

## Formal and Informal Authority

---

**Authority** is legitimate power, that is, power that subordinates willingly accept as right and proper.

---

**Formal authority** is the legitimate power that an organizational member has simply by occupying an official position or office in the hierarchy—the authority of position or office. Principals, for example, have formal authority merely because of their role. Power is invested in the role; this influence is legitimate because members willingly comply to reasonable requests and demands that are guaranteed by contractual agreement. In exchange for compliance to administrator directives, employees are paid to do their job. Teachers follow instructions of the principals with respect to attending faculty meetings, getting grades in on time, staying after school to help students, monitoring the halls, keeping order in the cafeteria, developing lesson plans, attending supervisory conferences, and a myriad of other routine school functions. In sum, formal authority is bought and paid for by the contractual agreement with the school district; it gives office holders the legitimate power to command compliance to basic organizational operations.

---

**Informal authority** is power and influence legitimated by the norms, sentiments, and values of the informal organization. In contrast to formal authority, which is based on legal contract, *informal authority* must be earned. Informal leaders are not officials appointed by the organization, but rather they are members who emerge as leaders spontaneously as a function of informal interactions among group members. At times, informal leaders yield more power than formal ones; their power is linked to their popularity, expertise, and social skills. Principals have authority of the office, but they must earn informal authority by behaving in ways that the informal groups and leaders find acceptable and consistent with the informal norms and common values. Hence, it behooves formal officials to know, understand, and expand their zone of authority to include informal as well as formal authority.

---