

## FRONT DESK APPARATUS

Cady Noland

*Power! : How to get it, how to use it.*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Korda, Michael, 1933–

*Power! : How to get it, how to use it.*

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Success. 2. Power (Social sciences) I. Title.

HF5386.K77 658.4 75-2263

ISBN 0-394-49314-1

## FURNITURE<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes, to those around him, he seemed so idealistic as to be innocent. He never talked about power and he did not seem to covet it. Yet the truth was quite different. He loved power and he sought it intensely, and he could be a ferocious infighter where the question of power was concerned.

...Part of his strength appeared to be his capacity to seem indifferent, to seem almost naïve about questions of power.

—David Halberstam

Office furnishings have strong symbolic value. [...] Furniture can say a great deal about [a] person. A reporter for *The New York Times* remarked of one tycoon that “Callers, supplicants and salesmen who make their way to [the chairman’s] 42nd floor office get swallowed up and find themselves peering between their knees at him,” helplessly sunk in deep, soft chairs. This is a fairly common power game, and can be observed in many offices. One young lady, job-hunting, noted that almost every senior executive in the publishing business had a low sofa. “...You couldn’t arrange things better to make a person [feel] unimportant.”

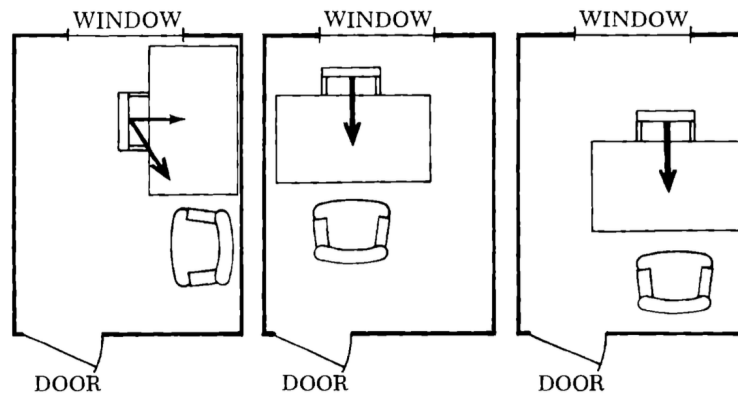
This is not altogether true. There are more elaborate ways of making people feel unimportant. Harry Cohn, the tyrannical president of Columbia Pictures, designed his office in imitation of Mussolini’s, a huge, elongated room with the desk at the far end, raised above floor level. “The portal to the position of power was a massive sound-proofed door with no knob and no keyhole on the outside. It could only be opened by a buzzer operated from Cohn’s or his secretary’s desk. [...]

This is a somewhat extreme example of power decoration, but even lesser power players will usually arrange their offices so that their visitors are obliged to sit in as much discomfort as possible. It is particularly helpful to make sure that

## FRONT DESK APPARATUS

all ashtrays are just slightly out of reach so that visitors sitting in low chairs and, unable to rise, have to stretch awkwardly to dispose of their cigarette ash.

The disposition of furniture is a better indication of power than the furniture itself. Some offices run to luxurious decoration, others do not, but the scale of luxury is more likely to be dependent upon the management's whim than the occupant's status. ...Power lies in how you use what you have, not in the accouterments per se. All the leather and chrome in the world will not replace a truly well-thought-out power scheme. A large office is pointless unless it is arranged so that a visitor has to walk the length of it before getting to your desk, and it is valuable to put as many objects as possible in his path—coffee tables, chairs and sofas, for example—to hinder his progress. However small the office, it is important to have the visitor's chair facing toward you, so that you are separated by the width of your desk. This is a much better power position than one in which the visitor sits next to the desk, even though it may make access to your desk inconvenient for you. When a small office is very narrow (and most are) it is often useful to have the desk placed well forward in the room, thus minimizing the space available for the visitor, and increasing the area in which it is possible for you to retreat, at least psychologically. Thus, in a typical small office, the alternative desk/chair relationships would look like this—



Of these possibilities, number three is by far the strongest power position for the occupant. Behind his desk, he has left himself plenty of room, so that he isn't likely to feel that his back is against the wall when arguing with a caller or a colleague, while his visitor is tightly enclosed, with little psychological space and breathing room. In drawing number two, the visitor is placed in an aggressive position, having more space than the occupant, and being further forward in the room. In drawing number one, the occupant has no power position at all, and is obliged to turn to his right at an uncomfortable angle to talk to the visitor. *Power, let it be remembered, moves in direct lines.* (Attempts to do without desks altogether, though popular in the recording and the broadcasting businesses, have never caught on. The desk performs a useful social function in power terms that is hard to eliminate.) [...]

Desks can tell us a great deal about people's power quotient. The objects most people place on their desks are not there by accident, after all, and usually give

## FRONT DESK APPARATUS

some clue to the power status of the occupant. One successful conglomerator was described as having “his desk peculiarly arranged—with a window at the back—so that outdoor light all but blinds the visitor while striking two polished glass paperweights on his desk, giving an impression that you have come under the scrutiny of two translucent orbs, that your thoughts are being read and your capabilities assayed in a second or two.” [...] Indeed, semi-domestic furnishings are very good power symbols, since they suggest the office is a kind of home away from home, not just a place in which one comes to work from nine to five on weekdays. Even people who go home religiously at five-thirty like to give the impression that they often stay to eight or nine at night, which explains the popularity of radios, clock radios, bars, small refrigerators, blenders, heating pads, exercise poles and Health-O-Matic scales, all of which I have seen in people’s offices. [...]

The more mechanical and complicated our world is, the more we need the simplicity of power to guide us and protect us. It’s the one gift that allows us to remain human in an inhuman world—for “the love of power is the love of ourselves.”

1. Noland, Cady. 2021. “Furniture” from Michael Korda’s *Power! : How to get it, how to use it*. In *THE CLIP-ON METHOD*. Published by Cady Noland, Rhea Anastas and Robert Snowden. ISBN 978-0-578-90314-9

In an atmosphere of rapidly trading artwork, it is not possible for Cady Noland to agree or dispute the various claims behind works attributed to her. Her silence about published assertions regarding the provenance of any work or the publication of a photograph of a work does not signify agreement about claims that are being made. Ms. Noland has not been asked for nor has she given the rights to any photographs of her works or verified their accuracy or authenticity.

Open hours: Tuesday through Thursday from 10AM—5PM and by appointment.  
For inquiries: [info@frontdeskapparatus.com](mailto:info@frontdeskapparatus.com)