

# Authority of the superior commander in commanding and leading subordinates

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## INFORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

The author addresses the problem of the superior's authority and its importance in commanding subordinates in uniformed services. Based on the analysis of the source literature and his own experiences, he defines the concept of authority and interprets its types. In the context of reflections on the subject of authority, he also defines the concepts of command and leadership and indicates the positive consequences of liberating authority but also to the negative implications of authoritarian management of subordinates.

## KEYWORDS

authority, uniformed services, command, leadership, power, exerting influence



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## Introduction

People seem to have been under the influence of other people since the dawn of time. They have succumbed to their authority, and, at the same time, they have often enjoyed authority in the circle of their relatives or friends. The life of each of us is characterized by submission to various authorities. The authority of parents, grandparents, educators in kindergartens, schools, superiors at work and many others, in various circumstances. We obey most of them, we listen to their instructions and good advice, remaining under their influence, since it is difficult to imagine living in a society where children do not listen to their parents, students do

not listen to their teachers, vehicle drivers do not obey the police officer directing traffic at the intersection of roads, and officers in uniformed services ignore the orders of their superiors. Therefore, authority in the broad sense of the term is revealed in the recognition of someone's prestige, importance, wisdom, knowledge, power and in the expression of respect, acceptance of submission and obedience.

Obedience to authority – looking for its positive attributes – ensures order and social order, allows uniformed services to operate efficiently, allows for collision-free functioning of various organizations and institutions. It can also be assumed that it is reasonable, under the assumption that people with authority are better predisposed to solve problems than those who succumb to them. Obedience to authority is also a convenient conduct, because it frees subordinates from making numerous decisions which they do not want or are unable to make. But also – which should be noticed – relieves these people from the effects of responsibility for decisions which are not their own (Wojciszke, 2002).

Mutual influence exerted by individual adults, groups, or social organizations is the essence of social life; it is a determinant of social relations. It is because of mutual influence that people can persuade others to follow desired behaviour, agree on the importance of the observed phenomena, but also set common goals and implement them. However, this generally presented, benevolent obedience to authorities also displays its negative or even tragic consequences. It is enough to refer to the history of the modern era, namely the history of the twentieth century, when two social systems, fascism and communism, whose ideologies were based on blind obedience to authority – the leader's authority, led to the death of tens of millions of human lives on a global scale. A negative example of blind obedience to authorities, although on a much smaller scale, is the fairly common and destructive activity of religious sects, some criminal groups, pseudo-healers, etc.

The subject of considerations in this paper is the authority of the superior – the commander and the superior considered by subordinates to be a leader. The cognitive goal is the knowledge of the types of authorities which strengthen the power of the positive influence exerted by a superior on subordinates or are a cause of destructive actions. In addition, an answer is sought to the question: which types of authority are the basic foundation of leadership, and which are its contradiction?

## 1. Authority and its types

The concept and significance of authority as an inseparable element of social life is interpreted in various ways in social science. The ambiguity of the concept of “authority” results from the difficulty in defining it unambiguously. It can be understood as a feature, social phenomenon or a relationship (Marcińczyk, 1991). Highlighting the characteristics of a given person (object) indicates the understanding of authority as an attribute which arises as a result of the behaviour of that person or the impression caused by the object and the meanings attributed to it by other people. The process of creating a social phenomenon, which authority is, testifies to its functional importance, and the analysis of the concept is related, to a greater extent, to the problem of who recognizes authority and what the social consequences of its recognition are. The relational importance of authority is visible in social relations, the effect of which is the assignment of authority to a given person. The mechanism underlying the assessment of the behavioural indicators of a person, proving their authority, is related to perception and attribution. Whereas the strength of authority in these circumstances depends on the degree of influence which a given person exerts on others. This influence means a tendency to model the way of thinking, evaluating or acting in accordance with the pattern represented by the person perceived as an authority. In this sense, authority, as an interpersonal category, exists only in the relationship between a person who represents specific values and standards of behaviour and a person who approves them with the utmost appreciation (Hołyst, 2015). In the relational approach to authority, both forms of identification occur in parallel.

Authority in interpersonal terms has a dynamic form, susceptible to change. The variability of the perceiving and perceived subject, as well as the implications resulting from the relationship between the subjects, modify the causative power of authority. For this reason, authority does not have a permanent structure. Once it has been shaped, it can be raised or lowered, or it can be lost forever. The prerequisite for recognizing a person as an authority is to perceive them and distinguish them from other people or phenomena surrounding them. A separate person becomes an object, while a perceiving person – the subject of this process. With such qualification, the object of authority is separated from the subject recognizing someone as an authority. Therefore, the object of authority may have a personal or non-personal dimension, while the subject of authority is always a person (Hołyst, 2015). Recognition of a given person as an authority may

take place through the independent process of perceiving this person as distinguished and arousing admiration or through the enthronement of such an assessment from a significant person (Hołyst, 2015).

Authority is divided into formal (external, apparent) and informal (internal, natural, real, authentic). In the first case, authority occurs as a result of institutional conditions and is created on the basis of the non-personal characteristics of the person perceived, such as the position, degrees or titles held. Informal authority, in turn, does not result directly from the prestige of the function performed by a given person, but is the result of the activity of this person and their output.

In the sciences of management, formal authority is treated as one of the pillars of power and denotes the right to issue commands and enforce obedience or force subordinates to recognize the rights of superiors to influence them (Stoner et al., 2001). However, an attempt to enforce obedience and thus create authority actually contradicts the very idea of authority, which manifests itself in one group of people expressing admiration and appreciation for another. Therefore, in the aforementioned situation, we deal with an imposed, superficial authority. In the literature on the subject, one can also find a distinction between a liberating and subjugating (enslaving) authority (Kozak, 2005).

From the perspective of a person being under the influence of authority, a liberating authority is beneficial, because it is a medium of energy for the implementation of pro-social tasks. It is a means of encouraging others to make efforts and display perseverance in setting and achieving goals. It has the inspiring power of influencing the behaviour of people in whom it inspires admiration, recognition and respect. It also encourages a creative attitude. This type of authority results from the competence of a given person and is to a large degree related to the principle of "to be", the adherence to which is conducive to developing the spiritual sphere of a person. Authority, thus revealed, is the result of others, observing in a person the traits which are considered highly valuable and socially desirable. This refers to the traits of a person focused on creating goods which serve the general public, and not on selfishly satisfying the needs of themselves and their inner circle. It is worth noting that such a person, being an authority for others, does not particularly seek such recognition, does not contrive their position, nor do they manipulate their image in order to arouse admiration and gain power (Hołyst, 2015).

On the other hand, the subjugating authority is related to an unhealthy need for the domination of a given person over another or others, revealing

actions of a selfish character. The nature of such a person is to a large degree irrational, and the origin of their actions is identification with the principle of "to have". In this case, authority is the result of the efforts of a person who strives to achieve it by various means. They do not shy away from manipulating their image and exerting pressure on others to obtain feedback confirming their dominant social position (Hołyst, 2015). It is so because their distinguishing feature is the insatiable craving for flattering attention from other people. They expect that their wisdom and infallibility be perceived and articulated at every opportunity. They are even inclined to force obedience from their subordinates, causing fear, which results from the necessity of absolute submission. In such a case, fear is an effective enforcement tool, which in the long run serves to maintaining power, rather than build authority. Above all, people who succumb to such kind of authority are those who perceive subordination and submission as a chance to elevate their social status, enjoy possibility of acceptance and guarantee their safety. In this case, the influence of authority increases in proportion to the psychological needs of the person remaining under its influence. According to Erich Fromm, the lack of a sense of security in those people is compensated, among others, by the power of the authority to which an individual subordinates (Fromm, 2005). However, the subjugating (enslaving) authority actually limits the independence of action and spontaneity of thought for the people remaining under its pressure. It makes these people susceptible to following orders unconditionally and carrying out the tasks set by a superior who is an authority, without reflecting on the potential or actual consequences of their own actions.

In the author's opinion, all social relations described as subjugating or enslaving freedom of thought, not only contradict the seriousness and significance of authority, but undermine the basic rights of the human being. For enforcing obedience and absolute subordination is a violation of the freedom and dignity of another human being. It is definitely characteristic of defining authoritarian relations, not authority. Authority should not deprive others of their freedom of thought and action or be based on coercion but it should actually correspond with their autonomy (Jakubowska-Branicka, 2000).

## 2. Command ÷ Power; Leadership ÷ Authority

Command is defined in the *Rules of Operation of the Land Forces* as “a process by which the commander imposes their will and intentions on subordinates and as part of which, assisted by their staff, plans, organizes, coordinates and directs the actions of subordinate troops through the use of standard operating procedures and all available means of transmitting information” (*Regulamin działań Wojsk Lądowych*, 2008, pp. 271, 407). It follows from this definition that the commander has power and, using its instruments, imposes their will on subordinates. Power with the authorisation to give orders to subordinates, directly linked to bearing the full responsibility for their consequences. The scope of a commander’s power varies and depends on the position held or the type of task received. Command in the structures of uniformed services is directly associated with the person of the commander in power (officer, warrant officer, non-commissioned officer).

Assuming that commanding is unequivocally identified with power and enforcing the commander’s will using the instruments of this power, the authority of the commander results, in the first place and large part, from the position held and the scope of power associated with this position. However, if the commander is a charismatic person with a high level of intelligence, including emotional intelligence, their real influence on subordinates increases (Kałużny, Zieliński, 2019). The strength of this influence is variable, depending on numerous factors and circumstances, but its source is a rich resource of general and specialist knowledge, life experience of the superior and their ability to use these resources in emerging interpersonal situations. In addition, a commander who does not force their own unilateral and sometimes arrogantly communicated decisions, but is capable, to a reasonable extent, of listening to rational arguments from the subordinates before making them, enjoys real (natural) authority among them. It is through such actions, among other things, that they begin to lay the foundations for the internal, peculiar bond developing between them and their subordinates. In such a mode of command, the authority of the commander resulting from their function (formal authority) changes into the authority resulting from the will of subordinates (natural authority), and thus the strength of their influence increases. Undoubtedly, natural authority is characterized by a complex structure shaped in the process of combining various interdependent components. These probably include basic values such as: wisdom, righteousness, appropriate manners and credibility.

Subordinates who recognize the personal (natural) authority of the commander and not the authority associated with the position held, do not agree directly with their uncritical adoration and imitation. For the personal authority of the commander does not result from the fact that they have power and “know everything better than subordinates”. In such a situation, a commander who becomes an example to follow is one who knows a lot but does not overwhelm subordinates with their knowledge, actions and power, inspiring them instead to exercise creative effort and courageous thinking. They do not use authority to order people about and enforce obedience, to indicate what should be done and how, but rather to lay foundation for trust (more on this topic in: Sztompka, 2007). It is a commander who realizes that building real authority is a slow process which relies on the acceptance of their actions by the subordinates. A commander who bases their influence primarily on trust and recognition of their causative role, and not on forcing subordination. They profess a principle whereby their subordinates should respect them instead of being afraid of them. This is because we respect others, not only commanders and not for the authority they possess, but for their knowledge, propriety, truthfulness, rationality of requirements, ability to control themselves in difficult conditions, ability to cooperate, reliability, efficiency in taking action, and accuracy in formulating thoughts. The aforementioned traits and competences of a commander are desirable, for example, due to the fact that modern subordinates are educated people, able to think independently, and, most importantly, they serve in uniformed services of their own will, not out of statutory obligation. Thus, they are more frequently partners of the commander in the implementation of common tasks, rather than unwitting executors of them.

Commanding subordinates is an honourable pursuit, but one requiring skills, all the more so in modern times. An activity requiring superiors not only to have appropriate intellectual qualifications and expertise but also fortitude and flexibility in decision-making. An excellent commander, regarded by their subordinates as a genuine authority, appears to possess both a wealth of knowledge and an assertive personality, as well as imagination stemming from it. They are able to rise to the heights of the intellectual and moral levels because only then are they able to effectively use their abilities to exert personal influence on the behaviour of their subordinates. And having an authentic, relatively permanent authority is the foundation for creating a friendly atmosphere of service. A service in which horizontal and vertical relations are based on clear criteria for

the functioning of individuals in hierarchical structures of dependence, in which authority is the privilege of those in a hierarchically superior position rather than a tool for exercise of power.

In addition, a personal – empowering authority is one of the basic referents of leadership, with the assumption that leadership “is a comprehensive, moral relationship between people, based on trust, obligations, commitments, emotions, and a jointly shared vision of the good”(Ciulla, 1995, p. 15). In leadership, there is no expectation of submission, no unconditional acceptance of authority, and no forced adaptation to the leader’s behaviour. Rather, it relies on dialogue, friendly communication, commitment, empathy, identification, reciprocity, and responsibility for tasks carried out together. Leaders are aware that the strength of their power does not depend on efficient and punitive enforcement of obedience but on the magnitude of societal acceptance (Gajdziński, 2013). It should be noted that it is difficult for a commander possessed of a “toxic power syndrome”, envy, and other traits which distinguish “small-calibre people”, especially careerists, to aspire to a leadership role. From the conditions outlined briefly, it is clear that leadership has always been a social construct. A leader (their rank or greatness) is revealed as a consequence of the social expectations of a particular group of subordinates at a specific time, in a specific culture, and in a specific situation. Leadership is the ability of a group leader to impart intellectual and moral causative power to the subordinates. The force needed to successfully implement jointly adopted intentions, which Gustave Le Bon described as a “secret force”, an “almost magnetic spell” (Le Bon, 1986, pp. 121, 134).

Leadership, although understood and interpreted in various ways, is becoming a popular term in the uniformed services, with increasing importance in the practice of exercising command. In the practice of commanding rather than leading, as there are no leadership positions in the hierarchical structure of these services, in formal terms. Despite this, there occurs an increasingly common conviction that traditional leadership of subordinates in modern realities without the leadership competence on the part of superiors is becoming increasingly difficult. We live in times when subordinates cannot always be persuaded to act in a certain way through the means of authoritarian power. It seems that a more appropriate way leading to conscious subordination and disciplined execution of tasks is to have adequate leadership competence based on the commander’s internal (informal) authority (Kałużny, 2002). For authority – a liberating authority even more so – can and, in the author’s view, does perform motivational functions.



Real, authentic – liberating authority is a carrier of socially accepted values – human-wide values, positive and causative energy.

It seems that authority figures, seen and assessed in this way, are likely to exist and exert influence in wider social relations, not just in the uniformed services. Authorities exposed and popularized in a different formula – identified, for example, with a function or position are subject to accelerated diminishing and, in the long term, exert little social influence. Because their colloquial understanding is associated with a restriction of individual freedom and autonomy, i.e., priority values for individualist culture (Bakiera, 2013). Thus, a culture characteristic of European societies, valuing freedom, independence, and autonomy of opinion, where the influence of non-authentic authorities seems increasingly less significant.

### **3. Commander's authority versus leader's authority**

How do we reconcile the efficiency of command which is strictly dependent on the need for almost absolute submission of subordinates to the authority of the commander with ethical behaviour? It is generally held as true that the modern model of command in uniformed services highlights the combination of a superior's formal and legal competences with their informal attributes and leadership predispositions (Kałużny, Pietrakowski, 2020). In addition, greater importance than over the past decades is attached to preparing a decision in a team, remaining in harmony with the personal responsibility of the commander for making it. However, despite the shift towards valuing leadership qualities, a commander is appointed and designated to a specific position with an assigned scope of privileges and duties. A leader, in contrast, cannot be formally appointed. They emerge from among group members, playing the role of leader and guide. As Bogdan Szulc rightly pointed out, "One becomes a commander by the designation of superiors; one becomes a leader through the acceptance of subordinates" (Szulc, 2002, p. 211). Another positive aspect is the fact that for people in uniforms, the idea of leadership is deeply rooted in the Polish tradition. In this country, there has been no shortage of great leaders from a historical perspective, including military leaders (Kałużny, Kuszyk, 2021), even though the idea of leadership only began to spur on the interest of scholars in the second half of the 20th century. A common characteristic of great leaders was the fact that they were able to inspire the faith of their supporters (subordinates) in what they believed or in what they did.

The path from a formal superior to a leader, recognised by subordinates, is one of moving towards a goal shared by the commander and subordinates. And one of the essential qualities of a good commander (leader) is a strong preference for national objectives and civil duties rather than private – personal interests. On the other hand, given the special responsibility of a superior for the life and health of their subordinates (especially under conditions of danger), everyone should have a conscience, understood as “moral consciousness, the ability to make judgements concerning the moral value of human acts” (Jedynak, 1999, pp. 254-255). A superior, being responsible for the results of the service-related actions of their subordinates, very frequently appeals (or at least should) to his or her own conscience and through its lens reflects upon their own conduct, which should be closely related to the need to “be just”. It is so because moral and lawful behaviour is firmly rooted in the traditions of the armed forces and in the oaths taken (to be faithful to God, Homeland and the flag), as well as in the codes and principles of ethics of uniformed services (Adamkiewicz, 1997). In practice, however, each service officer is loyal, sincere and characterized by a sense of responsibility for the actions undertaken and performed. Being a superior, they respect the dignity of their subordinates. They are guided by a sense of justice and a desire to strengthen and foster collegial bonds. They always subordinate issued orders and commands to the good of the service (*Kodeks honorowy żołnierza zawodowego Wojska Polskiego*, 2008).

Each commander, by virtue of their position, holds power adequate to a given position and formal authority associated with it. However, those who excel in leadership, in addition to the formal privileges resulting from their position, possess attributes rooted in individual personality and character traits (Knecht, Palka, 2018). This is because the power resulting from the assigned function and the associated authority are insufficient to fulfil the role of an excellent commander, let alone a leader. People of authority, in turn, the common source of which is power, indicate the danger of excessive obedience to this power. Such relationships limit the individual activity of a person under the influence of authority and create conditions for external controllability. The attitude of excessive obedience poses the risk of losing control over the essence of action in real situations, since a given person becomes accountable only to those who allow such actions. Minimising the sense of responsibility for the type and scope of actions taken, in a situation of obedience to authority, based on the principle “I was only following orders, commands of the superior”, results from excessive

confidence in their knowledge, infallibility, or the causative power of the authority held.

Submission to legitimate authority from the perspective of inaccessible knowledge or power for those who submit seems quite reasonable. However, the essence lies in the fact that we submit to people of authority even when it does not make any sense. And although blind obedience to authority is often profitable, it sometimes leads us astray, because we replace thinking with mechanical reaction (Zimbardo, 2007). In addition, as Stanley Milligram notes, although obedience to authority plays an important role in maintaining public order, disobedience constitutes a factor protecting against authoritarianism (Milligram, 2008). So, is it possible in our contemporary era, in uniformed services, to have a situation in which command is based on the internal authority of the commander – one that inspires and motivates, rather than on the authority of power? Is this possible in services where social relations and organizational roles of team members are defined and designated by a highly hierarchical organizational structure? Where unshakable principles of service and the allocation of authority to assign tasks and give orders are in force? It seems that, although slow, changes in this direction are inevitable, especially considering the voluntary, not mandatory nature of service in these formations.

## Summary

Superiors value obedience and submission in subordinates highly, while they are reluctant to tolerate mental acuity, independence and a sense of self-esteem. In such conditions, within the framework of traditional service, despite positive changes, there is little chance of resisting the influence of a superior and the authority of their power. Another challenge for uniformed services is the mentality of superiors, which is passed down from generation to generation. It seems that changes in the mentality of officers do not keep up with the progress of knowledge and the desired rules of command resulting from it – leadership and understanding of authority. Too little emphasis is placed on defining the purpose of actions and motivating factors when assigning tasks to subordinates, while disproportionately more attention is given to instructing them on how to carry out the task. Practicing such methods with subordinates guarantees the correctness of task execution but limits the initiative and creative approach to its performance. It gives superiors a sense of well-fulfilled duty,

satisfaction with the level of training and discipline of subordinates, but does not foster their creativity, independence and responsibility.

Despite many positive changes in the superior-subordinate relationship, obedience and impeccable execution of superiors' orders remain the fundamental criterion for a positive assessment in uniformed services. They often determine professional advancement, rather than the nobility of character, knowledge, and personal authority. The obvious reality in which almost every commander performs in a dual role, as both a superior and a subordinate, is not always recognized. This duality of roles manifests in specific interpersonal relationships. In a vertical chain of command, commanders often adopt the leadership styles practiced by their superior. Therefore, when a higher-ranking commander in the hierarchy treats subordinates instrumentally – as mere executors, it does not allow them to experience a sense of self-esteem or demonstrate the competencies possessed by them. They make it known to them that only the higher-ranking commander is the authority – the person who knows best and leads the way in the organisation. Thus, commanders situated lower in the hierarchical structure than their superior behave similarly towards their subordinates.

In a sense, an individual is powerless in the face of the authority of power. The more one's well-being depends on this authority the greater this powerlessness grows. Nevertheless, an educated, independently thinking individual with a sense of independence should consider the mechanism of exerting influence on the part of authority. They should try to answer the question: who and why dictates to them what is good and worth desiring, and what constitutes no value? Maybe then they will become responsible for what they do or do not do, as well as conscious decision-makers in choosing values based on true authority rather than superficial authorities. In this approach to authority, it becomes possible to maintain symmetry of influence, namely: authority affects us, but we decide whom we recognise as authority. It should be remembered that the qualities combining to constitute authority are not their objective traits, such as height or age. They are largely a product of our sensory, cognitive and emotional processes.

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## **Autorytet przełożonego w dowodzeniu – przewodzeniu podwładnymi**

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The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.