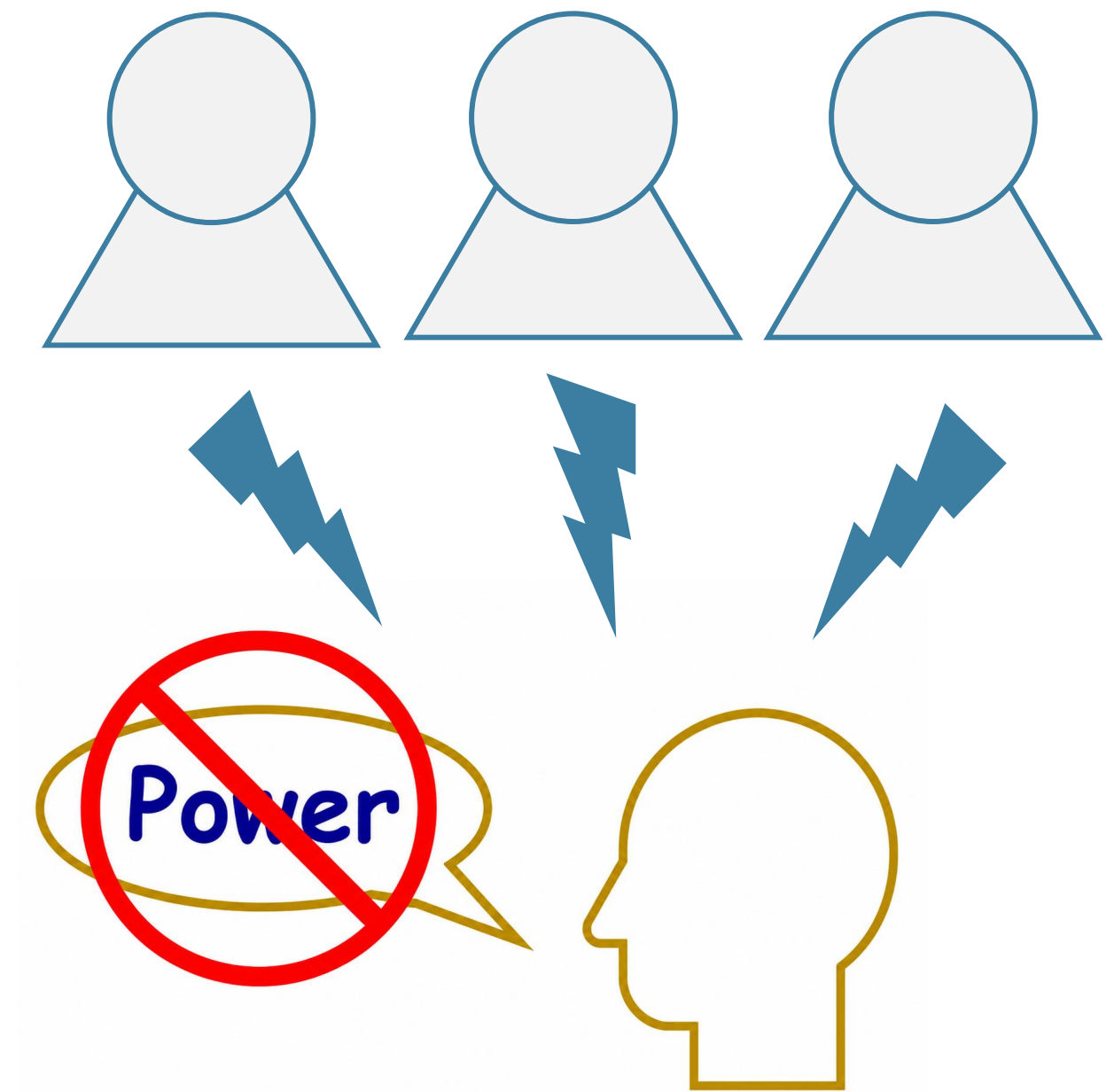
Add a few words in the comments if you feel comfortable doing so.

What keeps the taboo in place (1 of 3)

Power can suppress discussion of power

- Institutional punishment
- Strategic misinformation / obfuscation
- Protective silence
- Social conditioning / deference
- Politeness norms

Power is motivated to do so. Talking about power directly leads to questioning the distribution of power.



What keeps the taboo in place (2 of 3)

We suppress the subject ourselves

- Emotional avoidance
- Shame and guilt
- Self-censorship
- Concealing strength
- Avoidance of agency/accountability
- Powerlessness/hopelessness



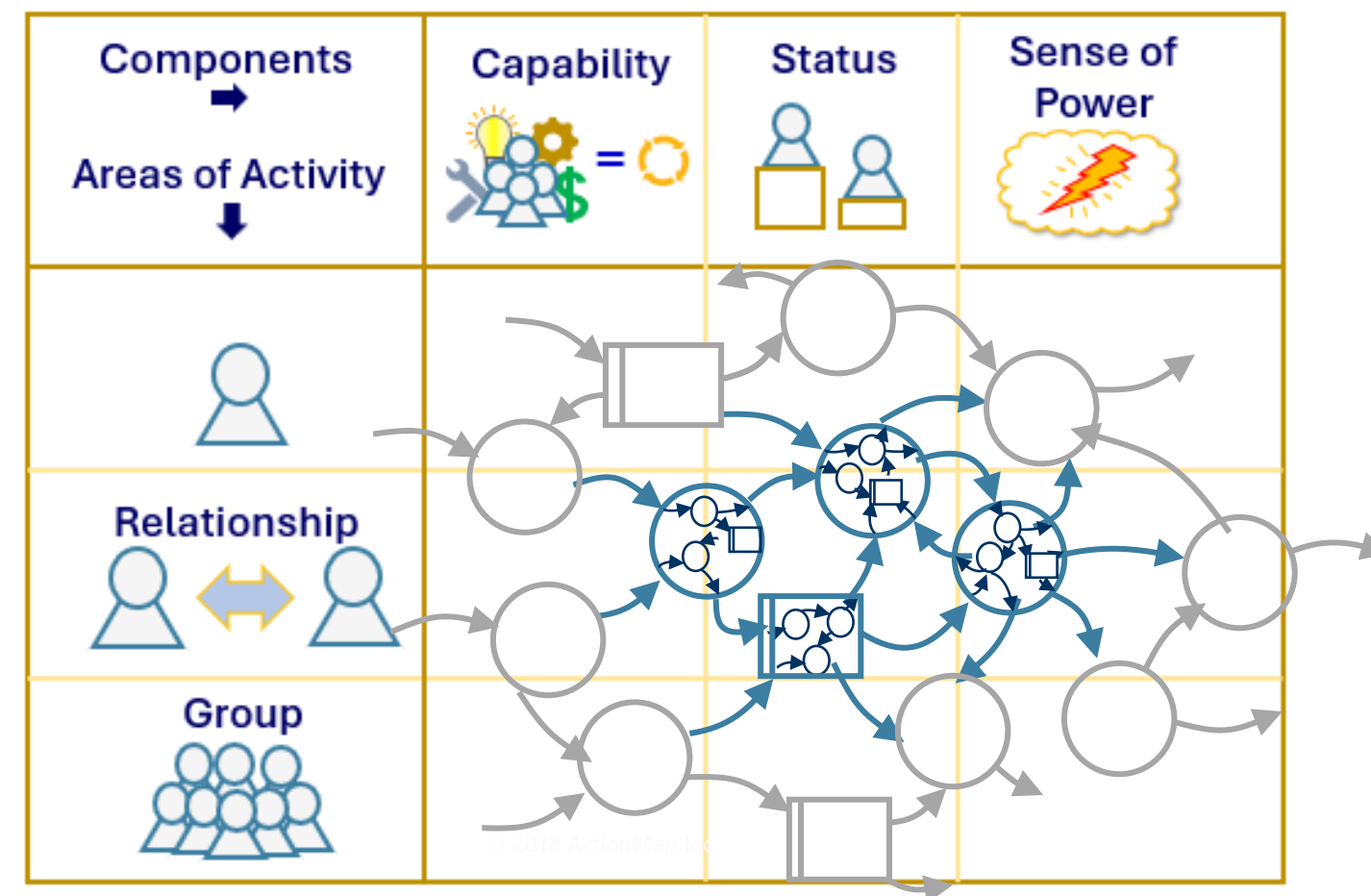
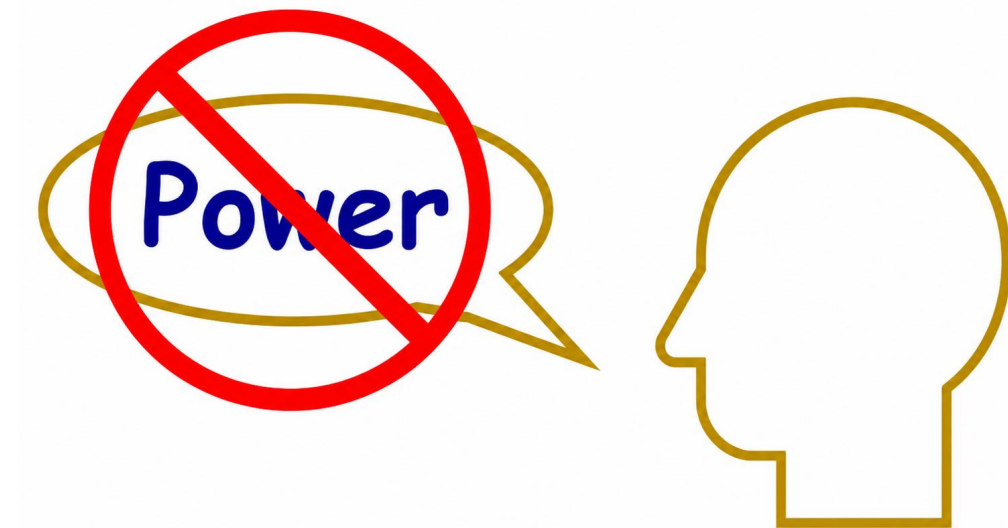
When power disappears from the explanation, agency tends to disappear with it.

And when agency disappears, accountability becomes harder to assign.

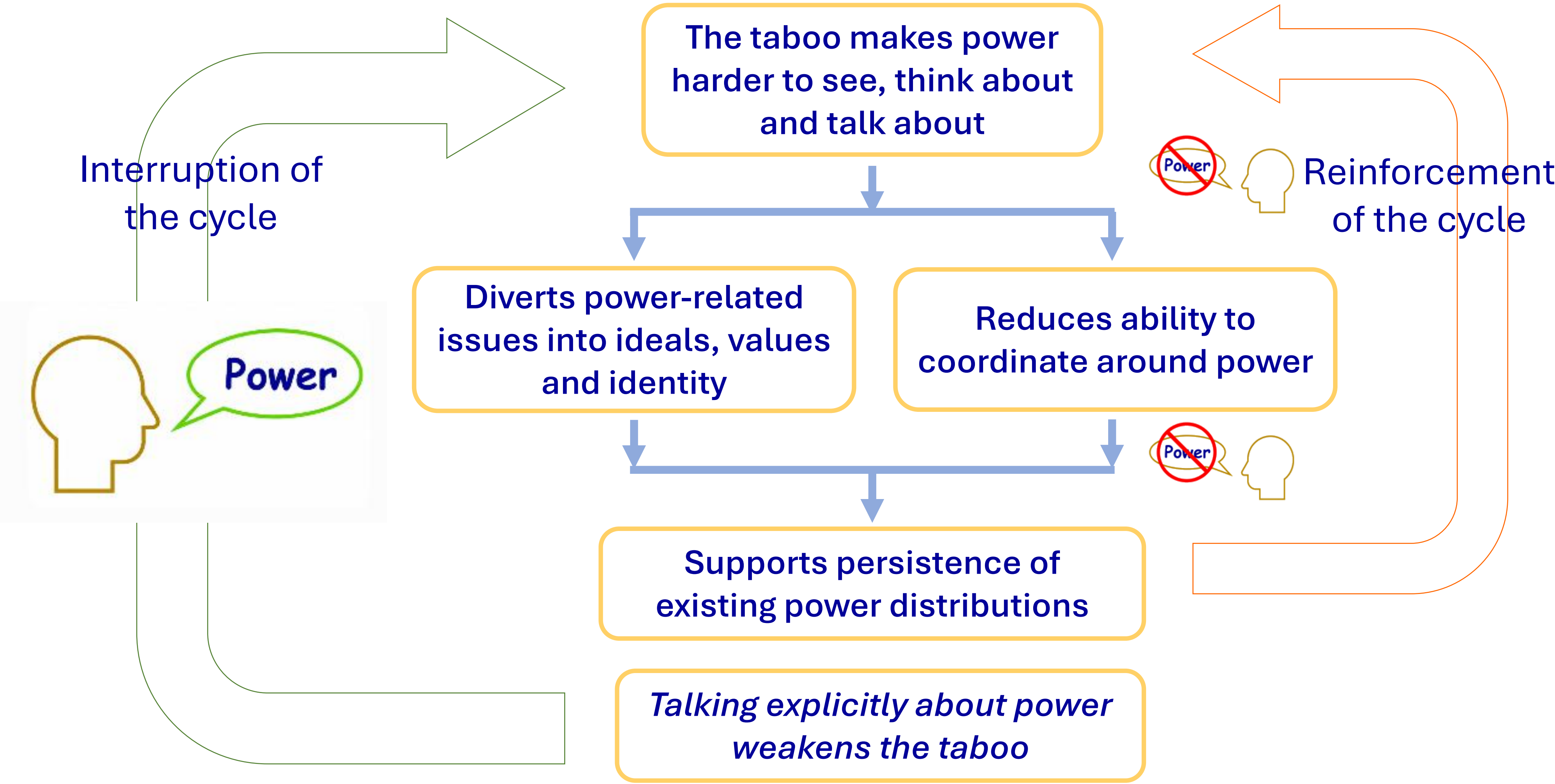
What keeps the taboo in place (3 of 3)

Power can be genuinely hard to talk about

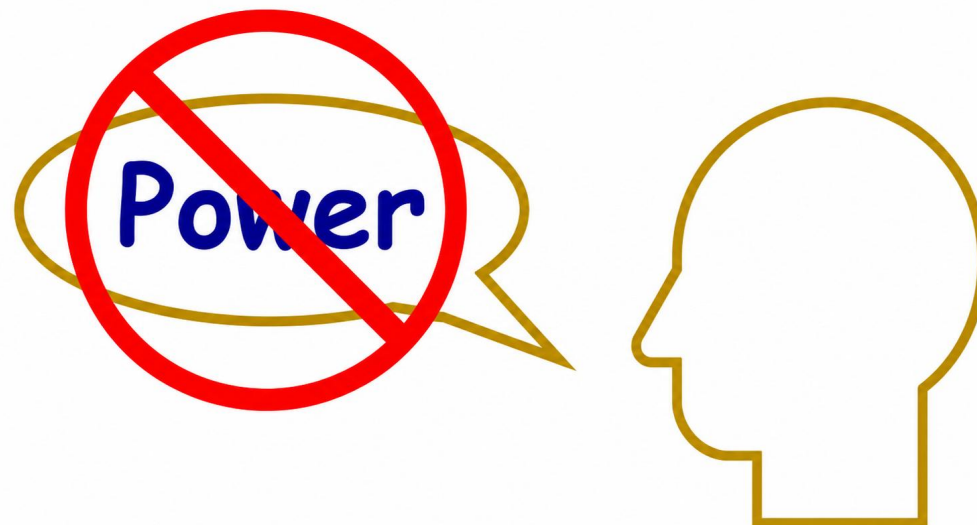
- No shared language
- Conceptual complexity
- Power is networked/matrixed
- Difficult to identify exactly what happened in a particular interaction



What does the taboo do?



Where might you see the taboo operating in the matrix?

Components Areas of Activity	Capability	Status	Sense of Power
Individual			
Relationship			
Group			

Interaction

Think of a situation where power was clearly operating, but people weren't talking about it directly.

What were they talking about instead?

Add a few words in the comments.

Part 3 – The Framework for Talking About Power -Complete

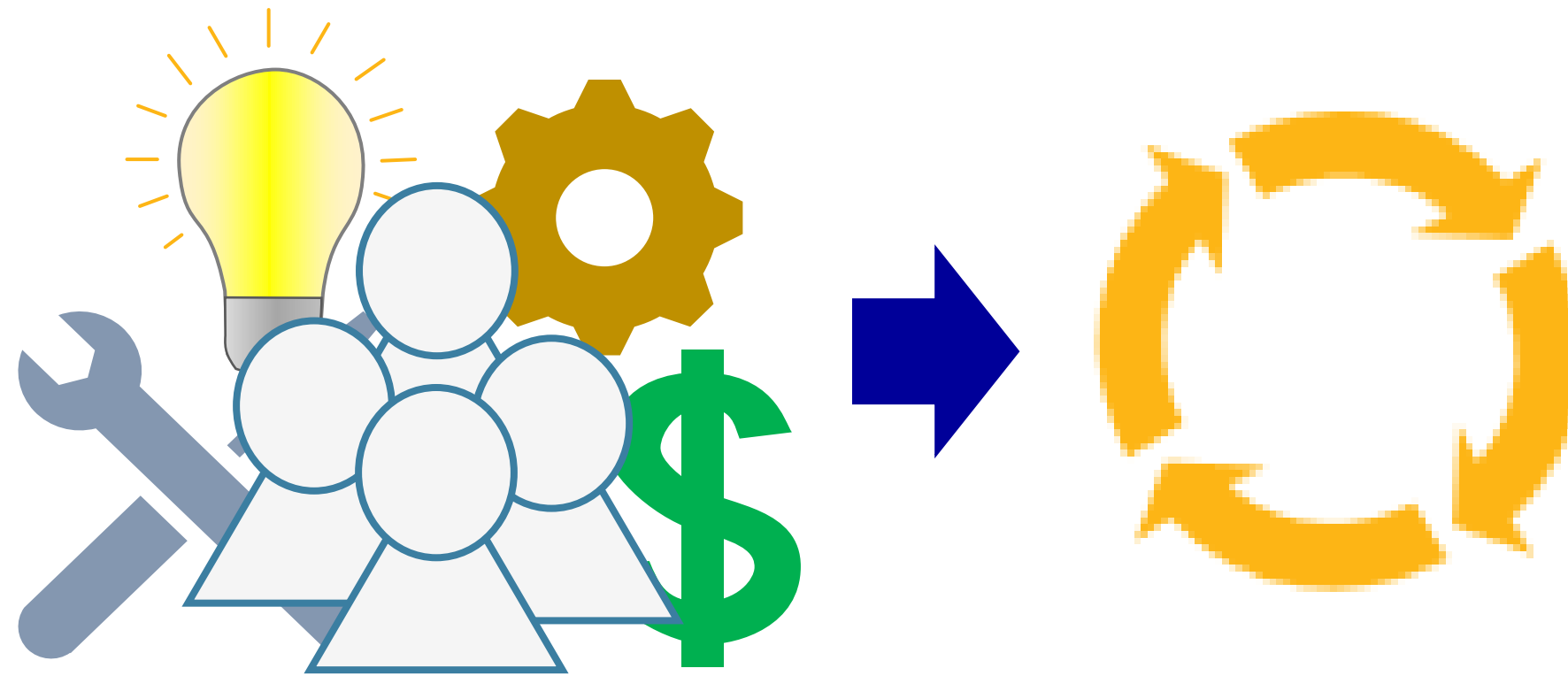
- The Matrix of Elements and Domains of Power
- The Taboo Against Talking About Power

Continue with Part 4 – Capability in Power

How to talk about power

A practical framework for understanding social power

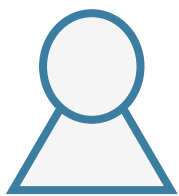
Part 4 – Capability in Power



Capability comes from many places

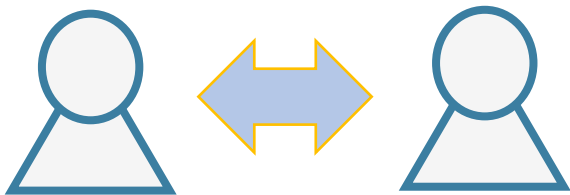
Strength & energy	Skills	Knowledge	Tools	Resources	Networks	Organization
Physical capacity Endurance Health	Learned abilities Craft Technique	Information Insight Experience	Technology Equipment Methods	Money Materials Property Time	Contacts Ties Access	Ability to coordinate all other capabilities

Individual



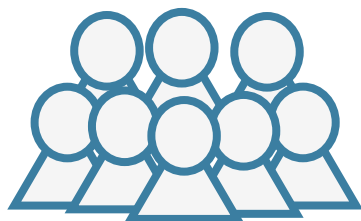
What a person can do

Relationship



What people can do through relationships

Group



What people can do through organized collective action

Capability is not absolute. Its effectiveness is in relation to the situation, objectives, and opposing capabilities.

“This is what allows me to do things and create effects I want.”

Interaction

Think of something you wanted to accomplish, but couldn't.

What capability was missing?

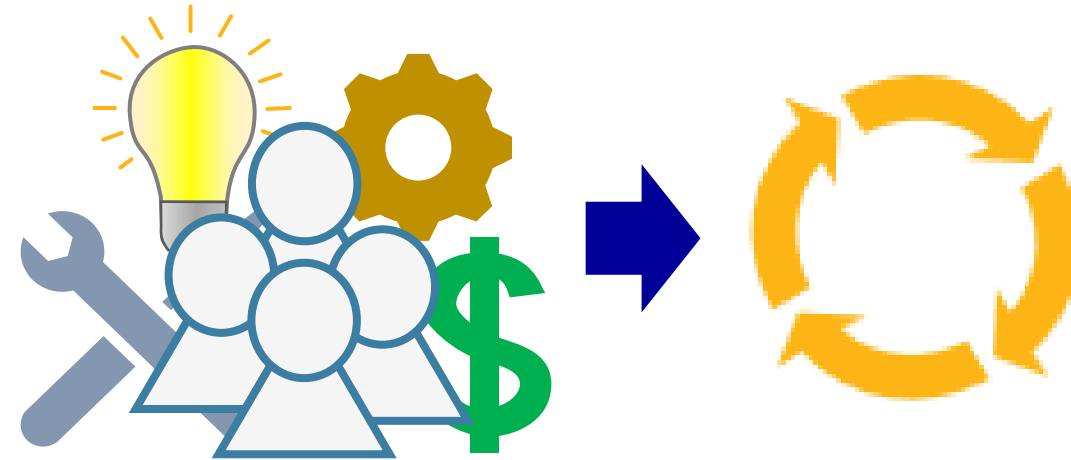
Now think of something difficult that you were able to accomplish.

Where did the capability come from?

Was it something you had yourself, or something you could reach through other people or a group?

Add a few words in the comments if you feel comfortable doing so.

Part 4 – Capability in Power - Complete

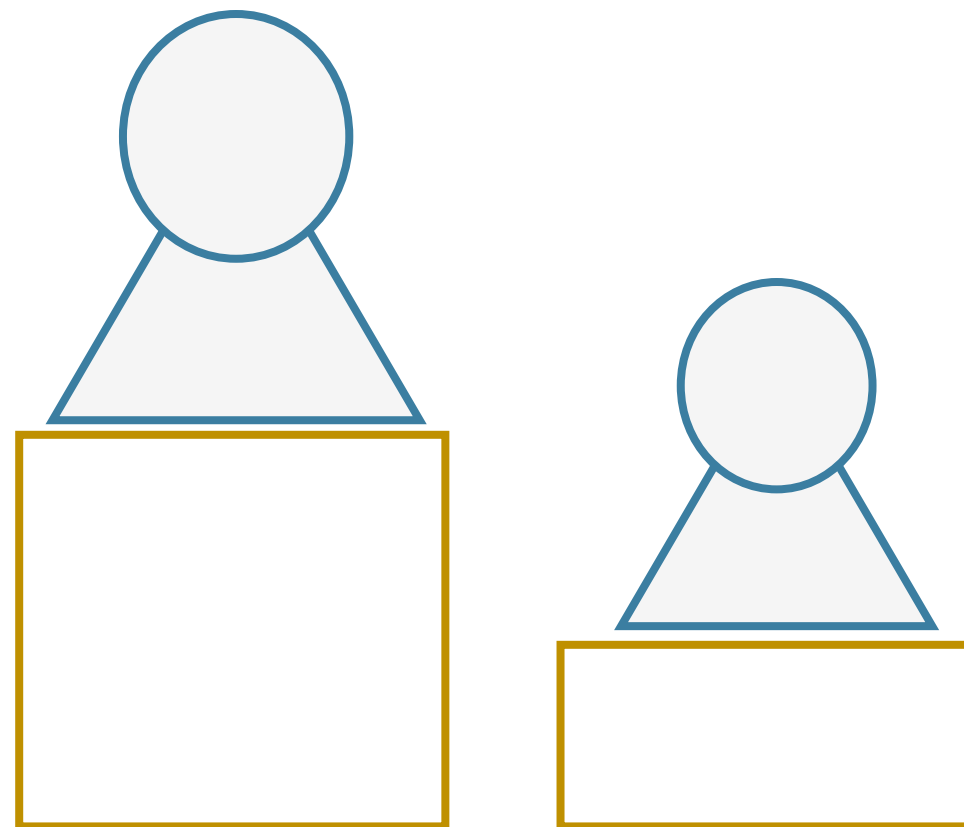


Continue with Part 5 – Status in Power

How to talk about power

A practical framework for understanding social power

Part 5 – Status in Power



What is status?

Status is perceived relative social standing.

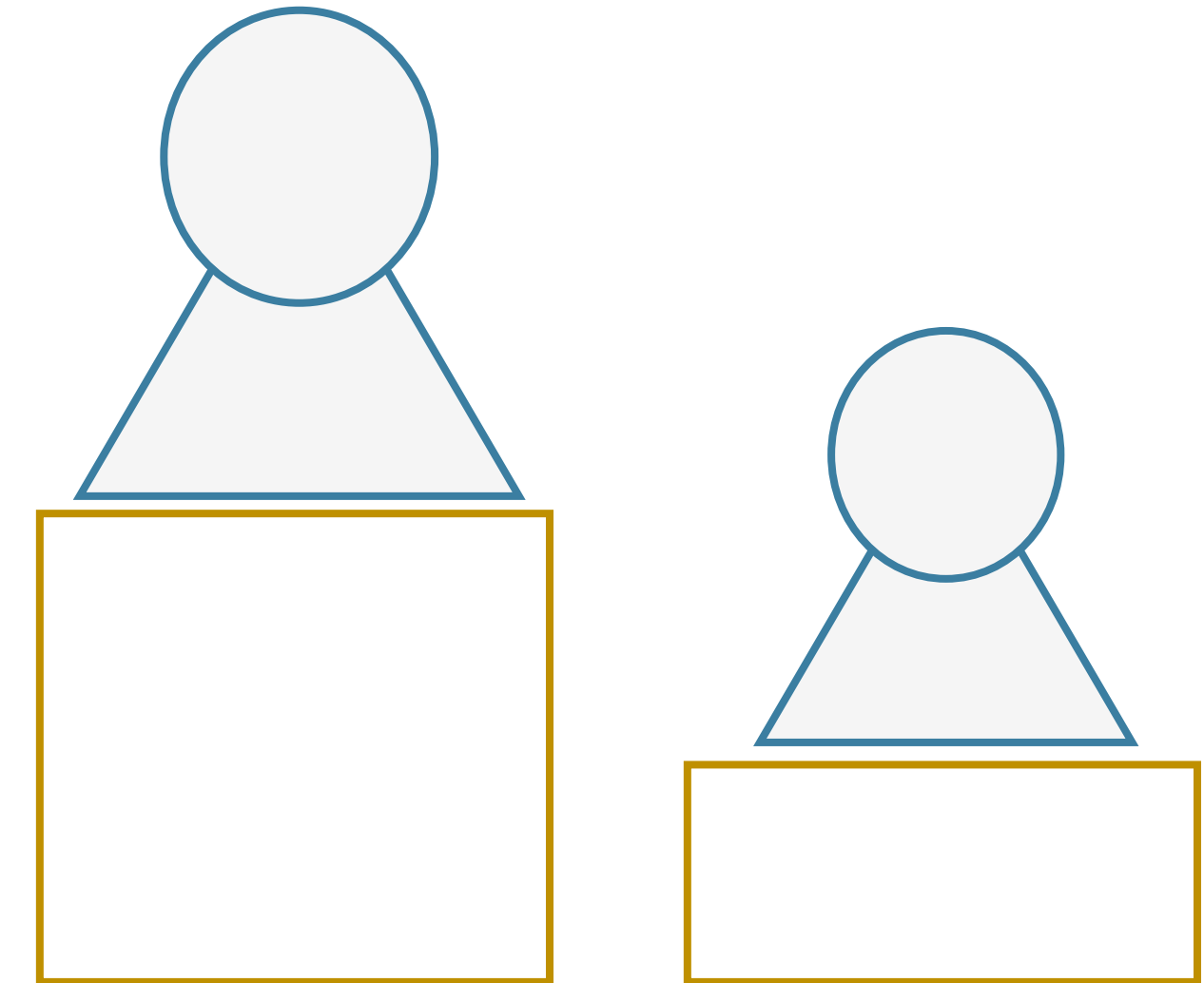
It reflects how we evaluate ourselves and how we are evaluated by others.

Status evaluations can be based on many things:

- Capability • Wealth • Role • Reputation
- Gender • Age • Race • Religion
- Appearance • Connections • Culture

What counts and how much it counts varies across people, groups and cultures.

Much of this can be tacit, automatic and outside conscious awareness.



Status is a continuous social process

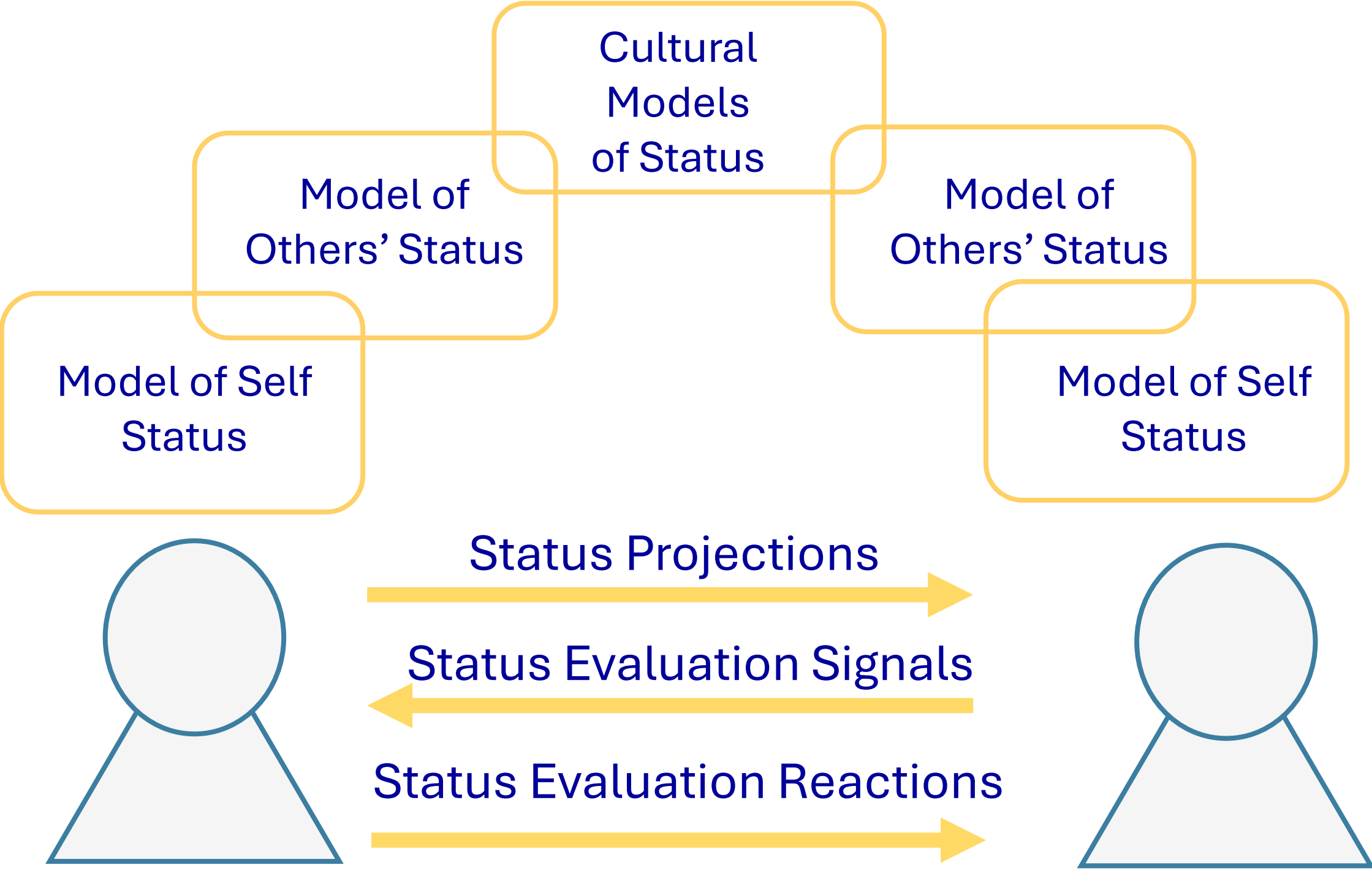
We continuously assess and project status.

We *project signals* about our own standing.

We also *project our status judgments* of other people.

Other people *pick up those signals* and *respond with signals* of their own.

We are simultaneously perceiving and creating status.



Why status matters

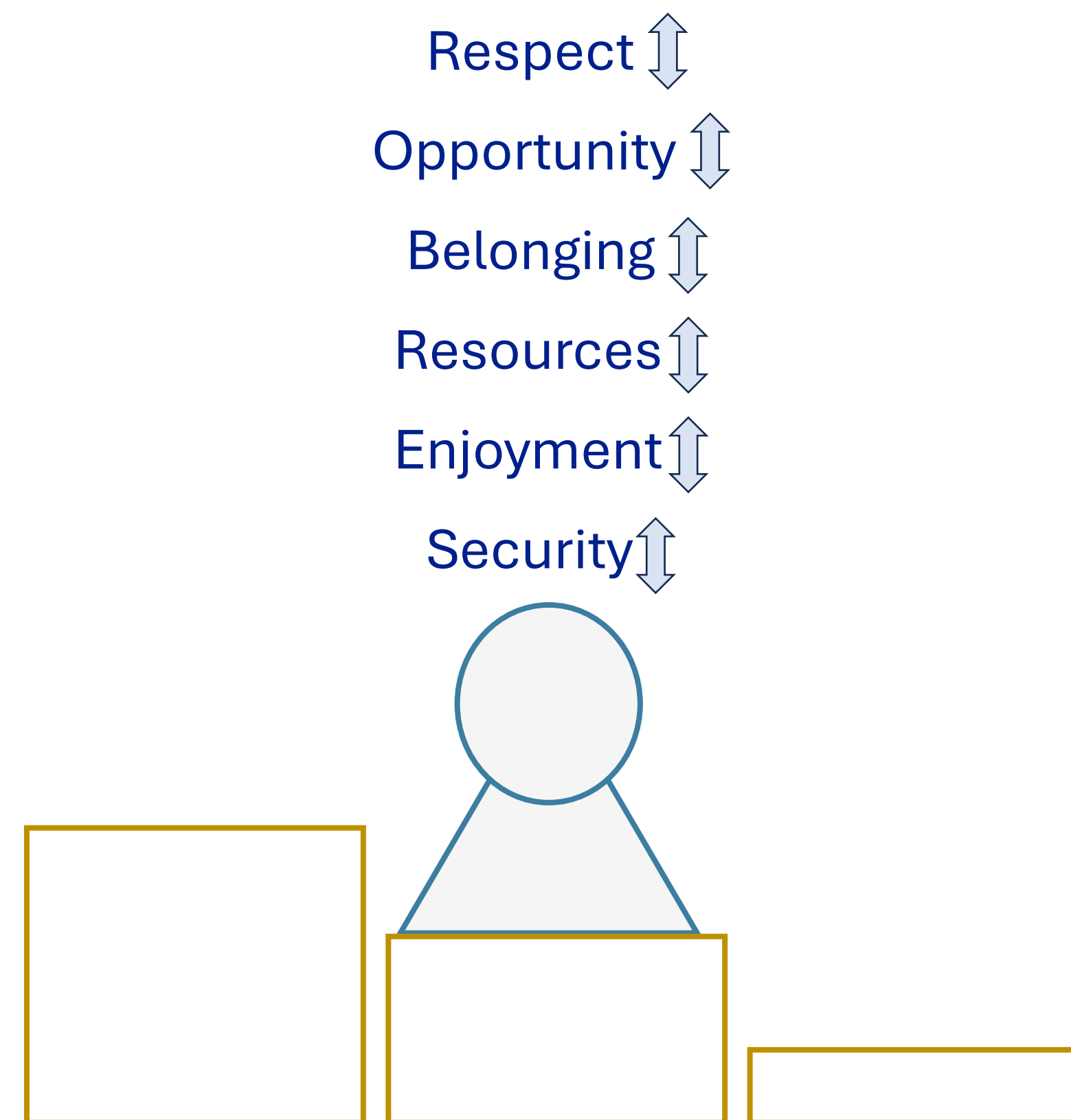
Status has consequences.

Our standing can affect:

**Respect • Belonging • Attention • Credibility
Access • Cooperation • Resources • Security**

So changes in status can mean changes in things we more directly care about.

This helps to explain why people seek status, defend status, and react strongly to threats to status.



Status interacts with capability and sense of power

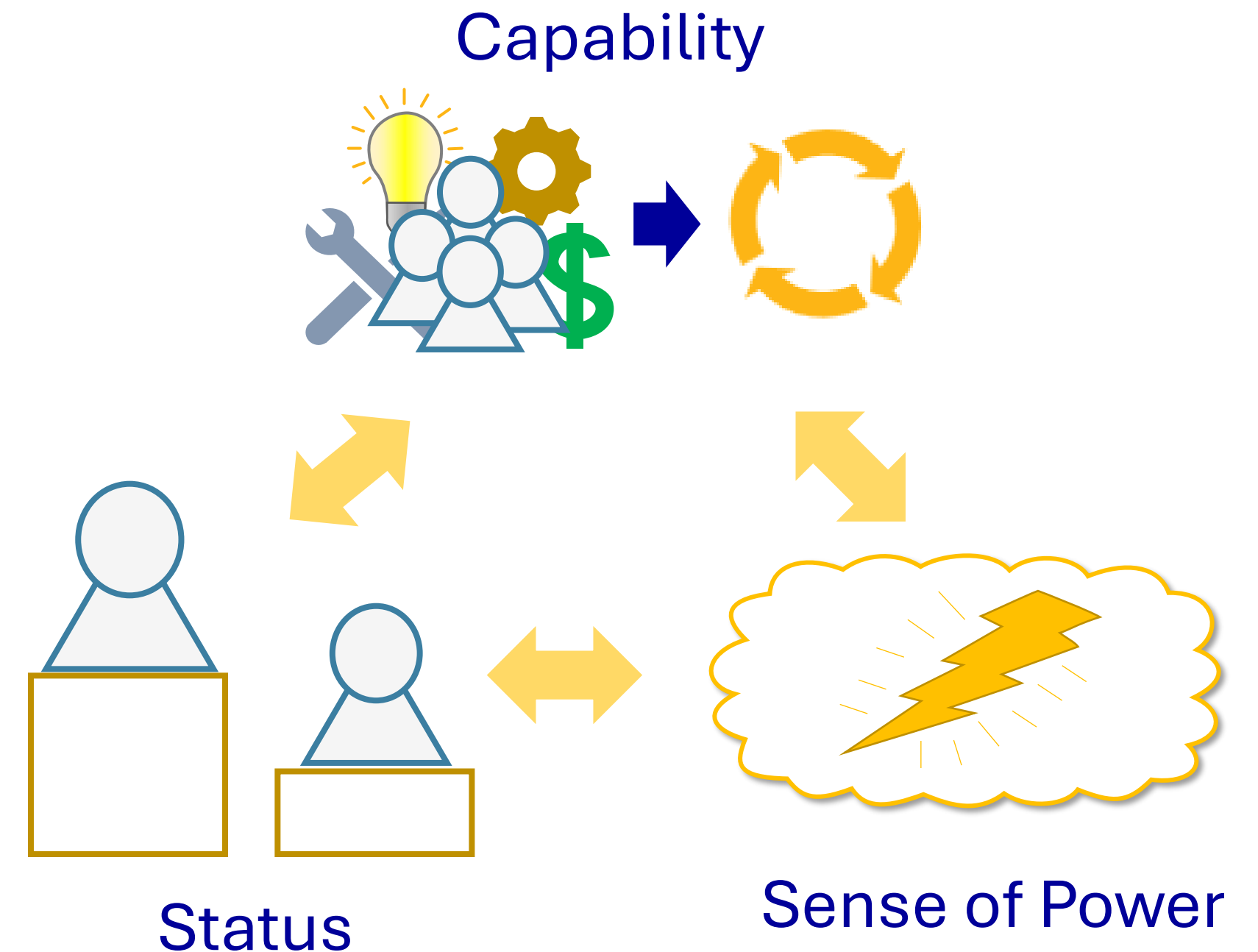
Status and capability affect each other.

- Higher status can bring credibility, cooperation, resources, opportunities, networks and access.
- Lower status can restrict them.
- Greater capability can produce higher status: esteem, authority, privilege and influence.

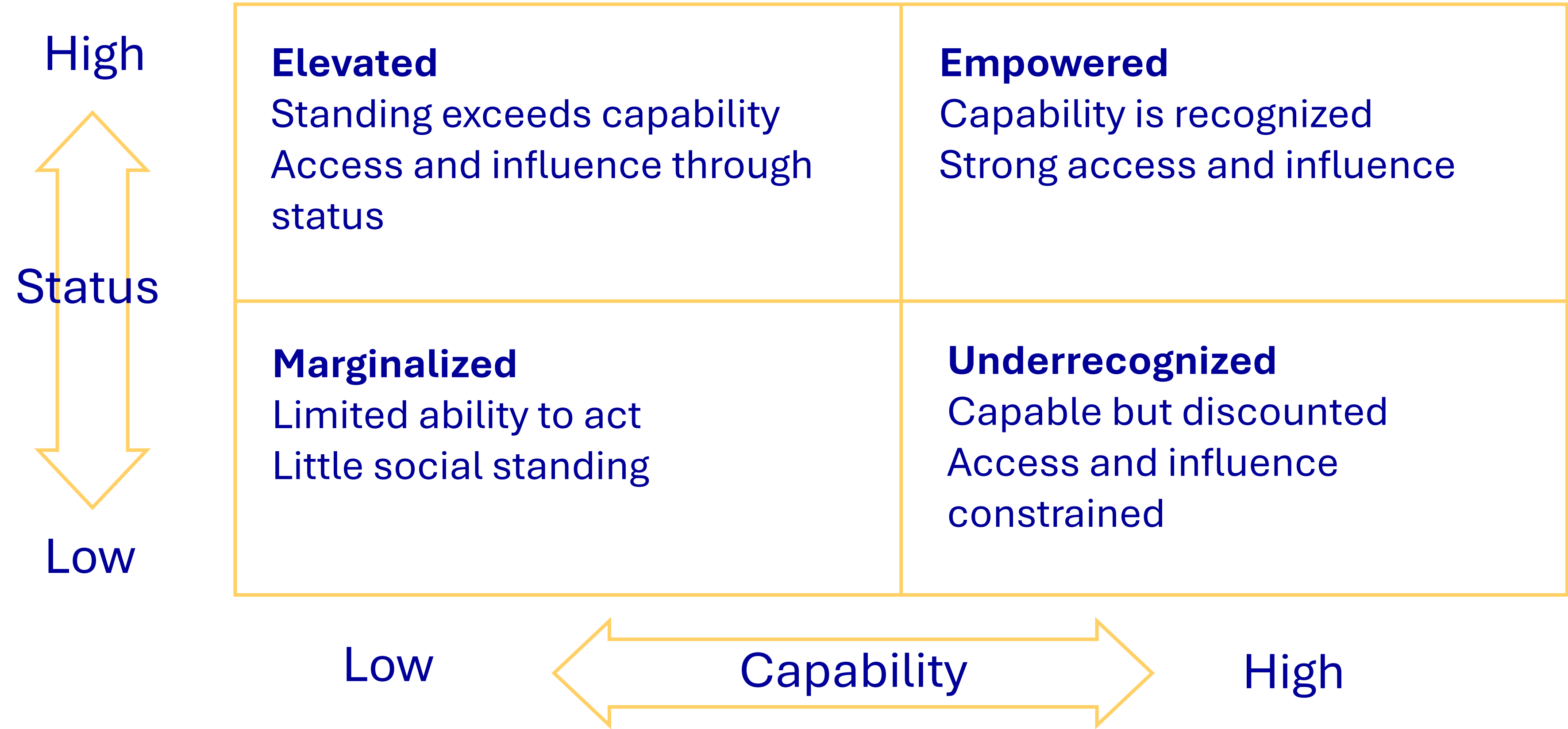
Status and sense of power affect each other.

- Higher status can increase confidence, perceived control and willingness to act.
- Lower status can increase hesitation, deference and uncertainty.
- A stronger sense of power can affect how status is claimed, expressed and responded to by others.

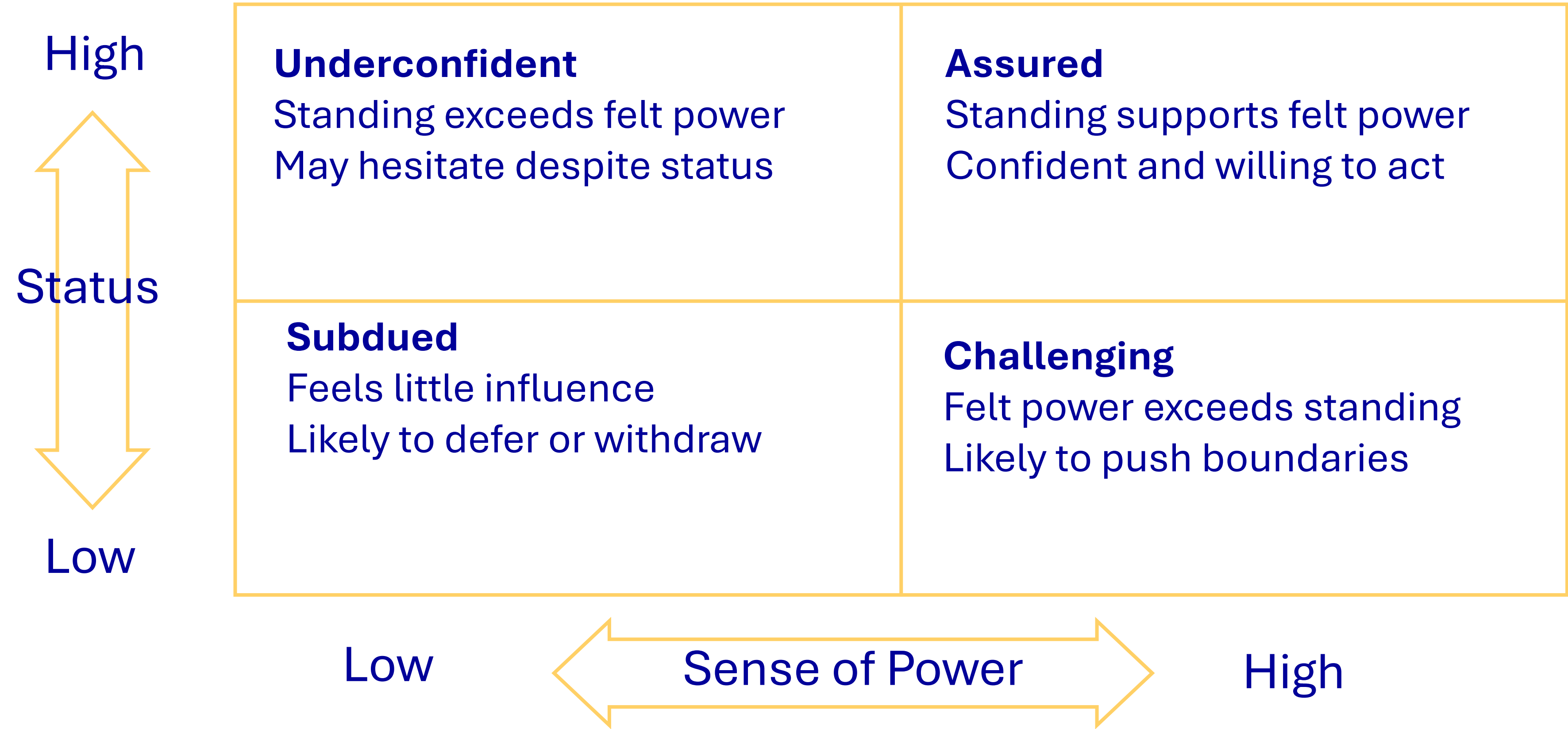
Status connects *what we can do* with *what we feel is acceptable* to do.



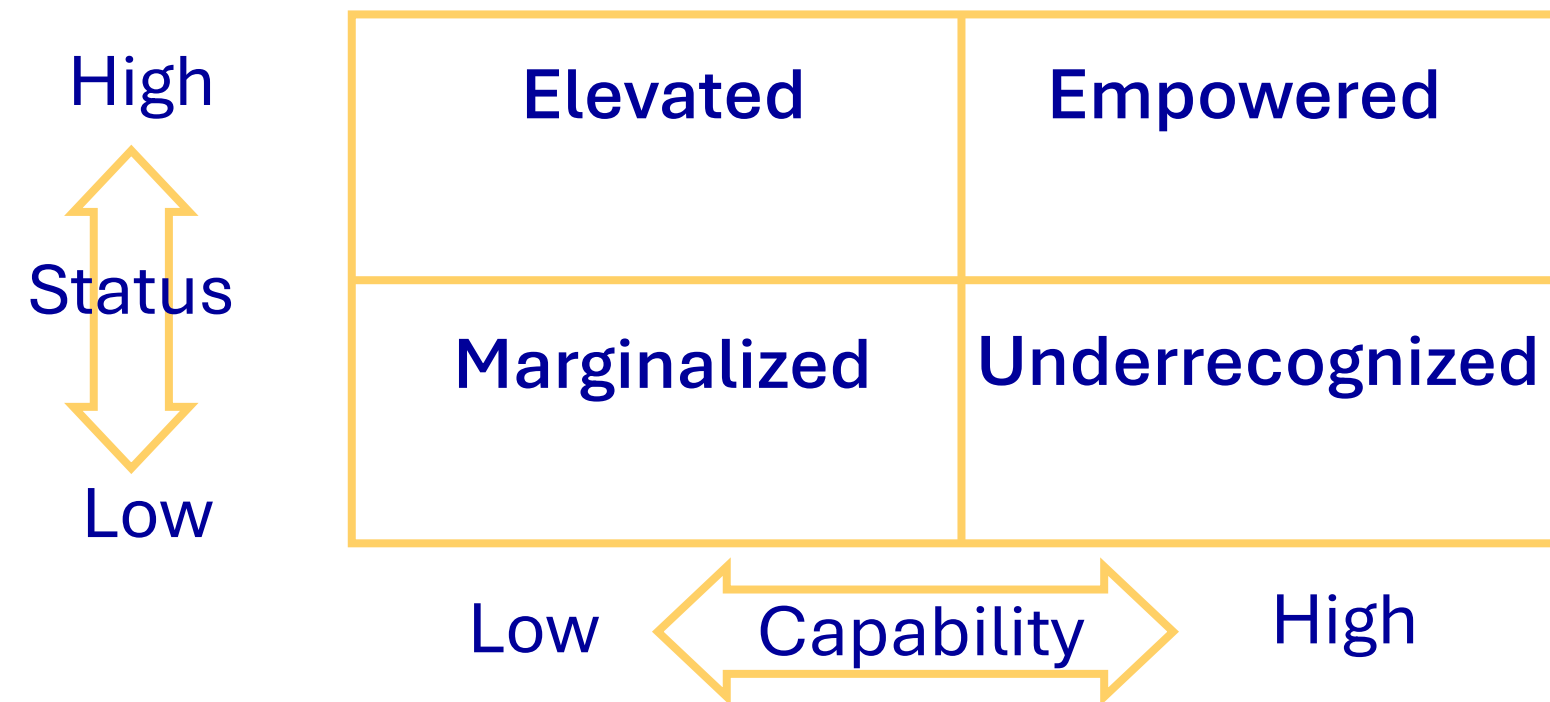
Status and capability



Status and sense of power



Stories

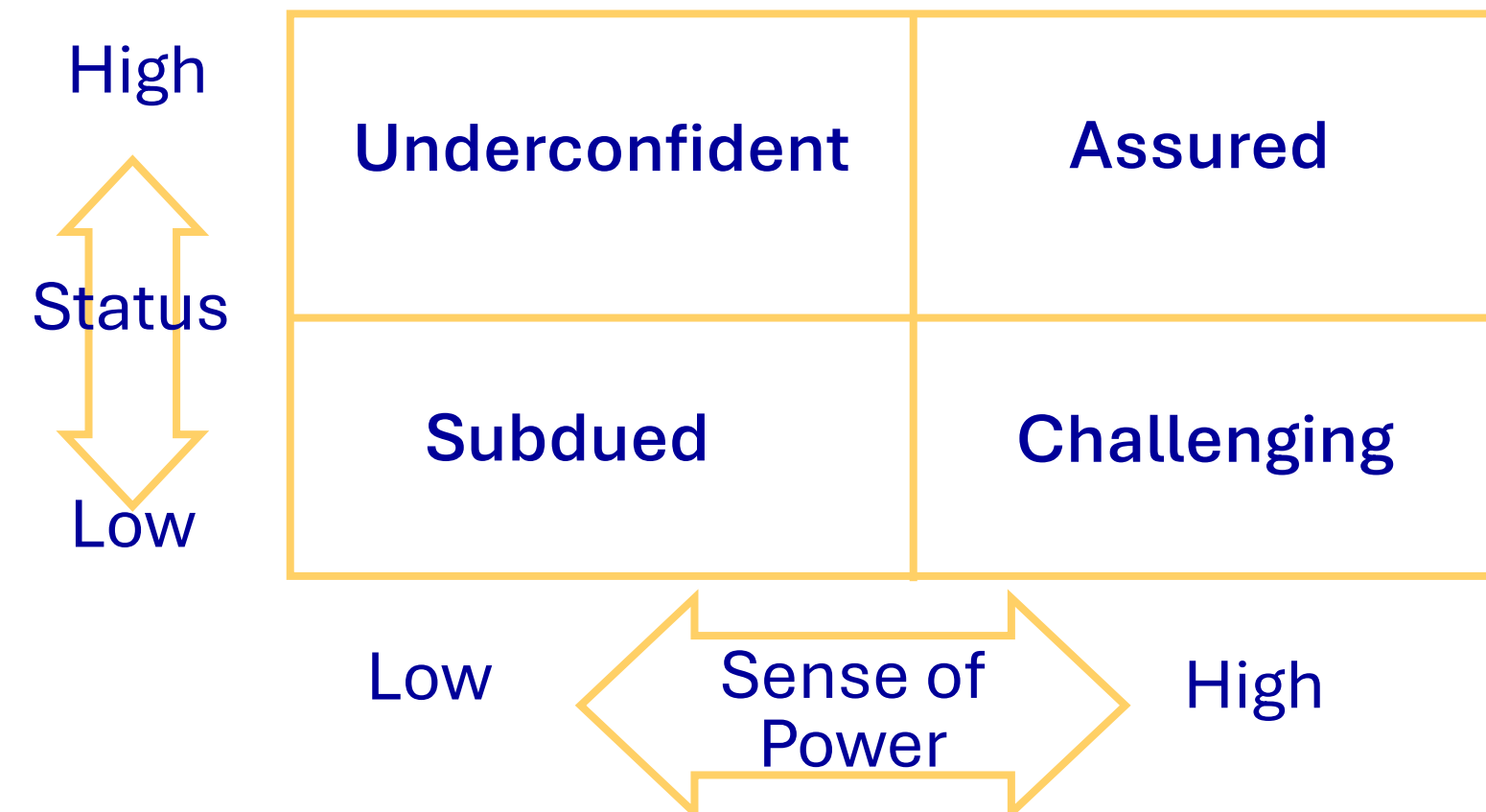


Elevated — A new executive has considerable authority before anyone knows whether she can do the job well.

Empowered — A respected engineer has both the expertise and standing to get a difficult decision made.

Marginalized — A new employee has little experience and little standing, so has limited influence.

Underrecognized — A highly capable analyst is routinely overlooked because of low organizational standing.



Underconfident — A newly promoted manager has the title but still hesitates to exercise the authority that comes with it.

Assured — A respected team leader feels comfortable speaking, deciding, and acting.

Subdued — A junior employee feels low standing and little ability to influence what happens.

Challenging — A confident newcomer with little established standing readily questions how senior people do things.

Status may be depend on being in a particular domain

Expertise — A physician may have high standing discussing medicine , but not necessarily in investing or software. 

Organizational level — A department head may have considerable standing with their staff  and much less in an executive meeting. 

Family — Someone with little status at work  may be the person everyone turns to for decisions at home. 

Community — Someone may be highly respected in a neighborhood, religious group, volunteer organization, or club  and largely unknown outside it. 

Crossing a boundary — A junior employee may receive ordinary feedback discussing their own work,  but strong resistance when challenging senior strategy.

New environment — A highly respected executive  can enter a new organization where no one knows yet what they can do. 

The domains we occupy are broadly aligned with our currently recognized status.

The status field

We can think of these domains as occupying a multi-dimensional “status field”.

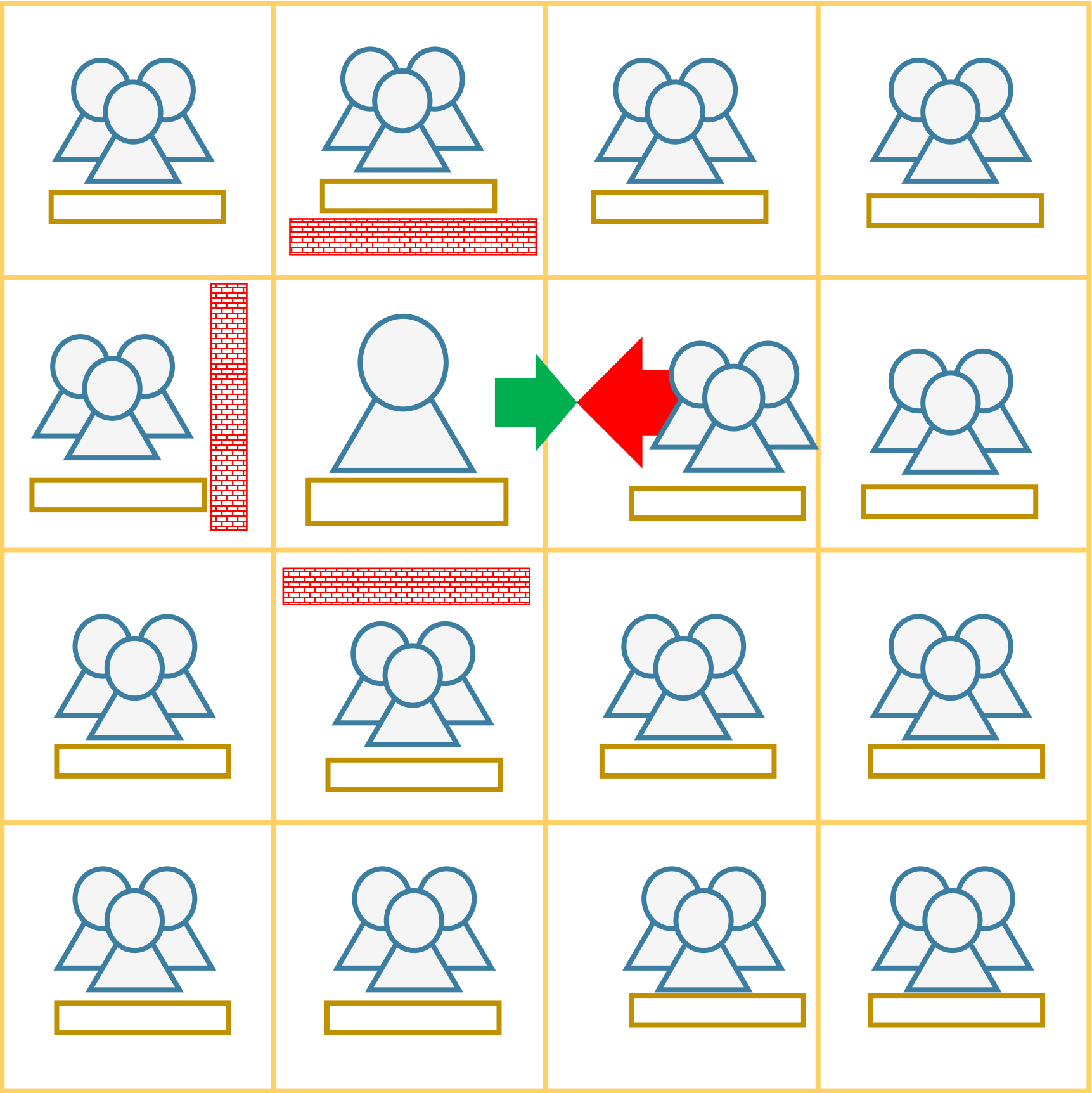
Within an aligned domain, status feedback tends to be relatively ordinary and stabilizing.

Move outside that domain and the signals can become stronger:

**Challenge • Resistance • Exclusion • Correction
Attention • Recognition • Access • Deference**

These signals can reinforce, challenge or change our standing.

The field is created and maintained by the people in it.



*We shape the status field through what we notice,
respect, recognize, and reward.*

Status can be harmful

Exclusion & discounting ↓

People may be ignored, undervalued, disbelieved, or excluded because of their perceived standing.

Constrained opportunity ↓

Status can affect access to resources, networks, cooperation, attention, and opportunity.

Deference & inhibition ↓

Lower standing can discourage speaking, acting, disagreeing, or challenging others.

Status defense ↓

Threats to standing can provoke defensiveness, conflict, concealment, or attempts to diminish others.

Embedded inequality ↓

When status differences become established in groups and institutions, they can reinforce existing differences in capability, access, and influence.



Status can reinforce what we value

What receives status

Competence & judgment ↑

Contribution & service ↑

Trust & cooperation ↑

Courage & integrity ↑

Curiosity & inclusion ↑

Constructive leadership ↑

Through recognition of...

Expertise, experience, sound decisions

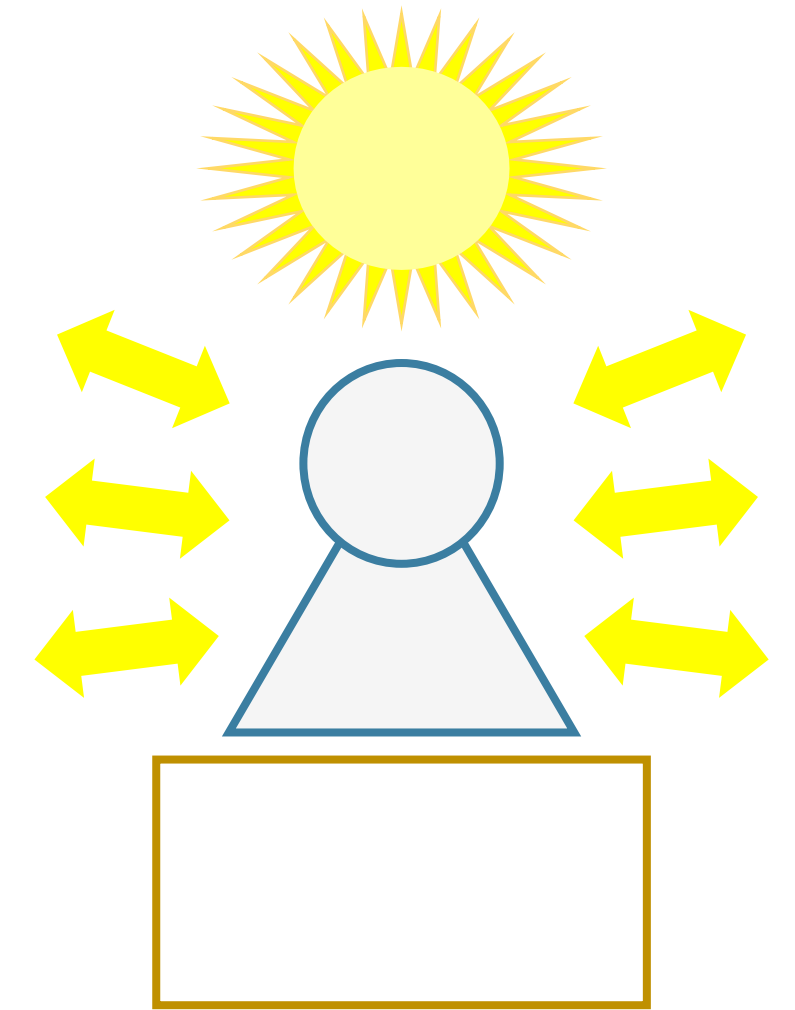
Useful work, helping, teaching, stewardship

Reliability, honesty, bridge-building, shared success

Principled disagreement, speaking up, doing what is right

Sharing knowledge, opportunity, attention and credit

Coordination, restraint, developing others, sharing power



Recognition is rewarding. It can reinforce behavior and strengthen confidence, agency, belonging, and aspiration.

Interaction

Think of a situation where your standing was clearly high.

What did you feel able to do?

Now think of a situation where your standing was low or uncertain.

What changed in your feeling?

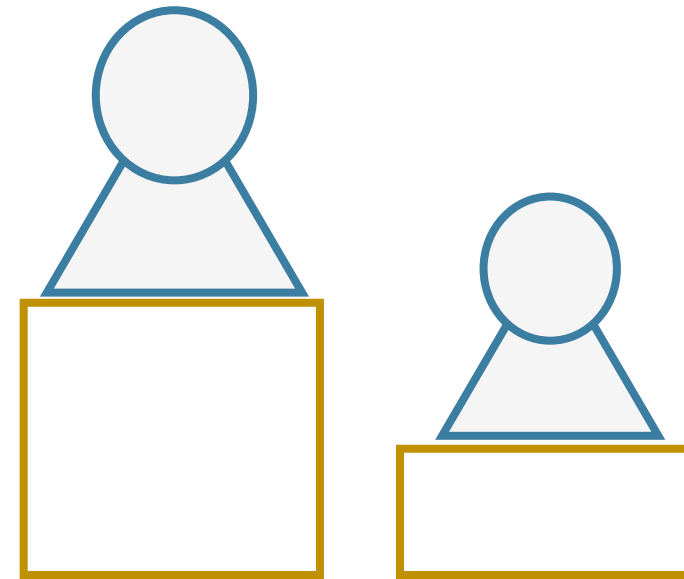
Think about the people around you.

How did they reinforce or challenge your standing?

**How comfortable are you acknowledging, even to yourself,
that your status matters to you?**

Add a few words in the comments if you feel okay about doing so.

Part 5 – Status in Power - Complete

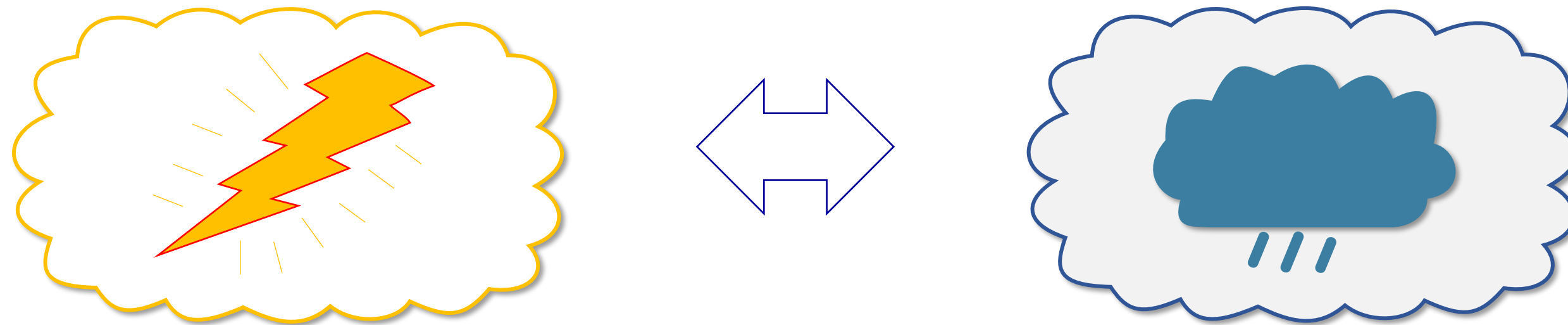


Continue with Part 6 – Sense of Power in Power

How to talk about power

A practical framework for understanding social power

Part 6 – Sense of Power in Power



Sense of power involves a perception of feeling

Before looking more closely at sense of power, this slides groups several familiar experiences under the heading of Feeling.

Feeling

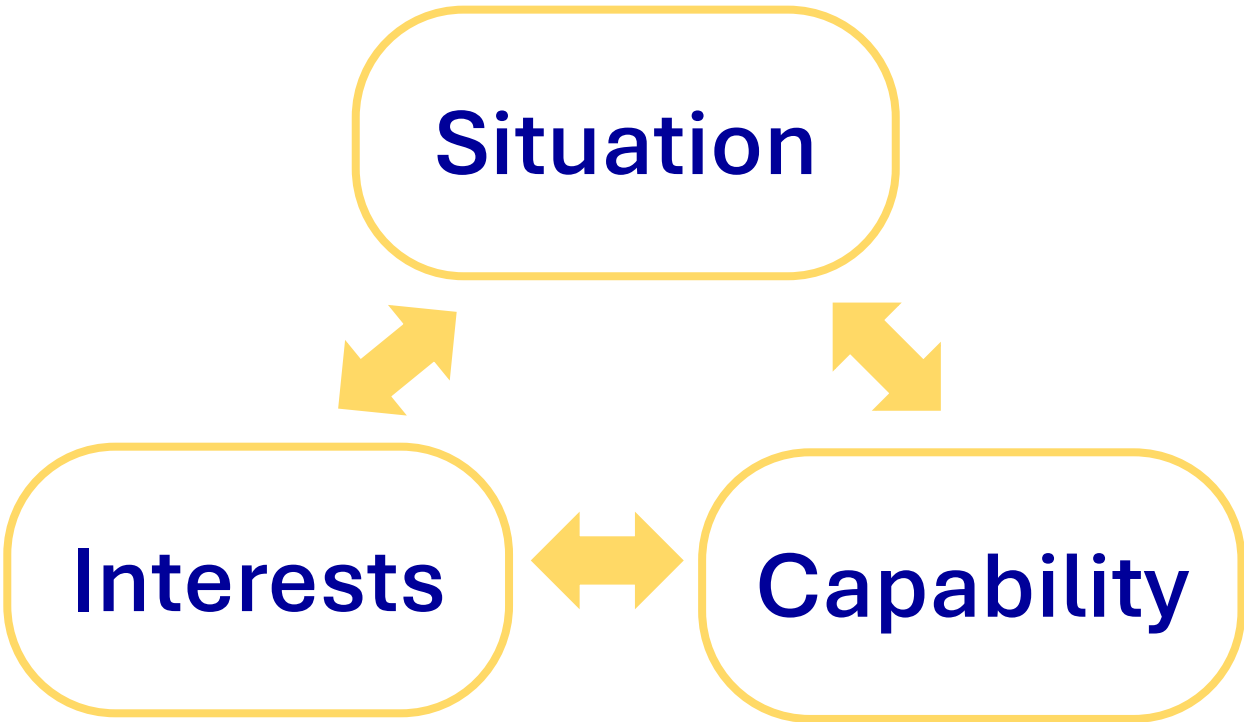
Felt Evaluation	Values & Interests	Emotion	Performance States
What draws us toward or pushes us away Bodily felt evaluation of positive, neutral and negative	What matters to us Often learned from the people around us	Joy, anger, fear, grief, happiness, pride: the whole range Often about relationships	Physical and mental readiness, energy, inhibition and so on Examples: how athletes, dancers and chess players prepare

Sense of power draws on these experiences to tell us something about our relationship to the situation we are in.

Our sense of power answers *two questions*

Both questions are about the relationships among our *situation, our capability, and our interests*

“Based on my perception and beliefs about what is happening, immediate, short term, and long term:



“Can I handle the situation I’m in?”

Feelings: Confident ↔ Okay ↔ Anxious

“Are my interests being fulfilled or thwarted?”

Feelings: Joy / Elation ↔ Satisfied ↔ Anger / Deflation

Components of sense of power – inputs to the feeling

Strength	Confidence	Ideas	Intent
Energy Vigor Readiness	Assurance Courage Self-trust	Possibilities Options Ways forward	Purpose Direction Determination

Think of a situation in which you want to accomplish something.

Now imagine removing each of the four components, one at a time.

Sense of power is highly variable

Most of the time, we don't pay attention to our sense of power.

We notice it when it gets off center from “Okay / Satisfied”.

- Seeing a strange shadow in a room
- Being stuck in traffic
- Finding the right item at the store
- Winning a business deal

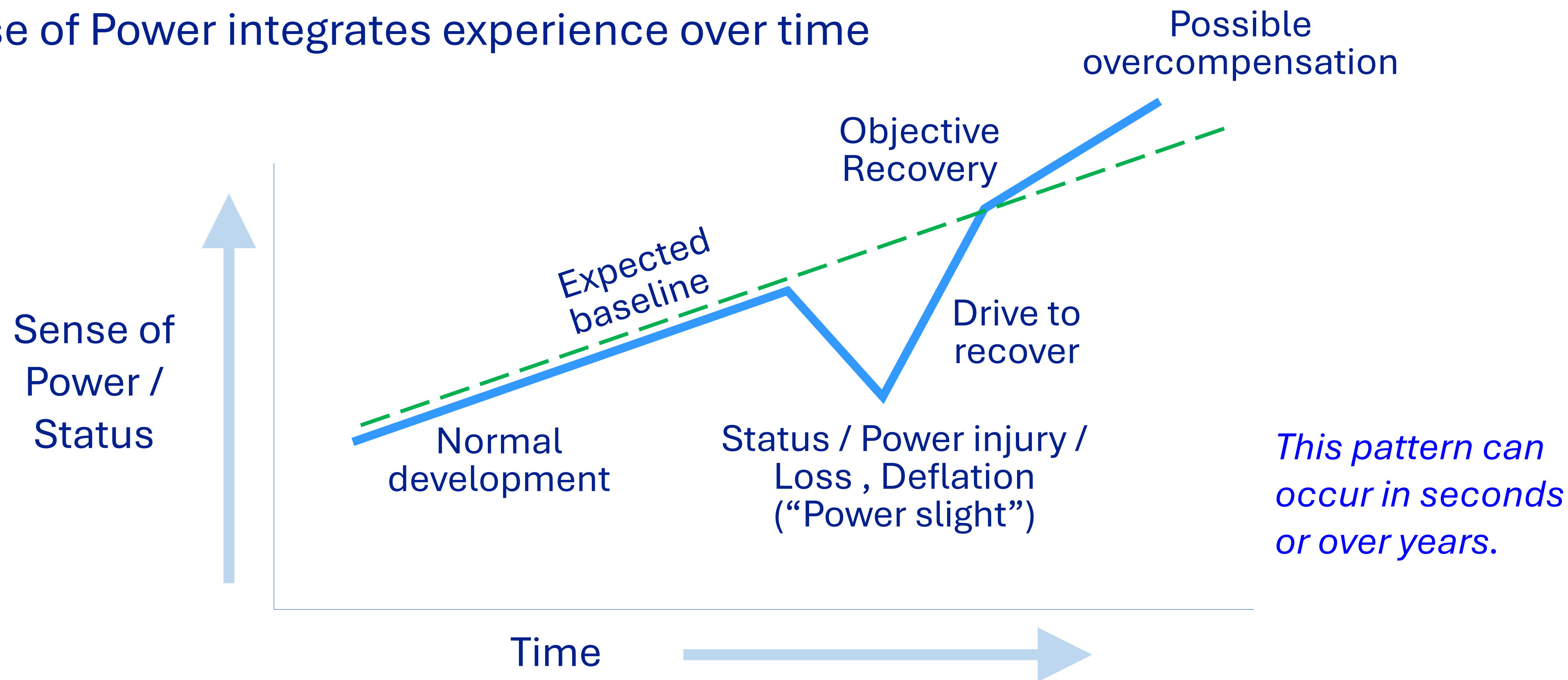
Our *actual* capability is only one influence on our sense of power. Other influences are:

- Beliefs
- Expectations
- Interpretations
- Support systems

So our sense of power can change even when our actual capability has not changed.



Sense of Power integrates experience over time



Examples:

- Competitive defeat in business or sports
- Childhood powerlessness / humiliation
- Loss of status / rejection in relationship or career
- Challenge to authority / prerogatives

Present sense of power may reflect both accumulated power experience ***and*** anticipated future shifts, impacting motivation.

Try it on

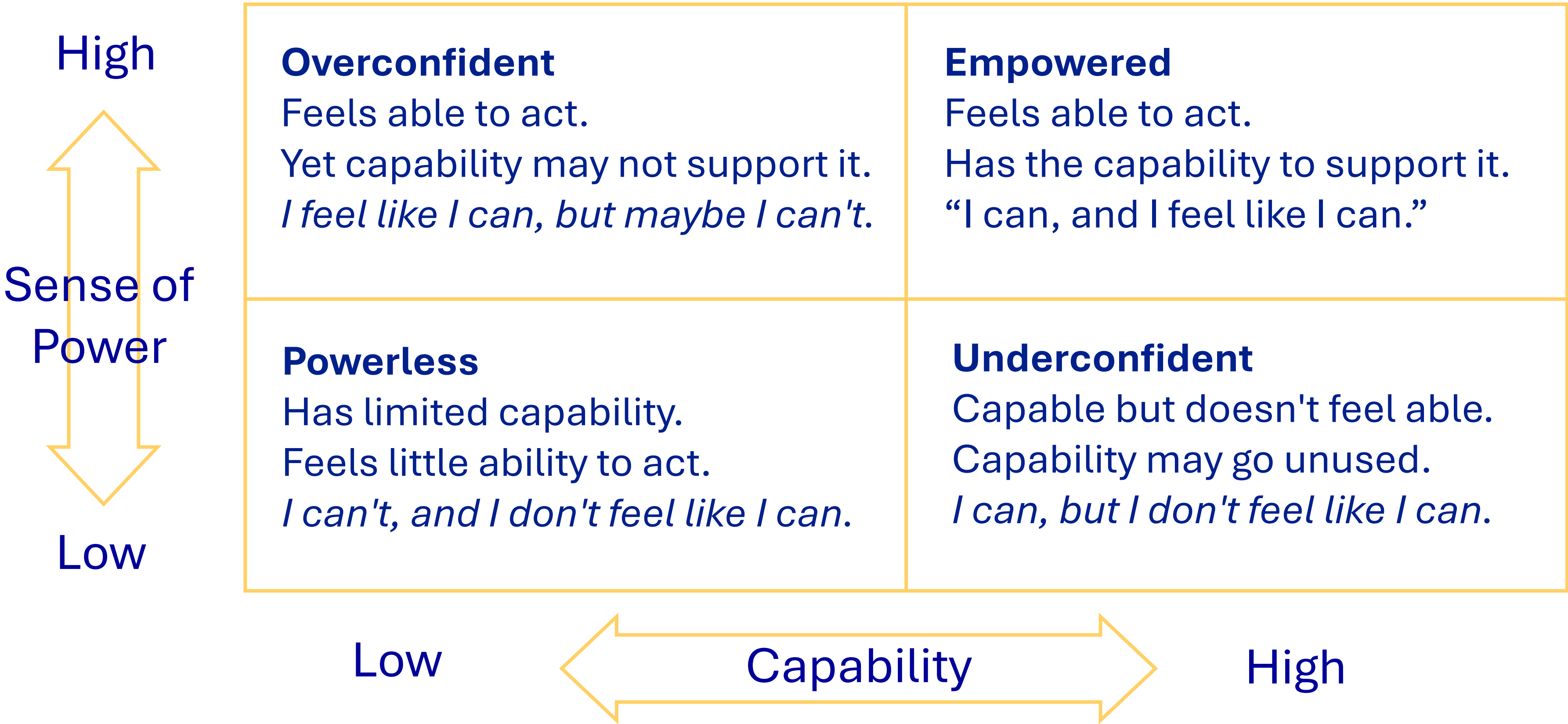
Think of a situation where your sense of power changed noticeably.

What changed?

- Your strength?
- Your confidence?
- Your ideas about what was possible?
- Your intent?
- Something in the situation itself?
- Was there a power slight?

Add comments if you feel comfortable doing so.

Sense of power and capability



Sense of Power connects *what we can do* with *what we feel we can do*.

Sense of power as a combination of energy and clarity

	Low Clarity (Ideas + Intent)	High Clarity (Ideas + Intent)
High Energy (Strength + Confidence)	<u>Restless / Impulsive</u> Feels energized and capable of acting, but lacks a clear direction. Action tends to be reactive, scattered, or poorly coordinated. May mistake activity for progress.	<u>Focused / Strong Sense of Power</u> Has both the energy to engage and the clarity to direct it. Acts purposefully, persists through obstacles, and experiences agency. Energy and direction reinforce one another.
Low Energy (Strength + Confidence)	<u>Disengaged / Muddled</u> Lacks both the energy to engage and the clarity to know what to pursue. Experiences confusion, passivity, or resignation. Little momentum develops because neither axis supports the other.	<u>Latent Power</u> Understands the situation and knows what should be done, but lacks sufficient vigor or confidence to act. Potential exceeds execution. Energy, not understanding, is the limiting factor.

Interaction

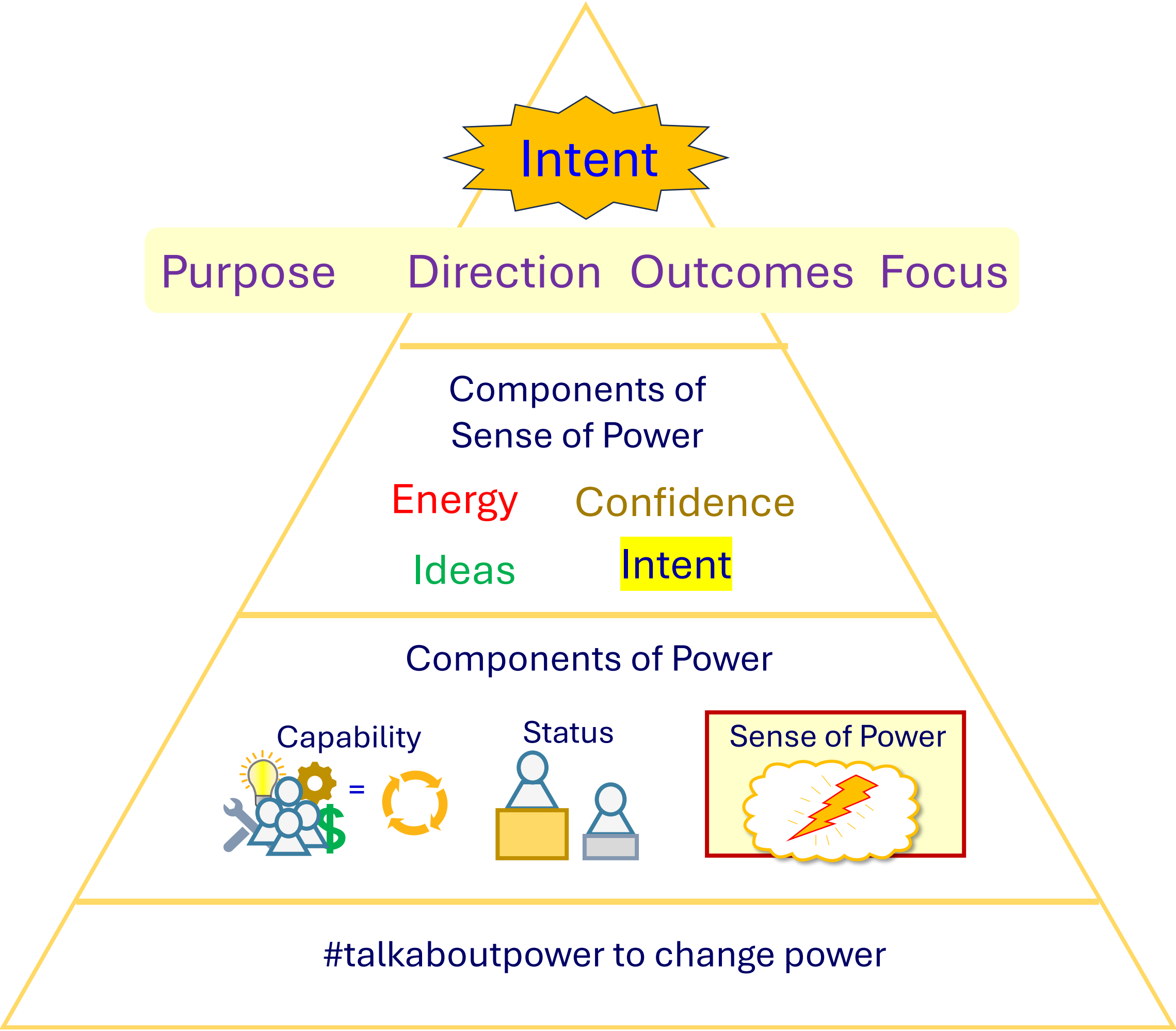
Think about where you might have experienced these states from the graph.

Think about where people you support or know about might have felt those states from the graph.

No need to add comments unless you're comfortable doing so.

	Low Clarity (Ideas + Intent)	High Clarity (Ideas + Intent)
High Energy (Strength + Confidence)	<u>Restless / Impulsive</u>	<u>Focused / Strong Sense of Power</u>
Low Energy (Strength + Confidence)	<u>Disengaged / Muddled</u>	<u>Latent Power</u>

Sense of power: Intent is the key



Intent is the mental state that organizes capability toward performance.

Desire says, “I want it.”

Intent says, “I am going to act toward it.”

If power is the ability to influence change, intent gives power its direction.

If you can generate intent, you can use it to develop all the other components of power.

Working with power

Develop your sense of power.

- Notice it and bring it into awareness
- Strength + Confidence + Ideas + Intent
- Test beliefs against actual capability
- Pay attention to changes in your sense of power

Develop your intent

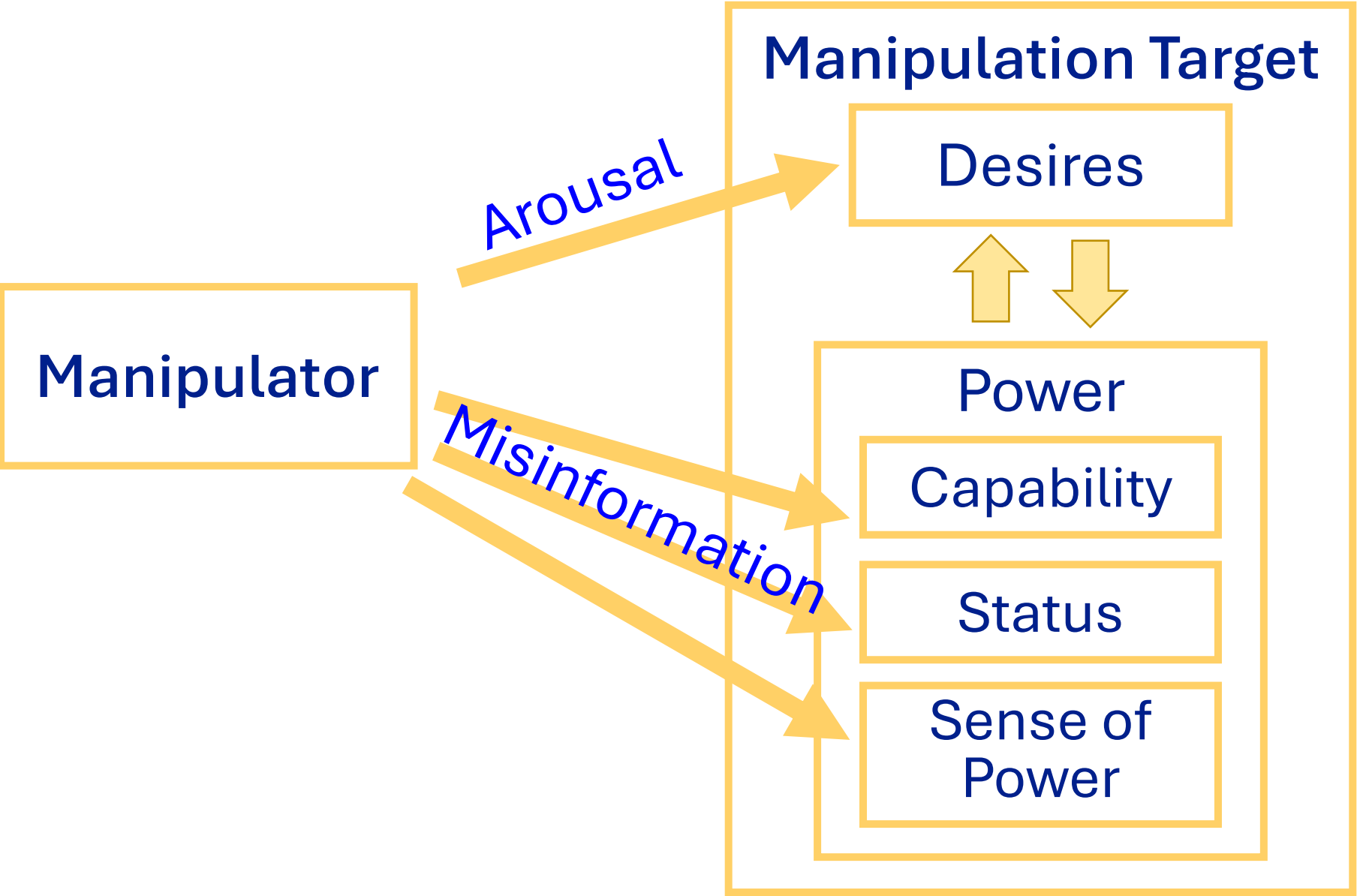
- Explore your purpose
- Choose a direction
- Decide on outcomes
- Focus on focus

Can you generate an intent to have a strong, healthy sense of power?

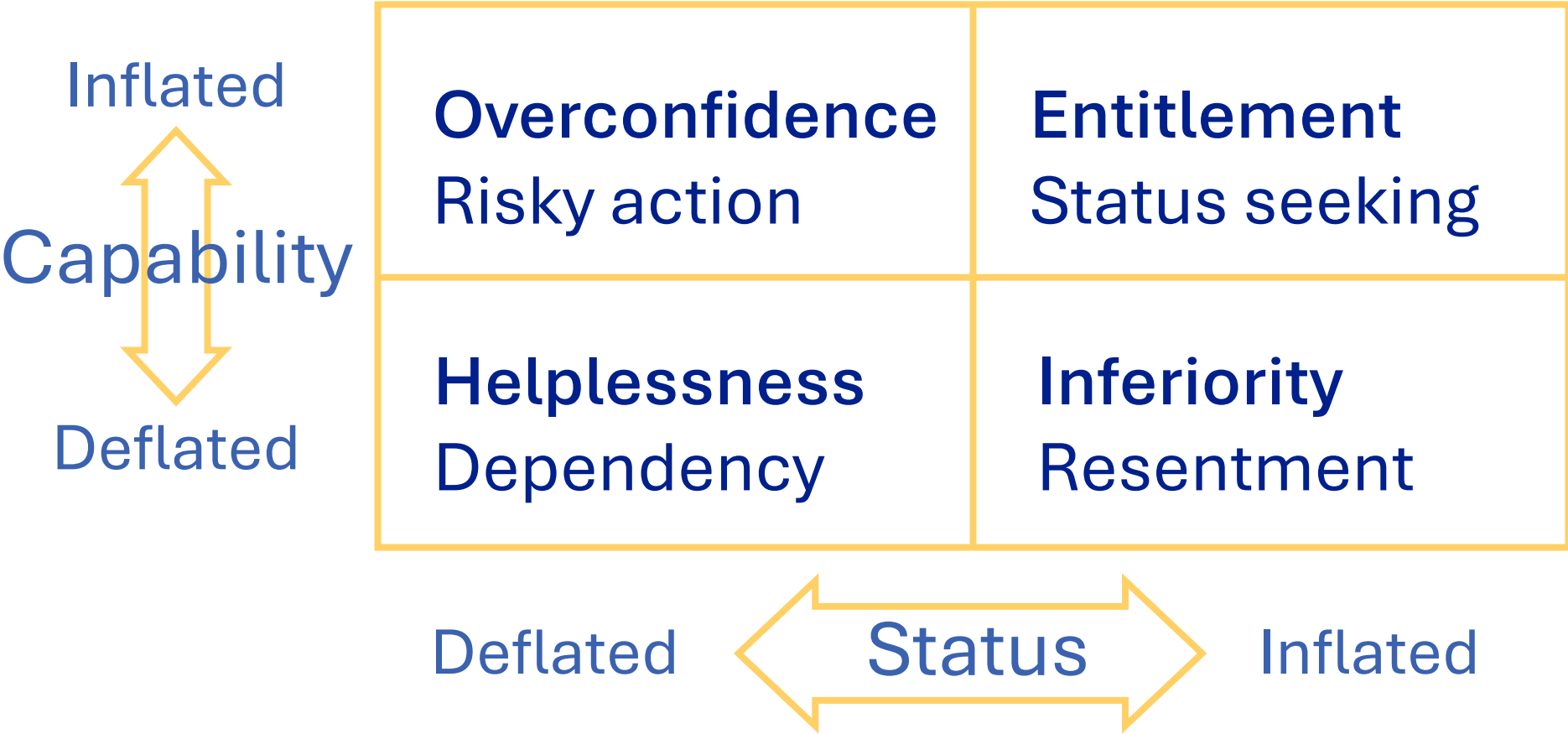
What might you do with a stronger sense of power?

Sense of power can be a target for manipulation

Manipulator Tactics



Manipulator Goals

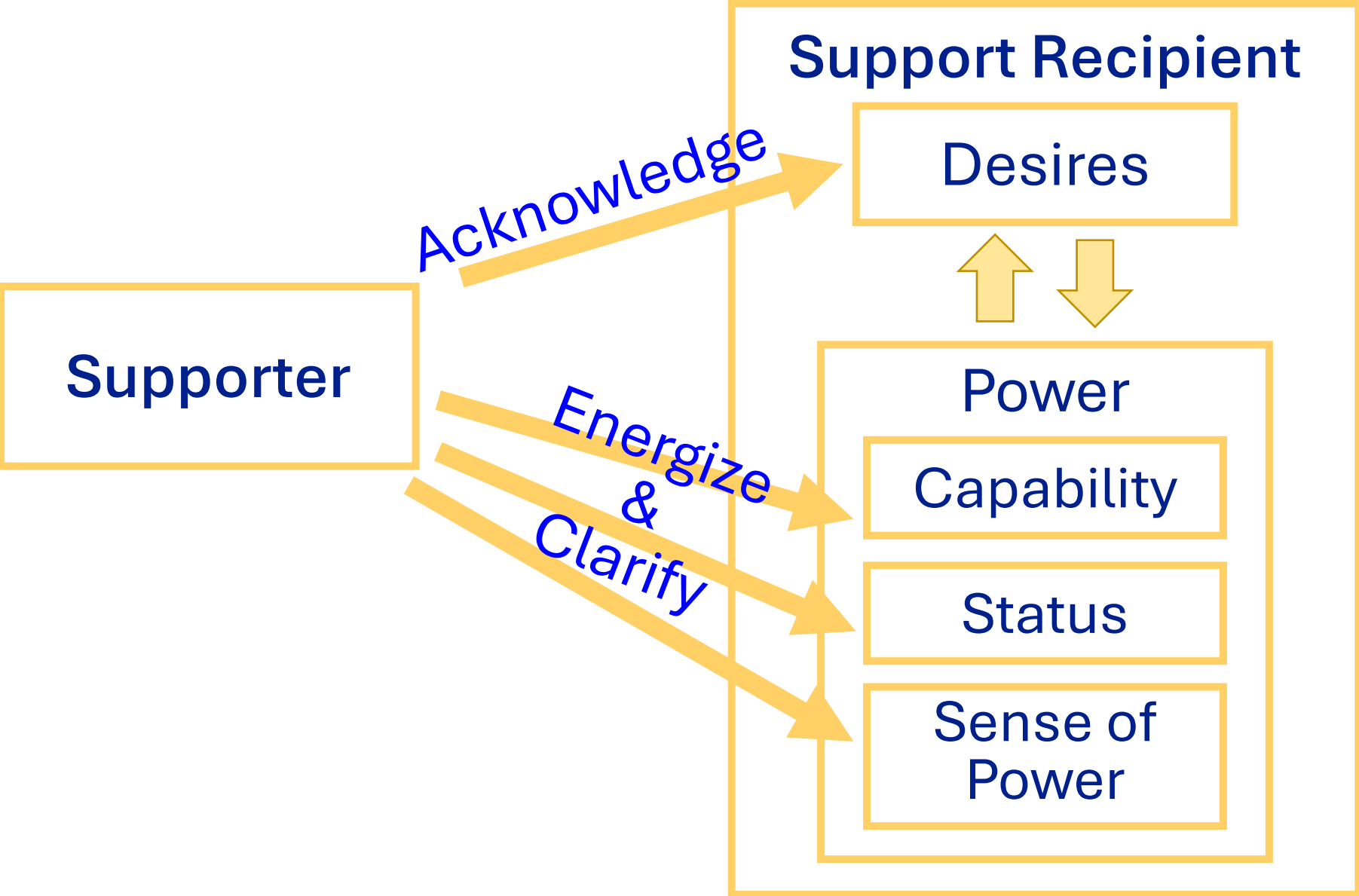


Applies to:

- Office politics
- Civic politics
- Marketing
- Propaganda

Sense of power can be a focus for support

Supporter Actions



Supporter Goals

	Capability	Status
Energize	Confidence Initiative	Recognition Belonging
Clarify	Realistic Ability Options	Realistic Standing Expectations

- Applies to:
- Coaching
 - Teaching
 - Leadership
 - Caregiving

Interaction

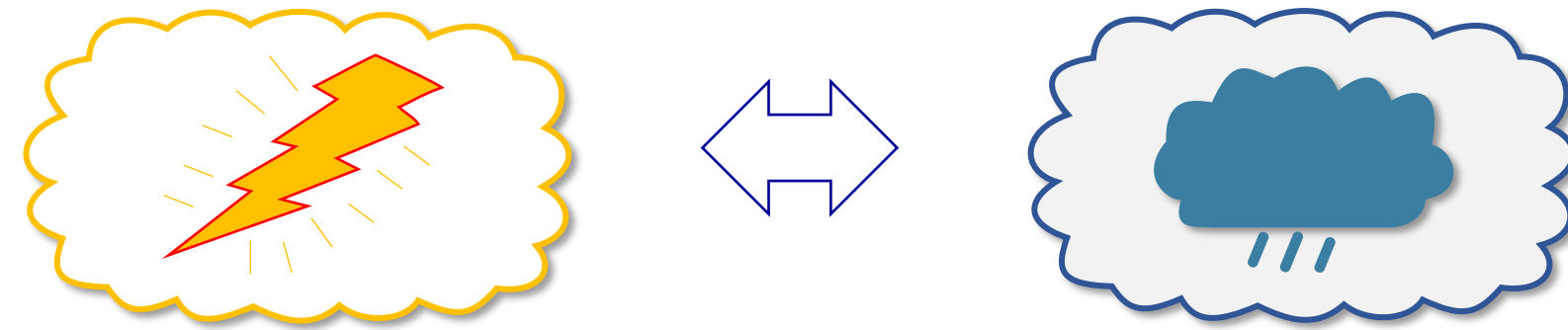
Think of a situation in which manipulation seemed to be occurring.

Can you see the dynamics in the model: arousal or misinformation affecting capability, status, or sense of power?

Then think of a situation in which someone was genuinely supportive.

Can you see how acknowledgment, energizing, and clarification can support capability, status, and sense of power?

Part 6 – Sense of Power in Power - Complete



Continue with Part 7 – Summary and Further Perspectives

How to talk about power

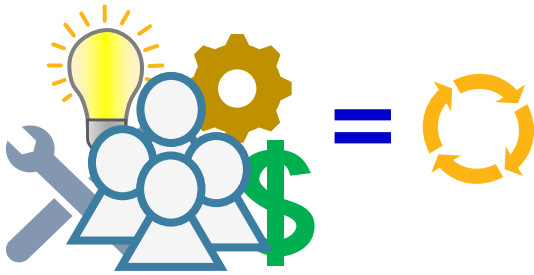
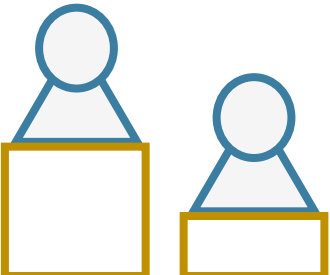
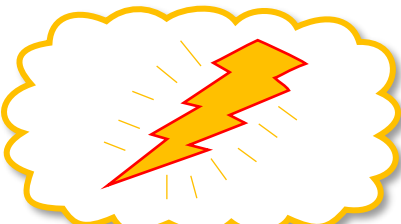
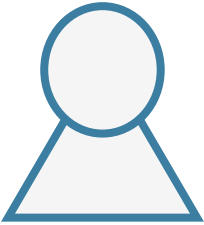
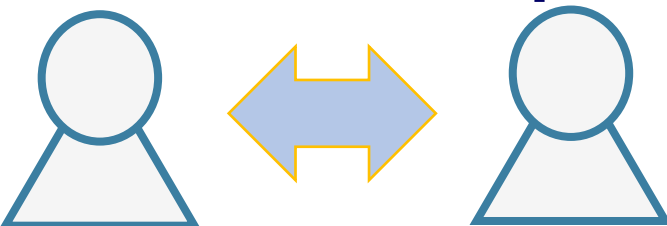
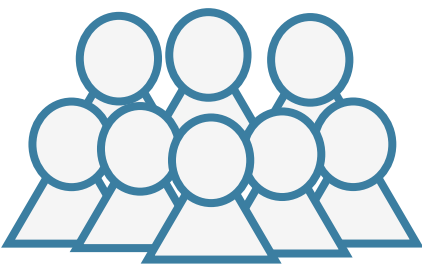
A practical framework for understanding social power

Part 7 – Summary and Further Perspectives

- What the framework shows
- Where the framework can lead

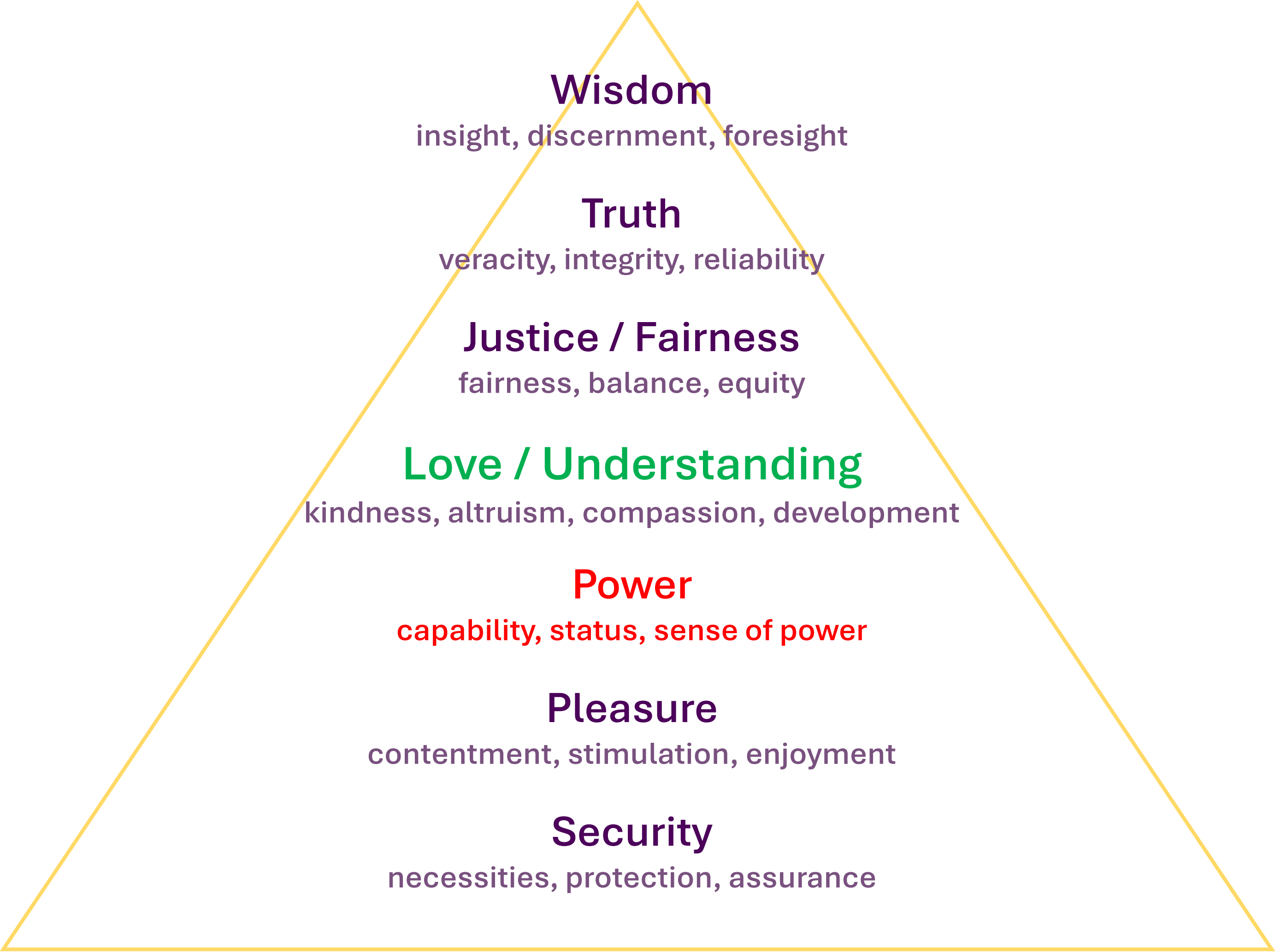
Power takes many forms and has many uses

Common understandings and uses

Components ➡ Areas of Activity ⬇	Capability 	Status 	Sense of Power 
	This framework gives us a way to locate and describe what is happening with power.		
Relationship 			
Group 			

- Power-as-Capability (“power-to”) (the general ability to cause, control & prevent change)
- Power-as-Command (“power-over”) (as in organizational authority or inter-personal dominance)
- Power-as-Insight (“power-to-perceive”) (as in the resolving power of a microscope or telescope)
- Power-as-Combined-Effort (“power-with”) (all of the above, in *coordinated* groups)
- Crowd Power (“power-among”) (many people, *not* coordinated)

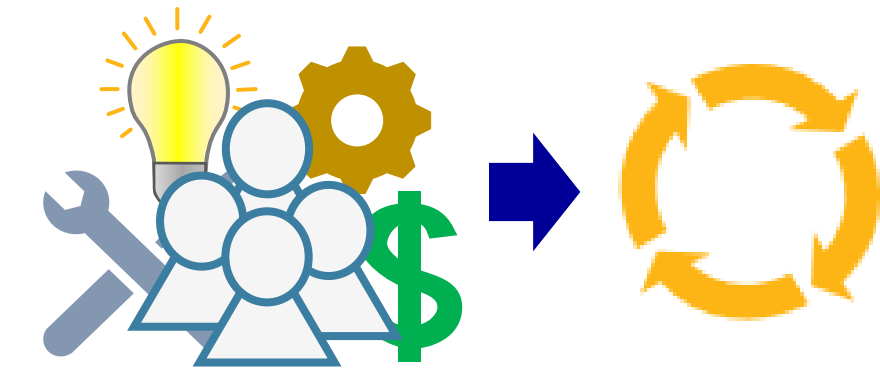
Power is involved in many human values



The taboo operates differently across the three components of power

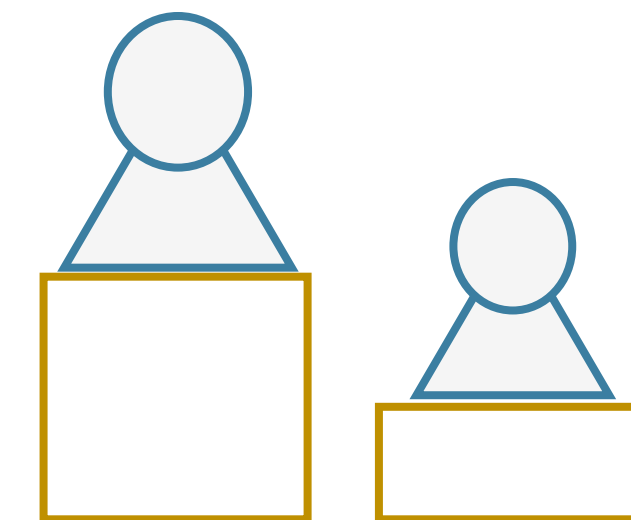
Capability

Relatively easy to discuss as skills, resources, authority, money, connections, etc.—but less comfortable to explicitly name those things as **power**.



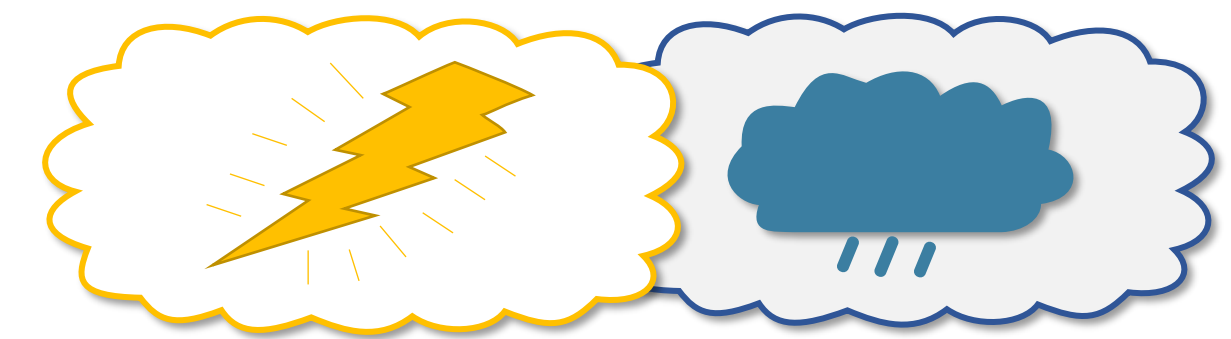
Status

Perhaps closest to the heart of the taboo. People continuously perceive and negotiate relative standing, while directly naming who is higher, lower, gaining, or losing standing is strongly inhibited. Even privately acknowledging how much status matters can be uncomfortable.



Sense of power

Largely internal and invisible. Because the experience itself is seldom named as power, people have relatively little language for noticing or discussing it.



Another way to think about the framework

Going back to mental modeling, and a systems perspective, the psychology of power can be related to basic functions of mind, ones that may be familiar from Jungian psychology:

• Sensation • Feeling • Thinking • Intuition • Extraversion • Introversion

Sensation provides information about what is happening. *How are our interests being served? No sense data => no interest tracking.*

Feeling evaluates what is happening in relation to our interests. Sense of power is not just data, it is an internal “meter” that *alerts us through feeling* to where we stand and how we’re doing. *No awareness of feeling => no conscious sense of power.*

Thinking models cause and effect, i.e. what can produce what, and is therefore *fundamental to capability*. *No cause and effect thinking => no modeled capability.*

Intuition, Extraversion and Introversion support the basis for Status: patterns of relationships, comparison with others, sense of self-worth.
No complex social modeling => no sense of status.

Further perspectives using this framework

- Consider how power is delegated in concentric circles in a hierarchical organization. Now consider how influence operates on informal networks across organization-level boundaries.
- Consider how a nonprofit founder's commitment to the mission can gradually become entangled with over-control of the organization.
- Consider that an inaccurate sense of power can generate unnecessary worry. People may worry about outcomes they actually have substantial ability to influence, or fail to stop thinking about situations that they know that they have no ability to control.
- Consider that manipulation is an exercise of power. It works by shaping another person's perceptions, emotions, choices, or sense of available options, often without making the influence fully visible.
- Consider that caring can be an expression of power. Helping, protecting, teaching, supporting, and enabling others can all be ways of applying capability and status toward effects that matter.

Further perspectives using this framework

If sense of power involves Feeling, what is the relationship between empathy and power?

If status affects our sense of power, what happens when status differences become embedded in organizations and institutions?

If sense of power depends partly on beliefs, who or what shapes those beliefs?

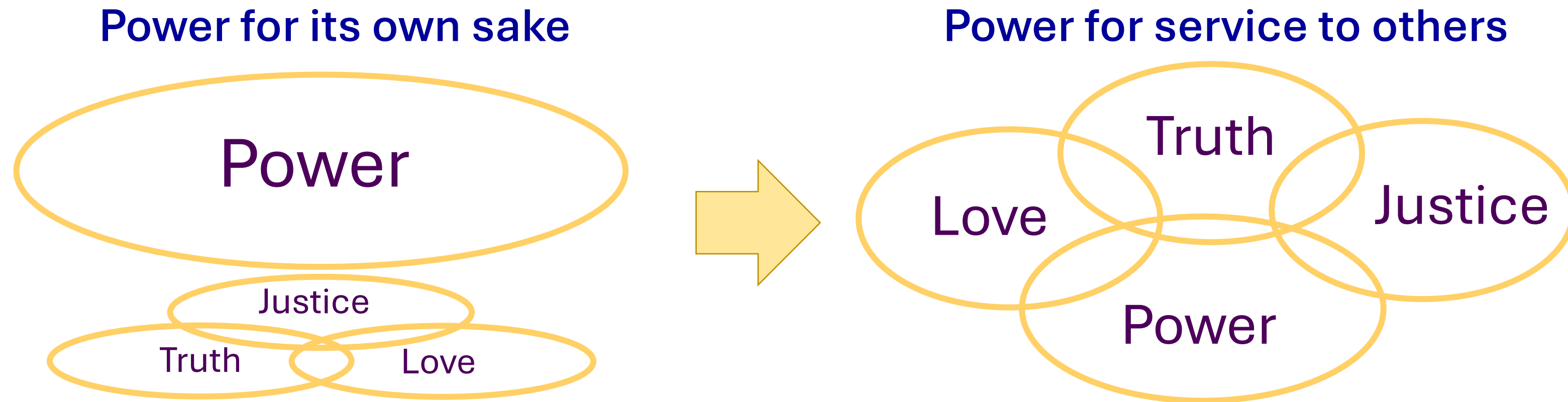
If capability, status, and sense of power interact, what happens when power becomes highly concentrated?

How much of the defense of freedom and autonomy is driven by the need to preserve a sense of power?

What becomes visible when we start talking about power?

Further perspectives using this framework

Consider how power operates differently when it is pursued for its own sake versus used in service of other values.



- What happens when the pursuit of truth, love, and justice lacks the power needed to put them into effect?
- What happens when the pursuit of those values ignores existing power dynamics?

Power is inherently neither good nor bad.
The question is what interests and values it serves.

End of Part 7

**This concludes
How to Talk About Power Training**

**Please see the slide deck for
references and further reading.**

Thanks for watching!

How to talk about power

A practical framework for understanding social power

Part 8 – References and Further Reading

References and Further Reading

Broad influences and perspectives (things the author has read or reviewed)

Heinberg, Richard. *Power: Limits and Prospects for Human Survival*. New Society Publishers, 2021.

(A major though later influence for validation and integration; reread three times. This firmly connects power to systems.)

A broad treatment of power across biological, social, economic, and technological systems. Probably the closest of these books to treating power as a pervasive systems phenomenon.

Keltner, Dacher. *The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence*. Penguin Press, 2016.

(A major influence for status and sense of power; reread several times.)

Particularly useful on the behavioral and psychological effects of having power and on the ways power can undermine the social capacities that helped someone acquire it.

Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. “Power Failure in Management Circuits.” *Harvard Business Review* 57, no. 4

(July–August 1979): 65–75.

(A particularly important early validation of the idea that power is difficult to discuss openly.)

Argues that power is widely treated as socially suspect or embarrassing while remaining essential to organizational effectiveness. Especially useful for the claim that power is taboo and that avoiding explicit discussion of it can itself produce dysfunction.

Domhoff, G. William. *Who Rules America?* First published 1967; subsequently revised through multiple editions.

(Only delved into the website; validation that there was something to write about.)

A systematic examination of who holds power in the United States and how power operates through economic, political, organizational, and social networks.

Pfeffer, Jeffrey. *Power: Why Some People Have It—and Others Don't*. Harper Business, 2010.

(A very different approach to personal power from the one taken here. Couldn't finish reading it out of objection to the goal.)

Practical, organizational, and explicitly concerned with acquiring and using power. Useful partly because of that contrast.

Russell, Bertrand. *Power: A New Social Analysis*. George Allen & Unwin, 1938.

(An early “primary document” for social power; validation for continued work on the framework; only skimmed.)

An early attempt to treat power as a fundamental explanatory concept in social life rather than merely as a feature of government or politics. Reviews evidence that power-related processes can operate without deliberate conscious awareness and can affect cognition and behavior.

(continues)

The following have been Recommended by AI after development of the framework (the framework author has not read or reviewed these; the comments on relevance to this framework are by AI)

Why these have not been read by the author, and why include them if they haven't been read.

While author respects academic research, author's experience is that excessive intellectual examination distracts from perception of experience. Academic credibility is not the primary route to the broad impact that is the author's goal. They are included to show convergence with existing research, and for people who want deeper insight into social power in general.

Keltner, Dacher, Deborah H. Gruenfeld, and Cameron Anderson. "Power, Approach, and Inhibition." *Psychological Review* 110, no. 2 (2003): 265–284.

Particularly relevant. Develops the approach/inhibition theory of power: elevated power tends to activate approach, positive affect, attention to rewards, and less inhibited action, while reduced power tends toward threat sensitivity and inhibition. This has substantial overlap with the experiential effects of power discussed in this training.

Gruenfeld, Deborah H. *Acting with Power: Why We Are More Powerful Than We Believe*. Currency, 2020.

Particularly relevant. A contemporary treatment of the discomfort and moral unease surrounding power.

Examines why people often associate power with domination, corruption, or abuse and therefore hesitate to recognize or exercise their own power. Particularly relevant to separating power itself from its misuse and to understanding power as a normal feature of social interaction.

Anderson, Cameron, Oliver P. John, and Dacher Keltner. “The Personal Sense of Power.” *Journal of Personality* 80, no. 2 (2012): 313–344.

Directly relevant. Develops and tests the *Personal Sense of Power* construct and scale: people's subjective experience of their ability to influence others and affect outcomes. The research finds that Sense of Power varies by social context and is related to, but not determined by, structural position and status

French, John R. P., Jr., and Bertram Raven. “The Bases of Social Power.” In *Studies in Social Power*, edited by Dorwin Cartwright. University of Michigan, 1959.

The classic taxonomy of reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert power. Still useful for thinking about where interpersonal power comes from.

Magee, Joe C., and Adam D. Galinsky. “Social Hierarchy: The Self-Reinforcing Nature of Power and Status.” *Academy of Management Annals* 2, no. 1 (2008): 351–398.

Especially relevant to the distinction between power and status. Treats them as related but conceptually distinct dimensions of social hierarchy and examines how each becomes self-reinforcing.

Guinote, Ana. “How Power Affects People: Activating, Wanting, and Goal Seeking.” *Annual Review of Psychology* 68 (2017): 353–381.

Particularly relevant—and a striking point of convergence. Reviews research connecting power with activation and energy, confidence, cognition and attention, wanting, goals, and action. Several of these correspond closely to phenomena incorporated into the TAP Sense of Power framework.

Smith, Pamela K., and Adam D. Galinsky. “The Nonconscious Nature of Power: Cues and Consequences.” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4, no. 10 (2010): 918–938.

Relevant to the experiential premise of the training. Reviews evidence that power-related processes can operate without deliberate conscious awareness and can affect cognition and behavior.

Bandura, Albert. “Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change.” *Psychological Review* 84, no. 2 (1977): 191–215.

The foundational treatment of self-efficacy: people's beliefs about their ability to perform actions required to produce outcomes. **Related to, but not the same as, Sense of Power.**

Moore, James W. “What Is the Sense of Agency and Why Does It Matter?” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (2016): 1272.

A useful introduction to *sense of agency*—the subjective experience of controlling one's actions and their consequences. **Another close neighbor to Sense of Power, but a narrower construct.**

Diamond, Julie. *Power: A User's Guide*. Belly Song Press, 2016.

A practical treatment of power and rank in interpersonal and organizational settings. More experiential than much of the academic literature and therefore adjacent to some of the concerns of this training.

Galinsky, Adam D., Derek D. Rucker, and Joe C. Magee. “Power: Past Findings, Present Considerations, and Future Directions.” In *APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 3: Interpersonal Relations*, edited by Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver. American Psychological Association, 2015.

A broad review of the psychological power literature, including the antecedents and consequences of subjective experiences of power

Anderson, Cameron, John Angus D. Hildreth, and Laura Howland. “Is the Desire for Status a Fundamental Human Motive? A Review of the Empirical Literature.” *Psychological Bulletin* 141, no. 3 (2015): 574–601.

Useful background for the Status portion of the framework, particularly the importance people place on relative social standing and the consequences of gaining or losing it.

Damasio, Antonio. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Not a book about social power. Included because of its treatment of feeling, bodily state, and consciousness, which provides useful background for thinking about the subjective experience of power.

Ownership and Permitted Use

© 2026 ActionMap Inc. **Talk About Power™**. All rights reserved.

This material may be viewed, shared, and used for personal learning, discussion, noncommercial education, and internal organizational development and training.

Internal use is permitted within an organization, including a commercial organization, provided the material is not sold, licensed, or used as part of a paid service provided to others.

Please retain attribution to **ActionMap Inc.** when sharing or presenting the material.

External paid training, consulting, republication, modification, or incorporation into commercial products or services requires permission.