

# UNDERSTANDING POWER, RANK & PRIVILEGE

**A three-part ANZPOP mini-course for better  
collegial, client and personal relationships**

*More insight*

*Less drama*

*Better connections*

## MODULE 2

Signals of high and low rank

How rank unconsciousness creates conflict



# HOW TO NOTICE POWER?

Power, rank and privilege are always part of interpersonal communications and relationships. Always.

In Module 1, we noted that high rank is blinding and that we are more likely to notice rank differences when we are in lower rank because we feel less safe.

That doesn't mean that we can articulate or name why we feel unsafe or uncomfortable. We need to notice the indirect communication signals that communicate rank status – higher or lower.

Again, these lists aren't exhaustive but cover the many different types of rank signals.



# HIGH RANK SIGNALS

High rank is often indicated by:

- Relaxed posture, sitting back
- Feeling at ease, comfortable
- Being articulate and expressive
- Feeling comfortable to speak up and express oneself
- Being more balanced, centered or detached, as opposed to being emotional
- Feeling entitled
- Dismissing others' experience – saying or thinking things like “don't take it personally/you're too sensitive”
- Determining availability for the relationship – when, where and how the relationship happens
- Determining the communication style – usually dictating a rational, calm style of conversation
- Thinking relationship problems belong to the other person, not them – tend to label the other person
- Condescending, detached or objective tone
- Feeling superior, confident or smug
- A tendency to initiate or guide conversation.



# LOW RANK SIGNALS

Low rank is often indicated by:

- Not feeling able to speak up
- Going blank, foggy brain
- Fumbling words, stuttering, forgetting words, jumbling sentences
- Settling for how things are
- Self-doubt, self-blame, insecurity, feeling inferior
- Adaptive behaviours – feeling like you have to agree, nodding, saying yes but wanting to say no
- Tracking the other person with your eyes
- Placating and elevating the other
- Fear signals – sweating, shaking, avoiding eye contact
- Paranoia, feeling like you're going crazy
- Being emotional, frustrated, feeling misunderstood or desperate
- Practicing what you are going to say before you say it
- Fidgeting
- Feelings of revenge
- Feeling overlooked, neglected, unnoticed
- Feeling alone in your position/opinion.



# CONFLICT AND POWER

Unowned high rank, or rank unconsciousness is the number one reason for interpersonal conflict.

When we're not aware of how we have power (and all the privileges that come with it i.e. the way life is easier or gives us more opportunities than others), we're at risk of misusing our power and inadvertently creating conflicts.

Following are three stories demonstrating how different kinds of power, when we're not aware we have them, can create or contribute to conflict.



## UN-OWNED SOCIAL POWER (PHYSICAL)

Sarah is 5'8" (172cm) tall. Her friend Tricia is 5'3" (160cm).

Sarah doesn't wear high-heeled shoes. She thinks this is because she knows they are bad for her back and feet and made a choice to not wear them.

Tricia almost always wears heels. Sarah tells her she should stop wearing them because she is damaging her back and feet, Tricia gets defensive and annoyed.

Sarah's intentions were good and she expected that Tricia would appreciate her care, if not her advice.

She is hurt by Tricia's reaction.

Had Sarah stopped to think about the ways in which being taller made life easier, and the ways in which shorter people are discriminated against, she may have approached this differently.

She might also realise she doesn't wear heels because she doesn't experience a need to, unlike Tricia.



## UN-OWNED PSYCHOLOGICAL POWER

An issue has arisen between two friends, Sam and Chris.

Sam brings up the fact that there is an issue and that they should talk it through straight away.

Chris is avoidant, changes the topic, suddenly has to be somewhere else etc.

Sam feels irritated and hurt by Chris's behaviour, and feels powerless to do anything about it.

Sam finds it easier to deal with relationship issues than Chris – this is high rank. Sam feels able to be direct in resolving issues – this is high rank. Sam tries to dictate how to deal with it (talking) and when (straight away). Having the confidence to decide when and how relationship issues are dealt with is a signal of high rank. Sam initiates action to deal with the issue – being the initiator of difficult conversations is also a signal of having higher rank.

If Sam were more aware of these higher psychological rank(s), they could be used to make the situation easier for Chris, and better for the friendship in general.



## UN-OWNED SPIRITUAL POWER

Al is one of three grown children.

At the funeral of their father, Al's siblings are in tears and struggling emotionally, whereas Al is solemn but shows little emotion.

Later at the wake, one of them accuses Al of being heartless and selfish.

Al has diabetes and knows a lot about the fragility of life, having survived several diabetic coma experiences.

This has given Al a kind of detachment and acceptance of death.

Al's comfort with death is a spiritual power, but it can come across as being aloof or uncaring. This can be hurtful and irritating to others when they are in distress.



# MODULE 2 EXERCISE

## REFLECTING ON CONFLICTS

1. Take a moment to think about the interpersonal conflicts in your life, either in the past or happening now.
2. Looking back at the Rank Inventory you did in Module 1; which high ranks did you have in those interpersonal conflicts that you weren't fully aware of?
3. What high ranks did the other person have that they weren't fully aware of?
4. If you were to use your high rank deliberately to better the relationship, how would you do that?



# COMING UP IN MODILE 3...

How to develop more *rank fluidity*

AND

How to continue your journey learning about power, rank and privilege.

