**Reading: Types of Authority**

**Types of Authority**

Authority refers to accepted power—that is, power that people agree to follow. People listen to authority figures because they feel that these individuals are worthy of respect. Generally speaking, people perceive the objectives and demands of an authority figure as reasonable and beneficial, or true.

Not all authority figures are police officers, elected officials or government authorities. Besides formal offices, authority can arise from tradition and personal qualities. Economist and sociologist Max Weber realized this when he examined individual action as it relates to authority, as well as large-scale structures of authority and how they relate to a society’s economy. Based on this work, Weber developed a classification system for authority. His three types of authority are traditional authority, charismatic authority and legal-rational authority (Weber 1922).

|  |
| --- |
| **Max Weber identified and explained three distinct types of authority:** |
| **Weber’s Three Types of Authority** |
|  | **Traditional** | **Charismatic** | **Legal-Rational** |
| **Source of Power** | Legitimized by long-standing custom | Based on a leader’s personal qualities | Authority resides in the office, not the person |
| **Leadership Style** | Historic personality | Dynamic personality | Bureaucratic officials |
| **Example** | Patriarchy (traditional positions of authority) | Napoleon, Jesus Christ, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr. | U.S. presidency and Congress |
|   |
| Modern British Parliament |

**Traditional Authority**

According to Weber, the power of traditional authority is accepted because that has traditionally been the case; its legitimacy exists because it has been accepted for a long time. Britain’s Queen Elizabeth, for instance, occupies a position that she inherited based on the traditional rules of succession for the monarchy. People adhere to traditional authority because they are invested in the past and feel obligated to perpetuate it. In this type of authority, a ruler typically has no real force to carry out his will or maintain his position but depends primarily on a group’s respect.

Traditional authority can be intertwined with race, class, and gender. In most societies, for instance, men are more likely to be privileged than women and thus are more likely to hold roles of authority. Similarly, members of dominant racial groups or upper-class families also win respect more readily. In the United States, the Kennedy family, which has produced many prominent politicians, exemplifies this model.

**Charismatic Authority**

Followers accept the power of charismatic authority because they are drawn to the leader’s personal qualities. The appeal of a charismatic leader can be extraordinary, and can inspire followers to make unusual sacrifices or to persevere in the midst of great hardship and persecution. Charismatic leaders usually emerge in times of crisis and offer innovative or radical solutions. They may even offer a vision of a new world order. Hitler’s rise to power in the postwar economic depression of Germany is an example.

Charismatic leaders tend to hold power for short durations, and according to Weber, they are just as likely to be tyrannical as they are heroic. Diverse male leaders such as Hitler, Napoleon, and Winston Churchill are all considered charismatic leaders.

**Rational-Legal Authority**

According to Weber, power made legitimate by laws, written rules, and regulations is termed rational-legal authority. In this type of authority, power is vested in a particular rationale, system, or ideology and not necessarily in the person who implements the specifics of that doctrine. A nation that follows a constitution applies this type of authority. On a smaller scale, you might encounter rational-legal authority in the workplace via the standards set forth in the employee handbook, which provides a different type of authority than that of your boss.