

Powers of the Project Manager

PMI's 2026 PMP® Examination Content Outline (ECO) and PMBOK® Guide, 8th edition, both emphasize mutual respect, an empowered team, and servant leadership. Two of the PMBOK® Guide principles speak directly to how a project manager uses power: be an accountable leader, and build an empowered culture. But there are many ways to describe management and leadership, and there is no one right way to lead or manage that fits all situations or all project managers.

One thing shapes how much power you start with: organizational structure. In a functional organization, the functional manager controls the resources and the project manager has little or no formal authority. That authority grows through weak, balanced, and strong matrix structures to a project-oriented organization, where the project manager has full authority. Most exam scenarios place you somewhere in a matrix, so much of your work is done through influence rather than command.

Types of Power

That said, understanding the following traditional types of power can help you read a scenario and choose the response that builds commitment rather than mere compliance:

- **Formal (legitimate)** This power is based on your position and the authority granted to you, usually through the project charter. It is strongest in a project-oriented organization and weakest in a functional one. Example: "I understand you disagree. However, after careful evaluation, I believe my decision is in the best interest of the team, and this is what we are going to do."
- **Reward** This power stems from the ability to give rewards. Example: "I understand that you want to participate in the acceptance testing of this project. Because of your performance, I will assign you as part of that team." Rewards work best when they are meaningful to the person receiving them and suited to the team's culture. Recognition can be as powerful as anything tangible.
- **Penalty (coercive)** This power comes from the ability to penalize team members. Example: "If this does not get done on time, I will remove you from the group traveling to the customer meeting." Penalty power may produce short-term compliance, but it damages trust and rarely produces commitment.
- **Expert** This power comes from being the technical or project management expert. It is earned through demonstrated knowledge and results, and it travels with you from project to project. Example: "This project manager has been successful on other projects. Let's give her a chance!"
- **Referent** This power comes from another person liking you, respecting you, or wanting to be like you. It is the power of charisma, reputation, and trust. Example: The most-liked and respected project manager in the organization says, "I think we should change the content of our standard project charter."

- **Informational** This power comes from having access to information others need, such as forecasts, performance data, or knowledge of leadership's plans. Example: "I have the latest forecast from the sponsor. Let's review it together before the steering committee meets." Shared openly, it builds transparency; withheld as leverage, it erodes trust.
- **Connection (relational)** This power comes from relationships and alliances with influential people, such as the sponsor or senior leaders. Example: "I spoke with the sponsor, and she supports moving the release date if the team needs it."

Note: The best forms of power are expert and reward. Penalty power is generally the least effective. Formal, reward, and penalty are powers derived from your position in the company. Expert and referent power are earned on your own. Position power is granted and can be taken away; personal power is built over time, and it is what a servant leader relies on most.

Using Power Effectively

- ☐ Confirm the authority granted to you in the project charter and understand how the organizational structure affects it.
- ☐ Build expert power by staying current in project management practice and in the project's domain.
- ☐ Earn trust early. Referent power depends on consistency, honesty, and following through on commitments.
- ☐ Recognize contributions in ways that suit the individual and the team's culture.
- ☐ Hear people out before using formal power, and explain the reasoning behind the decision.
- ☐ Treat penalty power as a last resort, and follow organizational policies when you must use it.
- ☐ Share information openly rather than holding it as leverage.
- ☐ Influence stakeholders you do not control through relationships, shared goals, and a clear case for value.
- ☐ Negotiate with functional managers for resources, and escalate through the agreed governance path when your authority is not enough.
- ☐ Empower the team to make decisions within its working agreements, and step in to remove impediments.
- ☐ Match your leadership style to the situation and to each team member's competence and commitment.
- ☐ Use AI and other tools to strengthen your analysis, while remaining accountable for the decisions you make with them.

How This Shows Up on the Exam

Power is tested in the People domain, which is 33% of the exam. Domain I Task 3, "Lead the project team," is where most power questions land, and they also appear in Task 2, "Manage conflicts," and Task 4, "Engage stakeholders." In the *PMBOK® Guide*, 8th edition, this content connects to the Resources and Stakeholders performance domains. You will rarely be asked to name a power type outright. Instead, a scenario describes what the project manager says or does, and you choose the most appropriate response.

Several distinctions carry weight. Formal, reward, and penalty power come from the position; expert and referent power come from the person. Penalty power pairs naturally with the forcing (directing) conflict technique, and both are usually wrong answers unless an urgent safety, legal, or ethical issue leaves no time for anything else. And do not confuse the project manager's power with stakeholder power on a power/interest grid: the grid measures a stakeholder's ability to influence the project, not the project manager's authority.

When a scenario places you in a matrix organization with little formal authority, the expected answer usually relies on expert power, relationships, negotiation, and escalation through governance, not threats or going around the functional manager. When a team member resists, look first for the cause, then choose the response that builds commitment. In adaptive environments, the role shifts further toward servant leadership: the project manager facilitates, coaches, and removes impediments while the self-organizing team decides how to do the work.