

Practical Legitimacy

A Framework for Understanding the Pillars of Authority

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Practical Legitimacy: A Framework for Understanding the Pillars of Authority

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Legitimacy, as understood in the day-to-day lives of people, is a direct and practical concept, not an abstract or mysterious one.

**Legitimacy is the relative willingness of people
to do as they are asked by an authority.**

The more legitimate an authority is perceived to be, the more cooperation it will receive, and the more active that cooperation will be. The less legitimate an authority is perceived to be, the less cooperation it receives. Most of the time resistance to an authority with low legitimacy is passive, people simply try to avoid as much interaction with it as possible. However, at some point, the loss of legitimacy can become significant enough to cause active opposition.

Loss of legitimacy is at the heart of many contemporary conflicts and disputes. Regaining it and repairing the rifts between communities, between governments and citizens, between companies and customers, often stalls on a misunderstanding of what legitimacy actually is and how it is promoted and secured.

Legitimacy is strengthened by specific behavior around four “pillars of authority”

Legitimacy is a property of authority that is promoted by specific behaviors that fall under four broad categories I call the “pillars of authority”: *security*, *services*, *voice*, and *attention*. I will provide an explanation of what each of the pillars means to people and the behaviors expected after some key points about what legitimacy is and is not.

Authority, and its legitimacy, rests on these four pillars and the expectations that people have with regard to them. There are clear sets of behaviors on the part of those claiming authority that underlie whether or not people will accept that authority as *legitimate*. With success in these behaviors legitimacy rises; with failure legitimacy decreases.

This framework of four pillars makes legitimacy *practical*. By using this framework to understand the expectations people have, authorities can better shape their interactions with people so as to deliberately develop legitimacy and the cooperation that follows. This framework is useful as a guide to actions and activities.

The framework also allows for analysis of existing authorities. We can determine how legitimate they are, with which groups under their jurisdiction, and why they are viewed by people as they are. This framework lets us see where authorities fall short with groups and specifically what behaviors are losing them legitimacy.

Legitimacy is a product of respect toward identity groups *by authority*

Legitimacy is a product of respect. It is the outcome of the ongoing demonstration of respect by organizations and their representatives toward groups of people with a shared identity. People, as members of identity groups, decide on the legitimacy of an authority or an organization based on how that organization behaves *toward the group*.

It is important to emphasize the order of the interaction: an authority must grant respect toward an identity group and then, and only then, will the group provide legitimacy, i.e. show a willingness to do as they are asked. *People and groups do not owe cooperation and legitimacy to an authority*. People make a choice about the legitimacy of an authority that is based on the respect shown to them and their group.

Legitimacy is a continuum, not all-or-nothing

The legitimacy of any authority is a continuum or sliding scale. It is not an all or nothing state of being. How groups of people perceive an authority can change from day to day, as will their willingness to accede to a request from that authority. Different groups can perceive the legitimacy of an authority differently, with one group offering legitimacy through a willingness to interact and cooperate, while another might withhold legitimacy through avoidance or resistance.

The four pillars (security, services, voice, attention) are cumulative with each other. An authority that functions at a high level at more than one pillar will receive more legitimacy

than an authority that is good at only one. Failing at more than one pillar leads to greater and quicker losses of legitimacy than failing at just one.

Legitimacy cannot be compelled

An authority only has legitimacy inasmuch as people or groups of people are willing to do as they are asked *without coercion*. Legitimacy is not the same as control. People can often (though not always!) be compelled to obey demands through repression and violence.

A decline or loss of legitimacy does not mean that an authority can no longer operate. An authority that resorts to repression to get things done can continue to function. The loss of widespread legitimacy does, however, make it more difficult and expensive to get anything done.

It is possible for an authority to build up a reputation for legitimacy, such that it can get away with compulsion in limited areas and for limited periods without wholesale collapse of legitimacy with the groups in its jurisdiction. But, by and large, authorities underestimate the power of voluntary cooperation at their peril.

Legitimacy applies to every organization

Legitimacy applies to the social contract of *every* organization and authority structure. Legitimacy does not apply solely to government, but to any organization or position that can request something of value from people. No organization escapes local scrutiny.

This applies to every organization in a context: government as a whole, branches or departments of a government, corporations or small businesses, charities and non-governmental agencies, social clubs and fraternal organizations, the United Nations and its agencies, the local police department, etc. It also applies to any position that claims authority: politicians, CEOs, community leaders and organizers, teachers and professors, pastors and priests, all the way down to parents in their relationships with their children.

Moreover, all four pillars are involved in the social contract of every organization. This can present a severe challenge to some organizations, where it appears that the organization does not have direct responsibilities with regard for one or more pillars.

The Four Pillars of Authority

- ◆ **Security:** Defined by people as (a) not harming the people an authority claims to represent and (b) preventing harm from befalling them, with (a) by far the more important.
- ◆ **Services:** Defined by people as the active provision of services that meet a certain standard of quality. From a government these can be education, sanitation, transportation infrastructure, health care, etc. From a business these can be the actual goods purchased by a customer. From a religion or religious leader these can be spiritual comfort, moral structure, etc. From a parent these can be food, clothing, shelter, the opportunity for an education, etc.
- ◆ **Voice:** Defined by people as some culturally appropriate and relevant mechanism by which citizens or customers can communicate with the authority and provide feedback.
- ◆ **Attention:** Defined by people as some culturally appropriate and relevant positive acknowledgement of their group and its right to existence.

Security

Security is the first and most fundamental of the pillars of authority. It emerges first in the personal relationship we have with our parents, and it arises first in the historical record of governing authorities. All organizations are responsible for security. Most, however, are responsible in indirect and implicit ways that go largely unacknowledged by the organizations. As a result, organizations often deny their responsibility for danger or damage in cases where people or groups do in fact perceive their accountability.

Security comes in negative and positive aspects.

- ➡ Negative security: do not hurt those you claim to represent
- ➡ Positive security: protect from harm those you claim to represent

While people care about both negative and positive aspects and how an authority practices and encourages them, they care far more about the negative. An authority that harms its people will lose legitimacy rapidly. Governments that turn to repression and violence to maintain control swiftly lose the compliance and cooperation of the population. A business

that sells shoddy and dangerous goods loses customers. Abusive parents are not rewarded with well-behaved children.

Positive security is also important. Threats must be engaged actively and prevented from harming or causing further harm. Militaries improve a government's legitimacy (and their own) by defending the country from invasion. Johnson & Johnson's response in 1982 to the poisoning of bottles of Tylenol was to recall every single bottle from store shelves (31 million!) and to change their nationwide advertising to offer warnings and refunds.

The organizations with direct responsibility for daily, everyday security (the police, the government and its structures, security firms) are held to the standard of making sure no one is hurt—especially by them. They are always held accountable when someone is harmed. This accountability does not have to have a negative pressure on legitimacy. It can be positive if the organizations have responded well to threats. But ignoring this responsibility and the accountability that goes along with it inevitably leads to loss of legitimacy.

Organizations that are not directly responsible for security are still held accountable for security (or people's perceptions of security) in their area of influence. An area of influence can be a limited geographic space, an ideological space, cyberspace, etc. When people feel less secure in an area, they will blame local organizations (organizations that claim authority in that space)—even if the organizations are not directly responsible.

A bar that allows rowdy patrons to roam through a neighborhood will suffer a reduction of legitimacy among neighbors. The bar is seen as responsible for local perceptions of reduced security. This can generate enough active dislike that neighbors can cause the license to operate to be taken away.

When credit card information is stolen from a company, the company loses customers.

When children are abused by a religious leader, the church loses legitimacy among its congregation and community.

Services

Organizations have to provide something that people and communities see as worthwhile. Further, the quality has to meet certain standards.

Governing authorities who fail to provide what communities consider as appropriate government services will lose legitimacy. The precise services and what is an acceptable minimum vary from locale to locale, but tend to include some level of education, health care, sanitation, transportation infrastructure, and energy.

Organizations that over-promise and fail to deliver on their promises will lose legitimacy. When a company says it will create jobs, but then fails to create as many as it suggested (or the jobs somehow do not go to those to whom they were promised), it will lose legitimacy.

An auto manufacturer whose cars do not meet their own stated standard for low emissions will lose legitimacy.

A charitable organization that fails to provide the services they say they will lose legitimacy within the community they claim to serve—even though they may not lose funding from donors..

Voice

Voice refers to true feedback mechanisms. True feedback mechanisms do not merely collect information; they provide ways to make people *feel heard*.

In order to promote voice, first, organizations need to provide ways to hear communities. In the case of governing authorities, they need to provide feedback mechanisms so that communities can talk to government. Electing representatives is one mechanism—and a crucial one for certain types of governing authority—but it also carries a time lag and often needs to be supplemented.

In the case of a business, they need to provide ways for a community or communities to express their concerns (or delight) over the company's behavior.

Governing authorities need to be seen to be listening to the groups who want to be listened to. Not every group cares about every issue, but if a group appears to care, then it is crucial to address them directly in languages they prefer, and provide them with opportunities for follow-up.

Businesses need to make communities feel as though they matter. In the case of customers, a business which provides good attention will be rewarded with loyalty. In the case of communities, businesses that are seen to be giving back (usually through charitable work of some appropriate sort) can improve their legitimacy.

However, charitable work is not a panacea. Here is where Voice comes in. A business or an explicitly charitable organization, or even a religious organization, has to do the “right” charitable work as perceived by the community. The wrong charitable work is seen by communities as violating the rules of Voice—and those of Attention and Services as well. Breaking three of the pillars leads to a big loss of legitimacy.

Attention

Attention is positive social acknowledgement. It is the validation of the existence of a group and its right to exist.

Authorities need to address groups directly by interacting with the markers of group identity. Some of the most obvious ways are:

- Sponsoring or participating in cultural festivals
- Celebrating group heroes and history
- Displaying group iconography

There are two significant challenges to authorities offered by the pillar of Attention.

First, there is the balancing act of providing the right amount of attention to multiple groups. Attention often appears as a finite resource to people. Therefore, if one group is getting attention (or is perceived by other groups as getting it), then there is often the perception that there is less attention available for other groups and, therefore, that these other groups are *losing*. This can lead to a backlash against the authority. The feeling of losing attention is a feeling of disrespect, which in turn leads the disrespected group to begin withholding legitimacy from the authority.

Second, there is the negative aspect of Attention, where authorities give negative social attention. Authorities and their representatives can call into question the right of groups to exist or feel represented. This too is felt as disrespect.

It must be noted that Attention is not the same as giving in to demands. However, when combined with mechanisms that enable Voice, Attention can be part of the process by which demands are heard.

In one powerful example of getting Attention right, a small city in the US with a very diverse population maintains three flagpoles in front of its City Hall. One flies the national flag, one flies the state flag, and the last is changed regularly to provide attention to groups residing in the city. For example, the flag of Greece is flown for Orthodox Easter, while the flag of Ireland is flown for St Patrick's Day. When there was an earthquake in Nepal, the Nepalese flag was raised the very next day.

This may seem small, but in a subtle way, this practice of symbolic acknowledgement of the many groups that make up the city allows and encourages everyone in the city to feel part of

a larger whole. Because the flagpoles stand outside City Hall, this is clearly official Attention. Because two of the flagpoles are constant, the third acknowledging one is always presented in the context of national, state, and city unity. Groups are not acknowledged as isolated and separate, but rather as parts that make the whole greater.

The Power of Practical Legitimacy

Using this framework of four pillars, it is remarkably easy to tell whether an authority can expect cooperation or resistance. We can also see how different groups can have differing perceptions of an authority's legitimacy. But practical legitimacy is not just a diagnostic tool.

The four pillars of authority are based on direct and simple behaviors. Practical legitimacy is fundamentally about getting the behaviors right, or shifting from the wrong behaviors toward better ones. When authorities understand what people expect, they can deliberately tailor their actions to meet those expectations. As mentioned above, this is not the same as giving into every demand. Rather it is about listening to people and respecting what you hear from them.

The power of this framework emerges from its directness. People are always quite clear about whether they feel their group identity is being supported or suppressed. They can and do articulate exactly why they have these feelings. They can tell what factors in their environment are responsible. All you have to do is ask.

Where did the Practical Legitimacy Framework come from?

Beginning in 2000 through 2013, the Do No Harm Project asked thousands of people in dozens of countries "What makes an authority legitimate? How do you know a legitimate authority when you see one?" The four pillars of security, services, voice, and attention came up in conversations around the world. There were regional variations in the services mentioned as important, and individuals sometimes offered more than just these four pillars. However, these four—security, services, voice, and attention—were cited everywhere.

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Executive Summary

Legitimacy is the relative willingness of people to do as they are asked by an authority.

- The more legitimate an authority is perceived to be the more cooperation it receives.
- The less legitimate an authority is perceived to be the less cooperation it receives.
- Legitimacy is not the same as control. It cannot be gained through coercion.
- A decline in legitimacy makes getting things done more difficult and more expensive.

Legitimacy is a continuum or sliding scale. It is not an all or nothing state of being.

- How groups of people perceive an authority can change from day to day.
- Different groups can perceive the legitimacy of the same authority differently.

Legitimacy is a product of ongoing respect shown by authorities.

- Respect must be shown toward groups of people with a shared identity.
- Legitimacy is promoted by specific behaviors on the part of authorities.
- These behaviors can be grouped in four categories.

The Four Pillars of Authority upon which Legitimacy can be raised

- ◆ **Security:** (a) do not harm those you claim to represent and (b) protect those you claim to represent from harm.
 - ➡ *(a) is far more important for legitimacy!*
- ◆ **Services:** the active provision of services people want.
- ◆ **Voice:** a culturally appropriate and relevant mechanism by which people can communicate with the authority.
- ◆ **Attention:** a culturally appropriate, positive acknowledgement of a group.

Legitimacy applies to the social contract of *every* organization in a context.

- Legitimacy does not apply solely to government.
- No organization escapes local scrutiny.