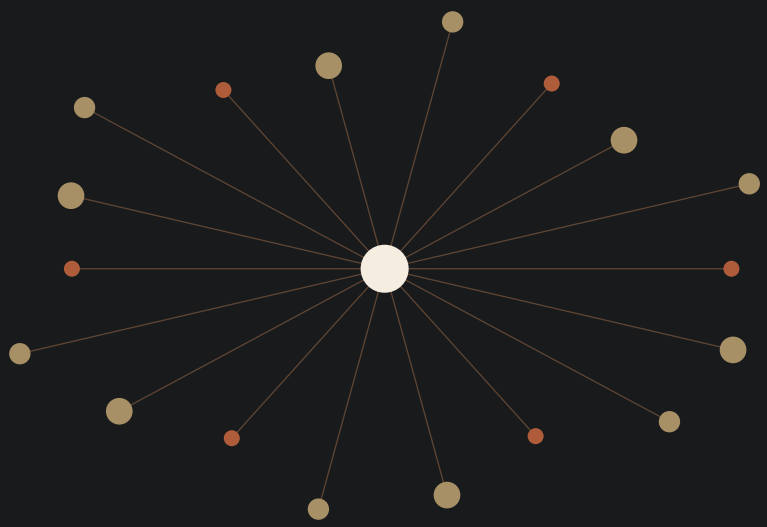
24 FORMS / 12 PARADOXES / 6 INVESTIGATIONS

POWER.

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE FORCES THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES



AN ORIGINAL PUBLICATION / SAHIL TAYAL / 2026

START HERE

A field map, not a hierarchy.

Read it in sequence, or enter anywhere. Each page is an invitation to inspect relationships rather than rank people.

01	Introduction and method	03–04
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Method labels: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK identifies a lens, ILLUSTRATIVE SCENARIO signals a fictional teaching example, and OPEN QUESTION means an investigation rather than a settled result.

WHY POWER?

Not one thing. Not one ladder.

A working definition for readers of organisations, relationships, design, politics and everyday life.

THE QUESTION BENEATH THE TITLE

Power is the changing relationship between what we can do, what others can do, and the conditions that make either possible. This is a practical starting definition, not a consensus shared by every theorist in this guide.

POWER OVER, POWER TO, POWER WITH

Power over concerns influence or control in a relationship. Power to concerns capabilities and the feasible actions available to a person. Power with concerns capacities created by coordination. These distinctions overlap but reveal different ethical questions.

WHY A FIELD GUIDE?

An atlas can make power less mysterious without claiming to settle it. We can locate a resource, examine a rule, distinguish evidence from assumptions, ask who may refuse and assess consequences for people affected.

THE POWER OF ORDINARY ATTENTION

Ask who opens the room, who can change the time of a meeting, who pays for a bad decision and whose labour lets everyone else arrive. The everyday scale makes abstract theory inspectable.

TRY THIS TODAY

Notice three decisions in which no one explicitly gave an order. What default, dependency or social expectation made the behaviour likely?

HOW TO READ

Evidence is not a mood.

Clear labels help separate claims from the lenses used to make sense of them.

ESTABLISHED FINDING

A claim backed by adequate empirical evidence for a specified setting. This guide rarely makes such claims because examples here are primarily educational.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A coherent account of how influence, authority, capability or social structures operate. Different theorists disagree, even where they describe similar events.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

An explanation of past events or institutions. The interpretation can be contested even when the underlying events are documented.

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENARIO

A deliberately simplified and fictional situation that helps examine choices. Never treat the outcome as a validated prediction.

OPEN QUESTION

An issue worth asking about, for which this guide does not claim a conclusive answer.

THE SIX-QUESTION COMPASS

Who decides? Who can refuse? Who owns the resource? Whose knowledge counts? Who bears the consequences? Who can change the rule?

THEORY / COMPARISON

Power as relationship

Selected perspectives—short summaries, not substitutes for reading the original works.

DAHL: INFLUENCE IN SPECIFIED DECISIONS

A precise description asks who influences whom, about what, and within which options. It prevents loose claims that a person has power over everything.

FRENCH AND RAVEN: BASES OF INFLUENCE

Legitimate, reward, coercive, expert and referent bases foreground mechanisms by which influence is generated. Categories vary across later elaborations.

LUKES: THE VISIBLE AND THE EXCLUDED

A conflict may be decided openly while broader alternatives remain unasked. This is a way to inspect the agenda, not automatic proof of hidden manipulation.

WHAT THEY DISAGREE ABOUT

Whether one can adequately measure power by observable conflicts or whether structural limits and preference formation require deeper analysis.

OPEN QUESTION

Which of these lenses makes a situation newly visible—and what might it conceal?

THEORY / COMPARISON

Power as social organisation

Selected perspectives—short summaries, not substitutes for reading the original works.

WEBER: LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY

Rule-following can rest on distinct grounds of legitimacy. Bureaucracies coordinate at scale while creating formal gates and appeal problems.

FOUCAULT: DISCIPLINE AND KNOWLEDGE

Observation, measurement and classification can shape people and institutions, even where there is no single person issuing commands.

BOURDIEU: DIFFERENT CAPITALS

Money, networks, cultural familiarity and recognition may be converted into opportunities through social institutions.

WHAT THEY DISAGREE ABOUT

The proper unit of analysis, the role of agency and whether power is best mapped as capital, authority or practices that constitute subjects.

OPEN QUESTION

Which of these lenses makes a situation newly visible—and what might it conceal?

THEORY / COMPARISON

Power as freedom and cooperation

Selected perspectives—short summaries, not substitutes for reading the original works.

SEN: CAPABILITIES

Judge opportunities by what people can genuinely be and do, not solely by formal rights or resource totals.

HIRSCHMAN: EXIT, VOICE AND LOYALTY

Discontent can be answered by leaving, trying to change the organisation or remaining attached to it. Each option alters the others.

OSTROM: GOVERNING TOGETHER

Communities can build rules for shared resources. Coordination depends on monitoring, boundaries, dispute resolution and local design.

ARENDT: COLLECTIVE ACTION

Acting in concert may generate a capacity not reducible to the violence or rank of one individual.

WHAT THEY DISAGREE ABOUT

The normative role of freedom, the durability of authority and the conditions required for legitimate cooperation.

OPEN QUESTION

Which of these lenses makes a situation newly visible—and what might it conceal?

ROOM 01 / MATERIAL

Physical Power

Who can act upon a body, and who can protect it?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Physical Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Physical capacity is shaped by bodies, tools, environmental hazards, organised force, and the institutions that authorise its use. A person may have strength yet lack the right, equipment, or safety to exercise it.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A neighbour carries a heavy cylinder upstairs while an older resident chooses whether to ask for help.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Public safety standards and emergency-response infrastructure distribute protection unevenly across places.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Protecting someone from danger, creating accessible routes, and reducing injury exposure.

RISK / MISUSE

Using intimidation or force to make disagreement unsafe.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Force can suppress resistance without winning legitimacy; bodily vulnerability varies with disability, age, workplace design and health.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Where does protection end and coercion begin?

ROOM 02 / MATERIAL

Economic Power

How many choices can money actually purchase?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Economic Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Ownership, wages, credit, market access and savings alter the terms on which people can wait, bargain, refuse or invest. Purchasing power is relational: it means little without functioning institutions and goods to purchase.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A freelance designer with savings can reject a bad contract that a financially strained peer must accept.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Credit conditions and property rights help structure who can open a business and who must rent access.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Funding public goods or giving workers a fair share of surplus.

RISK / MISUSE

Making crucial necessities conditional on humiliating terms.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Not all valuable goods can be bought; money may enlarge options while status, discrimination or care obligations still restrict them.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Who gets to absorb a delay, and who cannot?

ROOM 03 / INSTITUTIONAL

Political Power

Who gets to make a decision binding on everyone?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Political Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Political power operates through representation, offices, legal authority, civic pressure and collective consent, not simply through leaders' personalities. It reaches into the rules of public life and into the capacity to contest those rules.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

Residents argue about whether a public park should become paid parking.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Elected councils and legislatures make decisions through procedures whose legitimacy can still be contested.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Creating accountable public services and channels for participation.

RISK / MISUSE

Suppressing opposition, moving decisions outside scrutiny, or manipulating representation.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

An election confers authority to govern, not proof that every action is just or effective.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Who can contest this decision after it is made?

ROOM 04 / INSTITUTIONAL

Institutional Power

Can a form decide your future?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Institutional Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

An institution converts policies, records, routines and delegated authority into repeatable decisions. A rule can constrain arbitrary behaviour while also hiding assumptions in apparently neutral procedures.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A student's scholarship depends on a documentation deadline their family never received.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Eligibility rules in universities, banks and public agencies redistribute access and require appeals procedures.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Consistent standards, audit trails and accessible appeals.

RISK / MISUSE

Opaque gatekeeping, arbitrary exceptions or rules that protect insiders.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Written rules do not enforce themselves; people interpret them and may bend them for care or favouritism.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Who wrote the rule, and who can appeal it?

ROOM 05 / RELATIONAL

Social Power

Which relationships open doors, and which lock them?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Social Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Networks create flows of trust, information, invitations, reputation and obligation. Social capital may help a person find work, but access can depend on conformity to group expectations.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A referral gets an applicant an interview before the vacancy appears publicly.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Professional associations and alumni networks shape access to opportunity without controlling formal hiring rules.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Helping newcomers access introductions and mentorship.

RISK / MISUSE

Excluding outsiders through informal clubs, gossip or loyalty tests.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Being popular does not mean being right; strong networks can turn inward and discourage dissent.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Who is absent from the room where introductions happen?

ROOM 06 / SYMBOLIC

Knowledge Power

What happens when the expert cannot decide?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Knowledge Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Evidence, craft, interpretation and information access can change choices. But credibility depends on who can speak, which knowledge counts, and whether decision-makers are willing to listen.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A technician knows the machine is unsafe while the budget holder postpones repairs.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Scientific advisory bodies may provide expertise while elected officials retain decision authority.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Teaching, public research and informed consent.

RISK / MISUSE

Hoarding information or weaponising technical jargon.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Expertise is domain-specific; a specialist can be mistaken and lived experience can reveal blind spots.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Who knows, who decides, and who bears the consequence?

ROOM 07 / SYMBOLIC

Language Power

Who chose the words we are arguing inside?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Language Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Labels, metaphors, translation and repetition make some alternatives easy to see and others hard to articulate. Language can organise shared action, but it cannot abolish material constraints by itself.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A manager calls unpaid overtime 'passion' while a worker calls it uncompensated labour.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Policy debates often pivot around the definition of eligibility, responsibility and public interest.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Explaining a complex problem clearly and naming neglected harm.

RISK / MISUSE

Using euphemisms to conceal costs or dehumanising labels to narrow empathy.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

A powerful phrase may fail when experience contradicts it; listeners actively interpret messages.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

What changes when the same fact is named differently?

ROOM 08 / INSTITUTIONAL

Technological Power

Who can change the button everyone must press?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Technological Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Software architectures, data access, technical standards and platform control distribute what users can see and do. Technology embeds policy decisions, even when the interface feels neutral.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A small seller depends on a marketplace whose ranking rules change without notice.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

App stores and payment rails can influence whether a digital service reaches customers.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Open standards, accessibility, user controls and transparent appeals.

RISK / MISUSE

Surveillance, lock-in, manipulation or opaque automated exclusions.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

A technically possible action may be legally prohibited or socially unacceptable; technology is not destiny.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Who owns the switch, data and ability to leave?

ROOM 09 / INNER

Psychological Power

Which choices feel possible before we even try?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Psychological Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Attention, habits, interpretation, emotional regulation and perceived agency affect how possibilities are noticed and pursued. These capacities are shaped by fatigue, safety, resources and past experience.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A learner postpones asking a question because they assume everyone else understands.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

School feedback and workplace cultures can shape who expects to be heard.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Pausing before reacting and checking a harsh first interpretation.

RISK / MISUSE

Blaming people for constraints that are structural rather than personal.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Confidence is not control; thinking differently does not replace access to food, safety or rights.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Which part is interpretation, and which is a real constraint?

ROOM 10 / RELATIONAL

Emotional Power

Can care be a source of influence without becoming control?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Emotional Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Trust, fear, gratitude, love and shame alter how people coordinate and negotiate. Emotional leverage becomes harmful when affection or belonging is made conditional on obedience.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

Someone agrees to a family demand because they fear hurting a loved one.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Caregiving and crisis support build relational trust that formal authority may not purchase.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Reassurance, repair, honest apologies and reliable care.

RISK / MISUSE

Guilt, withholding affection or threats of abandonment used as leverage.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Emotions matter, but a strong feeling is not evidence of another person's intention.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

How can both people remain free to disagree?

ROOM 11 / SYMBOLIC

Cultural Power

Who gets to decide what counts as respectable?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Cultural Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Norms, taste, education, ritual and prestige make some practices appear natural or superior. Cultural capital can open institutions while also turning class familiarity into apparently neutral merit.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A job candidate is dismissed for a regional accent despite doing the work well.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

The prestige attached to language, degrees and etiquette shapes hiring and schooling.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Making different forms of knowledge and expression legible.

RISK / MISUSE

Treating one group's habits as universal standards of competence.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Culture is not a single fixed script; people negotiate, contest and remix traditions.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Whose familiarity is mistaken for excellence?

ROOM 12 / SYMBOLIC

Aesthetic Power

How does a room tell people where they belong?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Aesthetic Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Design, architecture, clothing, images and sensory atmosphere guide attention and social expectations. Aesthetics can welcome or intimidate before anyone speaks.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A government form becomes easier to complete when layout and language are clear.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Monumental buildings and ceremonial spaces can signal civic authority, exclusion or collective memory.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Readable public design, beauty without barriers, environments that dignify users.

RISK / MISUSE

Using glamour to conceal poor terms or architecture to discourage access.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Beautiful presentation cannot substitute for fair procedures and truthful claims.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Who feels invited by this design, and who does not?

ROOM 13 / RELATIONAL

Sexual and Romantic Power

Where does attraction meet freedom?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Sexual and Romantic Po	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Desire, attention, emotional investment and unequal alternatives can affect bargaining within intimate relationships. Consent must remain freely given, specific, informed and reversible.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

Two partners have different expectations about public displays of affection and discuss boundaries.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Legal protections and workplace policies address coercion in settings with unequal formal authority.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Respecting a no, naming preferences and sharing the work of communication.

RISK / MISUSE

Leveraging status, money or fear to pressure intimacy.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Attraction is not entitlement, and silence cannot reliably be read as consent.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Can each person decline without fear or retaliation?

ROOM 14 / COLLECTIVE

Collective Power

What becomes possible only when people coordinate?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Collective Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

People create capacities together that none could sustain alone: mutual aid, bargaining, common rules, shared infrastructure and public action. Coordination requires trust and mechanisms for dissent.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

Residents pool time and money to repair a neglected common stairwell.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Cooperative institutions and commons governance can work under carefully designed rules.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Sharing expertise, bargaining collectively, maintaining public spaces.

RISK / MISUSE

Pressuring members to conform or excluding people who question group norms.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Groups can fail through free-riding, unequal voice or capture by insiders.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

How can participants challenge the collective itself?

ROOM 15 / INNER

Moral Power

Can integrity matter when it carries a cost?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Moral Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Moral influence grows when others regard someone as consistent, courageous and accountable. Ethical example may change norms, but moral certainty can also harden into policing.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

An employee refuses to falsify a safety checklist despite pressure.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Professional ethics, whistleblowing safeguards and civil-society norms affect decisions.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Naming a wrong, accepting scrutiny and protecting vulnerable people.

RISK / MISUSE

Shaming dissenters, demanding purity or treating disagreement as evil.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Good intentions do not guarantee good outcomes; moral claims require reasons and evidence.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

What would accountability look like for the person making the moral claim?

ROOM 16 / COLLECTIVE

Spiritual Power

What can shared meaning organise, and who speaks for it?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Spiritual Power	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Belief, practices, ritual and religious communities can support care, endurance and collective identity. Authority over meaning must be distinguished from claims that can be tested empirically.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A community gathers to support a grieving family through familiar rituals.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Religious and spiritual organisations sometimes provide welfare, education or political influence.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Offering belonging, service, reflection and compassionate action.

RISK / MISUSE

Claiming supernatural certainty as a license for coercion or suppressing questions.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

An experience can be subjectively profound without proving an external causal mechanism.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Can a person belong while remaining free to question?

ROOM 17 / INNER

The Power of Refusal

What does a genuine no require?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Refusal	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Refusal is meaningful when alternatives, safety and social protections make noncompliance possible. A no can protect dignity, yet the cost of saying it differs radically across positions.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A worker declines unsafe overtime when there is a safe reporting channel.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Collective bargaining and legal rights can lower the price of dissent.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Setting a boundary, asking for consent and withdrawing cooperation from harm.

RISK / MISUSE

Using threats of withdrawal to punish or control others.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Advice to 'just say no' ignores dependency, retaliation and unequal options.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

What would make refusal safer for the least powerful person?

ROOM 18 / INNER

The Power of Silence

When is silence listening, and when is it enforced?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Silence	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Silence can be listening, reflection, privacy or strategic restraint. It can also result from fear, exclusion or the belief that speaking will not matter.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A chair pauses after asking a difficult question rather than filling the space.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Public consultations and organisational meetings can offer formal voice while discouraging inconvenient answers.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Making room for others and protecting private information.

RISK / MISUSE

Using ambiguity to evade responsibility or silencing criticism.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Silence alone cannot reveal agreement, consent, fear or indifference.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Whose silence is chosen, and whose is demanded?

ROOM 19 / MATERIAL

The Power of Time

Who can afford to wait?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Time	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Time changes negotiating leverage through urgency, savings, deadlines, learning, caregiving and generational advantage. The ability to wait is not distributed evenly.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A job seeker takes the first offer because rent is due, while an employer can interview for weeks.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Interest, compounding and long-run public investment reward some forms of patience but can deepen unequal starts.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Funding patient research and protecting rest or parental leave.

RISK / MISUSE

Using delays, endless procedures or deadlines to wear people down.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Waiting is not always wise; some harms require immediate action.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Who benefits from the clock as currently designed?

ROOM 20 / SYMBOLIC

The Power of Attention

Who gets seen, and what disappears?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Attention	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Visibility and salience influence what people discuss, reward and remember. Media, interfaces and algorithms distribute attention through incentives that are rarely neutral.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A complaint becomes urgent only after a video circulates widely.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

News agendas and platform recommendation systems influence which public issues surface.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Directing attention to overlooked evidence and labour.

RISK / MISUSE

Outrage amplification, distraction and surveillance of private lives.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Visibility is not verification; being noticed can also expose people to harassment.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

What important work is happening off-camera?

ROOM 21 / MATERIAL

The Power of Dependency

What changes when leaving is expensive?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Dependency	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Dependency rises when essential resources, relationships or infrastructure have few substitutes. Exit, voice and loyalty interact; the best option may depend on the cost of losing what matters.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A small restaurant relies on one supplier who can change delivery terms overnight.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Monopoly infrastructure and concentrated supply chains can shape bargaining even without direct threats.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Redundancy, fair contracts and channels for grievance.

RISK / MISUSE

Creating lock-in, penalising departure or controlling access to essentials.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Interdependence is not necessarily exploitation; mutual reliance can motivate cooperation.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Who has a viable alternative, and what would one cost?

ROOM 22 / INSTITUTIONAL

The Power of Systems

Can nobody intend the harm and yet everyone reproduce it?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Systems	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Defaults, incentives, bottlenecks, feedback loops and routines can create stable outcomes without a single villain. Systems can be redesigned, but consequences are rarely fully predictable.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A school's early application deadline advantages families with fast internet and flexible work hours.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Institutional incentives and process design can generate persistent unequal access.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Changing defaults, auditing externalities and building appeal channels.

RISK / MISUSE

Hiding behind 'the system' to avoid responsibility for preventable choices.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Systemic explanations do not erase individual agency, and not every pattern is intentional discrimination.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

What outcome does the system reward even if nobody says they want it?

ROOM 23 / COLLECTIVE

The Power of Ordinary People

Whose absence would make an ordinary day impossible?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
Ordinary People	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Care, cleaning, repair, teaching, food provision and maintenance sustain the visible achievements of institutions. Their power is often causal without being accompanied by prestige or bargaining leverage.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A cleaner's absence closes a laboratory despite the researchers being publicly credited.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Public health and urban services depend on frontline labour and informal coordination.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Recognising invisible labour through fair pay, safety and genuine voice.

RISK / MISUSE

Praising essential workers symbolically while withholding resources or rights.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Being necessary does not automatically grant control; admiration is not a substitute for bargaining protections.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

If this person stopped working for a day, what would break?

ROOM 24 / COLLECTIVE

The Power to Give Power Away

Can sharing authority make a system stronger?

SOURCE	CONDITION	RESULT
The Power to Give Powe	→ Rules + alternatives	→ Choice or constraint

MECHANISM

Delegation, distributed ownership, participation and well-designed accountability can increase the capacity of a group to act. Giving power away is not the same as abandoning responsibility.

EVERYDAY OBSERVATION

A founder gives teammates control over decisions within clear budgets and escalation rules.

INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Cooperatives and participatory governance share certain decision rights under explicit procedures.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE

Giving meaningful authority, information and room to disagree.

RISK / MISUSE

Calling participation 'empowerment' while keeping all important decisions centralised.

A LIMITATION WORTH REMEMBERING

Power sharing can fail without clear roles, resources or safeguards for minority voices.

YOUR FIELD QUESTION

Which decisions can people genuinely make without seeking permission?

PARADOXES 01–02

Power does not travel straight.

Opposing consequences can coexist. Inspect the conditions that make each side plausible.

01 / MORE CONTROL CAN MEAN LESS TRUST

ONE SIDE

A supervisor approves every tiny step, reducing mistakes in the short term.

THE OTHER SIDE

Team members stop taking initiative or surfacing problems, weakening shared capacity.

COUNTERPOINT

Safety-critical work sometimes needs strong checks.

REFLECT

Which decisions genuinely need central approval?

02 / VISIBILITY CAN CREATE VULNERABILITY

ONE SIDE

Public attention may make an overlooked problem impossible to ignore.

THE OTHER SIDE

The same visibility can expose private people to harassment or distort incentives.

COUNTERPOINT

Transparency and privacy can both be public goods.

REFLECT

Who benefits from publicity, and who bears its risks?

PARADOXES 03–04

Power does not travel straight.

Opposing consequences can coexist. Inspect the conditions that make each side plausible.

03 / A HIGHER SALARY CAN COEXIST WITH LESS AUTONOMY

ONE SIDE

A better-paid role may expand financial choice.

THE OTHER SIDE

Constant availability and limited discretion may shrink freedom over time.

COUNTERPOINT

More income can still purchase important exit options.

REFLECT

What would you exchange for a pay rise?

04 / EXPERTISE DOES NOT GUARANTEE INFLUENCE

ONE SIDE

A specialist accurately identifies a technical hazard.

THE OTHER SIDE

A budget holder may ignore the insight when incentives point elsewhere.

COUNTERPOINT

Institutional authority and technical skill are different forms of power.

REFLECT

What channel would make expertise consequential?

PARADOXES 05–06

Power does not travel straight.

Opposing consequences can coexist. Inspect the conditions that make each side plausible.

05 / REFUSING CAN PRESERVE AGENCY

ONE SIDE

Rejecting a misaligned contract can protect long-run choices.

THE OTHER SIDE

Saying no may sacrifice income or goodwill now.

COUNTERPOINT

Refusal is easier when there are real alternatives.

REFLECT

Whose no is costly?

06 / SHARED POWER CAN INCREASE CAPACITY

ONE SIDE

Delegating decision rights unlocks local information and initiative.

THE OTHER SIDE

Coordination problems and unclear responsibility may appear.

COUNTERPOINT

Rules and accountability determine whether sharing works.

REFLECT

What can be decided closest to the problem?

PARADOXES 07–08

Power does not travel straight.

Opposing consequences can coexist. Inspect the conditions that make each side plausible.

07 / A POWERFUL SYSTEM CAN BE FRAGILE

ONE SIDE

A tightly optimised supply chain looks efficient under normal conditions.

THE OTHER SIDE

One missing supplier can halt the entire process.

COUNTERPOINT

Redundancy costs money but protects resilience.

REFLECT

Which single point of failure is invisible?

08 / A QUIET PERSON CAN SHAPE A ROOM

ONE SIDE

A careful listener changes the next question everyone asks.

THE OTHER SIDE

Silence can also be the result of intimidation.

COUNTERPOINT

Do not read motives from quietness alone.

REFLECT

Who is able to remain silent by choice?

PARADOXES 09–10

Power does not travel straight.

Opposing consequences can coexist. Inspect the conditions that make each side plausible.

09 / FREEDOM CAN DEPEND ON INSTITUTIONS

ONE SIDE

Public transit and legal protections expand the real ability to move.

THE OTHER SIDE

Institutions also impose rules and sometimes arbitrary constraints.

COUNTERPOINT

Constraint and capability are not simple opposites.

REFLECT

Which shared rules expand practical freedom?

10 / INDISPENSABILITY CAN BECOME A TRAP

ONE SIDE

A colleague who alone understands a system becomes important.

THE OTHER SIDE

They cannot take leave without everything collapsing.

COUNTERPOINT

Knowledge sharing may reduce prestige but enlarge everyone's options.

REFLECT

What backup would dignity require?

PARADOXES 11–12

Power does not travel straight.

Opposing consequences can coexist. Inspect the conditions that make each side plausible.

11 / INFORMATION ABUNDANCE CAN OBSCURE UNDERSTANDING

ONE SIDE

A dashboard makes hundreds of indicators visible.

THE OTHER SIDE

Noise and conflicting definitions can overwhelm decisions.

COUNTERPOINT

Information is useful only with interpretation and relevance.

REFLECT

Which two facts actually change your choice?

12 / POWER CHANGES WITH CONTEXT

ONE SIDE

A senior manager may decide staffing but cannot repair the equipment.

THE OTHER SIDE

A technician may solve the breakdown but cannot set budgets.

COUNTERPOINT

Comparisons need domains, relationships and time horizons.

REFLECT

Power over what, with whom, and under which rules?

FIELD INVESTIGATION 01

THE POWER MAP

Begin with a relationship, not a rank.

HOW TO RUN IT

Choose any two forms of power. Draw the arrow between them only if you can explain the mechanism. For instance: an economic resource buys access to a platform; platform ranking affects public attention; public attention can affect revenue.

PRINT-AND-WRITE WORKSHEET

Power A: _____ Power B: _____

What precisely moves between them? _____

Who can interrupt the connection? _____

What alternative explanation might fit? _____

AFTER THE EXPERIMENT

What changed in your understanding? Which conclusion depends most on something you have not yet checked?

Privacy: The website stores any observations only in your browser, with an explicit erase button. This printable sheet should not include third-party personal information without permission.

FIELD INVESTIGATION 02

THE POWER EXCHANGE

Negotiation without a perfect score.

HOW TO RUN IT

Describe an actual or fictional disagreement without assuming that one actor is evil. Name their interests, alternatives, obligations and risks. Then try two different responses. Evaluate consequences rather than character.

PRINT-AND-WRITE WORKSHEET

Situation: _____

Actor A needs: _____ Actor B needs: _____

Alternative 1 / its likely trade-off: _____

Alternative 2 / its likely trade-off: _____

AFTER THE EXPERIMENT

What changed in your understanding? Which conclusion depends most on something you have not yet checked?

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FIELD INVESTIGATION 03

WHO REALLY HAS POWER?

Seven levers and their limits.

HOW TO RUN IT

Compare resources, information, exit, legitimacy, trust, coordination and rule-setting. A higher setting in the website changes a conceptual diagram only. It is not a power measurement, prediction or psychological assessment.

PRINT-AND-WRITE WORKSHEET

Strongest lever in this example: _____

Weakest lever: _____

Whose viewpoint is missing? _____

Which assumption could reverse your conclusion? _____

AFTER THE EXPERIMENT

What changed in your understanding? Which conclusion depends most on something you have not yet checked?

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FIELD INVESTIGATION 04

THE INVISIBLE POWER DETECTOR

Fifteen questions for observation.

HOW TO RUN IT

Use the fifteen-question instrument in the website. Avoid recording private names or confidential details here. Do not interpret unanswered questions as evidence of wrongdoing. Look for questions that invite documentation and conversations.

PRINT-AND-WRITE WORKSHEET

Who sets the agenda? _____

Who may refuse without punishment? _____

Who bears mistakes? _____

Who can appeal? _____

AFTER THE EXPERIMENT

What changed in your understanding? Which conclusion depends most on something you have not yet checked?

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FIELD INVESTIGATION 05

THE PARADOX LAB

Give the opposing argument its strongest form.

HOW TO RUN IT

Take a proposition you agree with, such as sharing authority improves a team. Write down a case where it holds, one where it fails, and the safeguard that might distinguish them.

PRINT-AND-WRITE WORKSHEET

Proposition: _____

When it helps: _____

When it harms: _____

A boundary condition: _____

AFTER THE EXPERIMENT

What changed in your understanding? Which conclusion depends most on something you have not yet checked?

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FIELD INVESTIGATION 06

ONE ORDINARY DAY

Follow one invisible dependency.

HOW TO RUN IT

Trace two hours of a day. Ask what infrastructure, labour and rules enable the activity. Focus on a real system, not on guessing the motives of people within it. A day need not follow the template used online.

PRINT-AND-WRITE WORKSHEET

Time window: _____

Which people or systems made it possible? _____

Who would bear a failure? _____

Who should get a say in redesign? _____

AFTER THE EXPERIMENT

What changed in your understanding? Which conclusion depends most on something you have not yet checked?

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FICTIONAL CASES 01–03

Trade-offs without scores.

Each short case models competing options. Actual outcomes would depend on context and information unavailable here.

CASE 01 / AN EMPLOYEE NEGOTIATING WITH A MANAGER

A small team member has quietly covered two vacant roles. A salary review is approaching, but the company says budgets are frozen.

Option 1: Ask for a dated review with documented scope and pay benchmarks. This turns unrecorded labour into a reviewable claim, but a date alone is not an enforceable guarantee.

Option 2: Threaten to quit on the spot. It may create urgency if alternatives exist; otherwise it risks income and weakens bargaining safety.

CASE 02 / A CUSTOMER AND A SMALL SHOPKEEPER

A customer wants a refund on a product with unclear terms, while the shopkeeper fears a loss on a thin margin.

Option 1: Clarify the sale terms and propose a proportionate remedy. A transparent record creates trust, yet remedy costs must still be shared fairly.

Option 2: Post an accusation publicly before hearing the seller. Public attention can motivate response but may harm reputation before the facts are established.

CASE 03 / AN INFLUENCER AND AN ALGORITHMIC PLATFORM

A creator loses reach following a feed change they cannot inspect. Their income depends on views.

Option 1: Diversify distribution and request platform information. Alternative channels reduce exposure over time but require work and may not rebuild the lost audience immediately.

Option 2: Buy visibility at any cost. Paid reach may restore some distribution while increasing dependency on the same system.

FICTIONAL CASES 04–06

Trade-offs without scores.

Each short case models competing options. Actual outcomes would depend on context and information unavailable here.

CASE 04 / A TEACHER AND A STUDENT

A student challenges a classroom rule that prohibits asking questions during demonstrations.

Option 1: Create an agreed question window and test its effect. A structured channel protects lesson flow and voice, but fixed windows may still silence urgent confusion.

Option 2: Punish the student to protect authority. This may produce surface compliance while teaching classmates that inquiry carries risk.

CASE 05 / A COMMUNITY ORGANISING COLLECTIVE ACTION

Residents disagree over how to repair a flooded street and whether all households should contribute.

Option 1: Hold a meeting with open records and visible options. A transparent process builds legitimacy but not everyone has equal time to attend.

Option 2: Let the loudest volunteers choose the plan. Speed rises, while excluded residents may stop cooperating later.

CASE 06 / A CREATOR AND A DISTRIBUTION PLATFORM

An independent writer relies on one platform that can alter pricing and audience access.

Option 1: Export permitted subscriber data and publish alternative access routes. Portability creates options, but only where consent and technical rules allow.

Option 2: Accept all contract changes silently. Short-term convenience may preserve distribution while increasing future switching cost.

FICTIONAL CASES 07–09

Trade-offs without scores.

Each short case models competing options. Actual outcomes would depend on context and information unavailable here.

CASE 07 / A PERSON SETTING A BOUNDARY

A family member asks for personal information and treats hesitation as proof of disloyalty.

Option 1: State what you can share and what remains private. A clear boundary preserves choice; relational disappointment may still follow.

Option 2: Disclose everything to avoid tension. Conflict may fade briefly, but privacy costs could be hard to reverse.

CASE 08 / A FAMILY BUSINESS SUCCESSION DISAGREEMENT

Three relatives disagree about decision rights in a growing family enterprise.

Option 1: Separate ownership, operations and family relationships on paper. Role clarity can reduce ambiguity, although it cannot erase longstanding emotional expectations.

Option 2: Let the oldest relative make every decision indefinitely. Familiar hierarchy can feel efficient, but it may silence new knowledge and entrench dependence.

CASE 09 / AN EXPERT WITHOUT FORMAL AUTHORITY

A safety specialist identifies a problem, but a director controls the budget.

Option 1: Document evidence and seek a formal risk decision. A written record increases accountability while protecting against vague warnings.

Option 2: Circumvent every manager without explaining the concern. Escalation can be justified in urgent danger but may damage trust when ordinary channels would work.

FICTIONAL CASES 10–12

Trade-offs without scores.

Each short case models competing options. Actual outcomes would depend on context and information unavailable here.

CASE 10 / A CAREGIVER WHOSE LABOUR IS OVERLOOKED

A household celebrates paid earnings while one member performs most care and scheduling.

Option 1: Make recurring care tasks visible and negotiate time and resources. Naming labour can redistribute work, but counting hours alone misses emotional load.

Option 2: Stop all care immediately to prove a point. Withdrawal could reveal dependence while placing vulnerable people at risk.

CASE 11 / A GOVERNMENT OFFICE AND A CITIZEN

A citizen receives an unexplained denial for a public service and cannot tell whom to contact.

Option 1: Ask for a written reason and available appeal channel. Documented reasons enable scrutiny but procedures may still be inaccessible.

Option 2: Use a personal contact to skip the queue. An exception may help one person while undermining equal treatment of everyone else.

CASE 12 / A SMALL ORGANISATION DEPENDENT ON ONE SUPPLIER

A crucial supplier announces an abrupt price rise before a busy season.

Option 1: Negotiate with documented volume and transition terms. Clear terms can preserve supply in the short term, even when leverage is unequal.

Option 2: Threaten legal action without checking the contract. Legal options may matter, but threats without grounds create cost and delay.

OBSERVATION SHEET 01

What did you actually see?

A source of evidence, a fair alternative interpretation and a possible next question are more useful than mind-reading.

01 / WHO SETS THE AGENDA BEFORE THE MEETING STARTS?

02 / WHO CAN SAY NO WITHOUT RETALIATION?

03 / WHOSE ABSENCE STOPS ESSENTIAL WORK?

04 / WHO DEFINES SUCCESS AND FAILURE?

05 / WHO CAN CHANGE THE RULES?

06 / WHO BEARS THE COST OF MISTAKES?

07 / WHO RECEIVES CREDIT FOR INVISIBLE LABOUR?

08 / WHO CONTROLS THE INFORMATION PEOPLE NEED?

DISTINGUISH

Observed / Inferred / Still unknown: identify which category your notes belong to before drawing conclusions.

OBSERVATION SHEET 02

What did you actually see?

A source of evidence, a fair alternative interpretation and a possible next question are more useful than mind-reading.

09 / WHO CAN APPEAL AN UNFAIR DECISION?

10 / WHO HAS A REALISTIC OPTION TO LEAVE?

11 / WHO IS MISSING FROM DISCUSSIONS?

12 / WHOSE EXPERTISE IS TREATED AS CREDIBLE?

13 / WHO DECIDES HOW TIME IS ALLOCATED?

14 / WHO CAN SPEAK WITHOUT BEING INTERRUPTED?

15 / WHO KNOWS HOW TO GET HELP WHEN A PROCESS FAILS?

DISTINGUISH

Observed / Inferred / Still unknown: identify which category your notes belong to before drawing conclusions.

GLOSSARY / PART 1

Working language.

Short definitions for the exercises, not fixed disciplinary standards.

AGENCY

The capability to choose or act within real conditions; not unlimited freedom.

AGENDA-SETTING

Influence over which problems and options become available for decision.

AUTHORITY

The socially or institutionally recognised right to decide or direct within a domain.

BARGAINING POSITION

The ability to negotiate terms, affected by alternatives and urgency.

CAPABILITY

A real opportunity to be or do something, not only formal permission.

COERCION

Pressure involving threats or costs that undermine meaningful freedom of choice.

CONSENT

Freely given, informed, specific and reversible agreement.

CULTURAL CAPITAL

Embodied, objectified or institutionalised cultural resources recognised as valuable.

DEPENDENCY

Reliance on a resource, person or institution with limited substitutes.

EXIT

Leaving an organisation, relationship or provider rather than changing it internally.

GATEKEEPING

Control over who enters, qualifies or participates in an opportunity.

INSTITUTION

A durable pattern of roles, rules and practices organising shared life.

GLOSSARY / PART 2

Working language.

Short definitions for the exercises, not fixed disciplinary standards.

LEGITIMACY

The accepted justification for an authority or process.

NORM

A shared expectation about acceptable behaviour.

POWER OVER

Influence over others within a specific relationship or decision.

POWER TO

Capacity to achieve an outcome or exercise a genuine option.

POWER WITH

Capacity generated by coordination among multiple people.

RULE-SETTING POWER

Ability to define the constraints or criteria that govern later choices.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Resources made available through social connections and relationships.

VOICE

Trying to improve conditions by raising concerns from within.

VULNERABILITY

Exposure to harm or loss that affects the feasibility of choices.

ZERO-SUM

A contest where one party gaining something implies another loses that same resource.

TRANSPARENCY

Access to explanations, reasons or information relevant to decisions.

ACCOUNTABILITY

A mechanism by which decision makers must explain and respond to consequences.

REFERENCE SHELF / 1

Read the originals.

Bibliographic details and links. Where a link opens a search page, it is a discovery pointer, not independent verification of the edition.

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RESEARCH LIMITATION

This guide synthesises theories and pedagogical examples. It does not claim to be a systematic review or a validation study.

REFERENCE SHELF / 2

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RESEARCH LIMITATION

This guide synthesises theories and pedagogical examples. It does not claim to be a systematic review or a validation study.

ONE LAST QUESTION

If you could change one relationship of power in the world around you, which one would you change — and who should get a say?

Power can enable, constrain, care, exploit, protect and coordinate.

This atlas is an invitation to look harder—not to win a ranking.

EXPLORE THE INTERACTIVE ATLAS

https://sahiltayal.com/power/

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