



ACTION INSIGHTS

Eight Types of Power City Leaders Can Use When Negotiating

By Brian S. Mandell, Stephen Petraeus, Guhan Subramanian, Lisa Cox

FEBRUARY 5, 2024

RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR CITY LEADERS

City leaders often feel their hands are tied in multiparty negotiations, but a [study](#) supported by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative offers a framework for analyzing power in public negotiations that can help mayors and their staff develop a strong negotiation strategy.

Do you know your full arsenal of power moves when you're getting to the negotiating table? Are you leaving value on the table for your city when bargaining with private sector parties, non-profits, or other government entities? As we argue in a recent [academic article](#), negotiations in the public sphere demand a specific lens on how power is distributed and how it can be garnered, especially to support a mayor's policy agenda and make a difference in constituents' lives.

Every day, cities and their leaders are at the center of negotiations large and small, from simple [procurement contracts for grass mowing](#) to [large-scale public-private partnerships for building a subway line](#). And while some citizens might think that mayors wield untold formal power, many times it's the informal power, or a mixture of the two, that ultimately gets a negotiation to the finish line with constituents' interests served.

Where City Leaders' Power Lies

Understanding the eight types of power at a public official's disposal can help city leaders more exhaustively analyze their own power—and that of others—when preparing for the trenches of a negotiation. See the table below for definitions of the eight types of power at play in a public negotiation.

| TYPES OF POWER | DEFINITION |
|-----------------------|---|
| FORMAL POWER | |
| Institutional | Authority granted to an individual by virtue of their job title or position within an institution |
| Convening | Ability to bring groups together while retaining control of the agenda |
| Veto | Ability to stop a deal unilaterally, often through a legislative or administrative process |
| Shift | Ability to switch between multiple types of acceptable deals without incurring a personal or political cost |
| INFORMAL POWER | |
| Moral suasion | The ability to reframe a negotiation in a moral or ethical light that is favorable or unfavorable to one alternative |
| Nuisance | A party's ability to draw attention to themselves, even if they have relatively little power in the larger negotiation context |
| MIXED POWER | |
| Momentum | Power that flows from the perceived progress of an actor's chosen alternative and the attachment of others to that course of action |
| Coalitional | Power based on an actor's preexisting ability to tap into a large network of allies and direct their resources toward a cause |

Formal power might be what first comes to mind when one thinks of the influence of the mayor's office. We differentiate broad formal power into four subtypes: institutional power, convening power, veto power, and shift power. Institutional power might include a mayor's ability to focus on certain problems and influence the public agenda or to broadcast (or limit) certain messages, such as what's included (or not included) in a mayor's first 100 days plan. A mayor might leverage convening power by bringing together stakeholders and controlling the meeting agenda, e.g., leaving off or adding in certain discussion topics. Meanwhile, veto power might be brandished as a threat to change the negotiating field or leveraged to prevent an unacceptable deal. Mayors generally have low shift power, since they can't be seen "flip-flopping" or treating different parties unequally.

Formal power might be what first comes to mind when one thinks of the influence of the mayor's office.

Informal power, though less straightforward and more nuanced than formal power, is just as important

Informal power, though less straightforward and more nuanced than formal power, is just as important, and it includes moral suasion power and nuisance power. Moral suasion power is especially relevant in the public realm, as it tends to deal with more controversial topics that may turn on moral or ethical arguments. Moral suasion is also available to weaker parties, and if expertly wielded, can, for example, secure a "seat at the table" for someone

who was not party to a negotiation at the start. Nuisance power allows a group with no formal role in a negotiation to potentially change the narrative. For example, individuals without formal authority, such as grassroots activists, can call attention to a specific issue through protests, the media, or other negative publicity. Even using nuisance power as a threat can be a potent tool in negotiations.

Mixed power includes momentum power and coalitional power. Momentum power may take the form of earmarking funds for a project to send the message that the project is happening, a perception that could assist in rallying support. Coalitional power is a blend of formal authority and personal relationships. For example, a well-connected mayor can call on a diverse group of allies and other stakeholders to direct their resources to a larger cause. Coalitional power paired with nuisance power can create a formidable agent for change.

The City Leaders' Power Move Checklist

Given the growing expectation for city leaders to navigate and negotiate complex, multiparty issues and the increasing role of public-private partnerships at the municipal level, reflecting on different types of power in public negotiations could prove beneficial to city leaders. Below, we outline several suggestions:

Be prepared

Ideally, before a negotiation, a mayor or city leader will have evaluated the formal, mixed, and informal power held by each party to assess the balance of power. This will inform a city leader's initial strategy, even if new events and new parties require changing the strategy along the way.

Build relationships

Well-connected mayors can more quickly rally support and get their messages amplified, which can be extremely advantageous when exercising power such as momentum power, coalitional power, and nuisance power. While a mayor and other city leaders can certainly build relationships throughout a negotiation, having a base to call on before negotiations have even started can save precious time during the throes of a negotiation.

Limit one type of power to strengthen another

For example, low shift power can allow for increased moral suasion power. That is to say, while standing your ground limits your flexibility, putting forth moral or ethical reasons for doing so can allow you to authenticate and better leverage moral suasion power.

Consider two-level games

In two-level games (the iterative process between separate negotiations that influence each other), leverage your knowledge of both arenas and sequence your actions to help you build power. City leaders may also want to consider which parties are included at which levels to identify overlap and to assess the barriers and opportunities at each level. For example, when a state governor vetoes legislation, it can affect the choices and decisions of that state's mayors in their negotiations.

Leverage power parity

If one party falsely thinks that they hold an outsized portion of the power, it may be advantageous to show counterparties that the power is more balanced than they might think. When negotiators know that their power is matched, they are more likely to work toward an alternative that is mutually acceptable to more parties.

Ultimately, no matter how simple or complex a city leader's negotiation is, having a sense of where different types of power lie can be beneficial to driving a political agenda and achieving the best outcome for a city leader's constituents.

Further Readings

[“Sources of Power in Public Negotiations: A Framework Applied to Public-Public and Public-Private Negotiations”](#)

Negotiation Journal

[“The Queen City’s Collective and Compassionate Approach: Fighting Opioids and Homelessness in the Granite State” Teaching Case](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

[Negotiation Teaching Case Set](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

Action Insights summarize findings from academic research. They offer management and leadership guidance you can put to use in your work, and they link to the underlying studies.

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, located at the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University, is a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies to equip mayors and senior city officials to tackle complex challenges in their cities and improve the quality of life of their residents.

Launched in 2017, the Initiative has worked with 465 mayors and 2271 senior city officials in 524 cities worldwide. The Initiative advances research and develops new curriculum and teaching tools to help city leaders solve real-world problems. By engaging Harvard graduate students in research and field work, the Initiative supports current city leaders while investing in future generations. The Initiative also advances the field of city leadership through teaching, research, and new curricular materials that help city leaders drive government performance and address pressing social problems.



Scan to read this
document online.
Revised 02/2024



**BLOOMBERG
CENTER FOR CITIES
HARVARD UNIVERSITY**

BLOOMBERG | City
HARVARD | Leadership
Initiative

A publication of the
Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative
79 JFK Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138 USA

cityleadership.harvard.edu
cityleadership_research@harvard.edu