Chris Lipp: The Science of Personal Power

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Chris Lipp is a professor of practice and director of the Freeman School's Management Communication program.

Twenty years ago as an engineer in a semiconductor company, Chris Lipp had an epiphany about personal power.

He was recently promoted into managing $100 million in revenue. He was walking into a meeting, and he was nervous.

“It was a different environment than engineering,” he recalls. “I was speaking with a sales team. All of a sudden. I had to earn respect again.”

But an unexpected thing happened. As he started to speak, everybody locked eyes on him. “For a few minutes, I owned that room,” he says

“In the background of my mind, I was saying to myself, ‘I'm doing something right here. Where did this come from? How do I do this again?’”

His quest for an answer steered his career in a radically different direction: business communication. Today, he’s a Professor of Practice and Director of Management Communication at Tulane University’s A.B. Freeman School of Business.

After two previous books about pitching and persuasion, he’s publishing his third and most personal communication book, titled The Science of Personal Power: How to Build Confidence, Create Success and Obtain Freedom (Wiley).

Projecting Personal Power

To Lipp, personal power is not a technique of communication. It’s a mindset.

“Personal power is how we feel about our own capability to create impact,” he says. “It's an internal subconscious belief that is expressed through our thoughts and behaviors.”

The mindset of personal power works both inside and outside the speaker, he says. It makes them feel positive about themselves, it also commands attention and motivates others.

Lipp stresses that his readers don’t have to take his word for it. Every principle in his book is backed by research.

He cites one experiment in which test subjects were first conditioned to feel either powerful or powerless. Then, they were left alone with a fan blowing straight in their faces, with a hidden camera recording their reactions. Subjects who felt powerful were twice as likely to move the fan or turn it off.

A follow-up study found that those who moved the fan were more likely to be rated as managers by observers than those who sat doing nothing. Says Lipp, “People saw someone who moved the fan as someone who took action on their environment. They saw that person as more powerful.”

To Lipp, personal power is a core quality behind many popular leadership strategies.

“It’s the unifying force that underlies courage, leadership, resilience, inclusivity, authenticity, and pathways to formal power,” he says “We treat these branches as separate, but they all arise from the same trunk.”

To Engineer Understanding

Lipp began his career motivating electrons rather than people. After growing up in the San Francisco Bay area, he got an electrical engineering degree from the University of California, Berkeley. He spent four years with the semiconductor equipment company Applied Materials.

As he rose in the ranks, he found it challenging to explain himself to non-engineers. “That’s how I moved into communication,” he says. “ I really wanted to understand how I could engineer people's understanding and acceptance of my ideas.”

That interest led Lipp to later earn a master’s in social psychology. He put his emerging communications skills to work coaching MBA students at nearby Stanford, but he quickly realized he needed a more specialized niche.

He found it in Silicon Valley. He spent a year observing entrepreneurs pitch their startup ideas to venture capitalists. He distilled their successes into his first book, “The Startup Pitch.”

The book presented a four-part formula that’s now used in pitches worldwide. Lipp describes it as, “You start with the problem, then you move to the solution. Then you move to the market, and finally end with how you capture that market. It’s all about

structure. And in each step, you must communicate value.

As he coached entrepreneurs at companies like Microsoft and Google, he also taught at nearby colleges. He found a synergy between theory and practice, classroom and boardroom, developing ideas in one setting and trying them out in the other.

It’s a synergy he’s brought to the Freeman School in New Orleans, since he was recruited in 2023 to revamp its management communications program.

Learning From Experience

Lipp calls his vision for the program “experiential learning.” He explains, “We want to ensure that students get the experience of business. They don't just walk out of academia thinking like an academic.”

A business communications course has to be relevant to doing business, he says. “Students don't just learn to communicate better,they learn to communicate in order to achieve impact and get results.”

Experience also means partnering with New Orleans area companies, helping students learn by confronting practical challenges.

In one communication course, the final project is to reach out to a local business and devise a plan for solving a business problem. The student writes the proposal, execute the project, and present the resultsin class,. Says Lipp, “They’re working with real businesses, doing something that is going to benefit the community.”

He sees personal power as yet another facet of experiential learning, and he plans to base a course on his new book.

“I could teach you all the resume skills and interviewing skills in the world,” he says. “But if I spend just five minutes with you before you go into an interview, and I get you tapped into your personal power, research shows that you’re twice as likely to

get the job.”

But personal power isn’t just about getting external results, he tells students. It’s also about internal results.

“It’s nice to gain something external, like success,” he says. “But personal power is ultimately about feeling a positive relationship with the world. Having more confidence, a greater sense of control, and more optimism in life.”

Explore Business Communications and More

To compete in today’s business environment, graduates need to combine hands-on experience with classroom instruction. A program like those at Tulane University's Freeman School of Business offers the best of both modes of learning. Instructors have extensive business backgrounds, while students can take advantage of the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Greater New Orleans. Learn more about how such a program can empower you to start, manage, or expand a company: to have an impact in the rewarding world of business.