

A Political Perspective of Power in Organizations

The classical organization theorists portrayed organizations as highly rational structures in which authority meticulously followed the chain of command and in which managers had legitimized power. The discussion in the next chapter on informal managerial roles and organization portrays another, more realistic view of organizations. It is in this more realistic view of organizations that the importance of the political aspects of power and strategic advantage comes to the forefront.⁶⁰ As Pfeffer notes: “Organizations, particularly large ones, are like governments in that they are fundamentally political entities. To understand them, one needs to understand organizational politics, just as to understand governments, one needs to understand governmental politics.”⁶¹

The political perspective of organizations departs from the rational, idealistic model. For example, Walter Nord dispels some of the dreams of ideal, rationally structured, and humanistic organizations by pointing out some of the stark realities of political power. He suggests four postulates of power in organizations that help focus on the political realities:

1. Organizations are composed of coalitions that compete with one another for resources, energy, and influence.
2. Various coalitions will seek to protect their interests and positions of influence.
3. The unequal distribution of power itself has dehumanizing effects.
4. The exercise of power within organizations is one very crucial aspect of the exercise of power within the larger social system.⁶²

In other words, the political power game is changing, but is still very real in today’s organizations.⁶³ Researchers on organizational politics conclude that

politics in organizations is simply a fact of life. Personal experience, hunches, and anecdotal evidence for years have supported a general belief that behavior in and of organizations is often political in nature. More recently, some conceptual and empirical research has added further support to these notions.⁶⁴

Even though the organizational politics has and will continue to flourish, its nature and how it is expressed changes over time. For example, younger workers often disdain the “Boomer” form of politics as “so last century.” However, as an expert on organizational politics warns the young generation:

By shunning the conventions of office politics, they risk burning bridges. So because you never know how long you’ll be at a firm, I’d still advise sticking to the same old directives. They’re the same today as they were two decades ago.⁶⁵

Like other aspects of organizational behavior dynamics, politics is not a simple process. Besides the age of the participants, politics can vary from organization to organization and even from one subunit of an organization to another. A comprehensive definition drawing from the literature is that “organizational politics consists of intentional acts of influence undertaken by individuals or groups to enhance or protect their self-interest when conflicting courses of action are possible.”⁶⁶ There is also a more recent view that different forms of power in organizations are connected to specific learning processes that help explain why some political insights become institutionalized and others do not.⁶⁷ The political behavior of organizational participants tends to be traditionally viewed as opportunistic for the purpose of maximizing self-interest,⁶⁸ but a counterargument is that orga-

nizational politics is actually the cornerstone of organizational democracy. As one theoretical analysis noted:

politics is central to the development of real organizational democracy. It provides practical advice on how to work with a constructive political “mindset” and highlights how such behavior underpins, rather than undermines, the process of redistributing organizational influence.⁶⁹

Thus, like other dynamics of today’s organizations, the nature of politics is quite complex and still being studied for better understanding.

Research on organizational politics has identified several areas that are particularly relevant to the degree to which organizations are political rather than rational. These areas can be summarized as follows:⁷⁰

1. *Resources.* There is a direct relationship between the amount of politics and how critical and scarce the resources are. Also, politics will be encouraged when there is an infusion of new, “unclaimed” resources.
2. *Decisions.* Ambiguous decisions, decisions on which there is lack of agreement, and uncertain, long-range strategic decisions lead to more politics than routine decisions.
3. *Goals.* The more ambiguous and complex the goals become, the more politics there will be.
4. *Technology and external environment.* In general, the more complex the internal technology of the organization, the more politics there will be. The same is true of organizations operating in turbulent external environments.
5. *Change.* A reorganization or a planned organization development (OD) effort or even an unplanned change brought about by external forces will encourage political maneuvering.

The preceding implies that some organizations and subunits within the organization will be more political than others. By the same token, however, it is clear that most of today’s organizations meet these requirements for being highly political. That is, they have limited resources; make ambiguous, uncertain decisions; have unclear yet complex goals; have increasingly complex technology; and are undergoing drastic change. This existing situation facing organizations makes them more political, and the power game becomes increasingly important. Miles states: “In short, conditions that threaten the status of the powerful or encourage the efforts of those wishing to increase their power base will stimulate the intensity of organizational politics and increase the proportion of decision-making behaviors that can be classified as political as opposed to rational.”⁷¹ For example, with the political situation of today’s high-tech, radically innovative firms, it has been suggested that medieval structures of palace favorites, liege lordship, and fiefdoms may be more relevant than the more familiar rational structures.⁷² Recent theory-building does recognize the reality of territoriality in organizations. “Organization members can and do become territorial over physical space, ideas, roles, relationships, and other potential possessions in organizations.”⁷³ The next section presents such practical political strategies for power acquisition in today’s organizations.

Specific Political Strategies for Power Acquisition

Once it is understood and accepted that contemporary organizations are in reality largely political systems, some very specific strategies can be identified to help organization members more effectively acquire power. For example, one research study found that

a supervisor-focused political strategy resulted in higher levels of career success, whereas a job-focused political strategy resulted in lower levels of success.⁷⁴ Another taxonomy of political strategies included the following:⁷⁵

1. Information strategy—targets political decision makers by providing information through lobbying or supplying position papers or technical reports
2. Financial incentive strategy—targets political decision makers by providing financial incentives such as honoraria for speaking or paid travel
3. Constituency building strategy⁷⁶—targets political decision makers indirectly through constituent support such as grassroots mobilization of employees, suppliers, customers, or public relations/press conferences

Over the years, various political strategies for gaining power in organizations have been suggested.⁷⁷ Table 10.1 gives a representative summary of these strategies. Research is also being done on political tactics. For example, Yukl and Falbe derived eight political, or influence, tactics that are commonly found in today's organizations. These tactics are identified in Table 10.2. Yukl and his colleagues found that the consultation and rational persuasion tactics were used most frequently⁷⁸ and along with inspirational appeal were most effective.⁷⁹ Some modern organization theorists take more analytical approaches than most of the strategies suggested in Table 10.1 and Table 10.2, and they depend more on concepts such as uncertainty in their political strategies for power. For example, Pfeffer's strategies include managing uncertainty, controlling resources, and building alliances.⁸⁰ Others take a more pragmatic approach, such as the analysis that suggests that successful political behavior involves keeping people happy, cultivating contacts, and wheeling and dealing.⁸¹ Law Professor Theresa Beiner coined the term "reindeer games" (from the song "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer") to describe, like in the song, social

TABLE 10.1. Political Strategies for Attaining Power in Organizations

- Taking counsel
- Maintaining maneuverability
- Promoting limited communication
- Exhibiting confidence
- Controlling access to information and persons
- Making activities central and nonsubstitutable
- Creating a sponsor-protégé relationship
- Stimulating competition among ambitious subordinates
- Seek out and befriend the most influential individual in a situation
- Neutralizing potential opposition
- Making strategic replacements
- Committing the uncommitted
- Forming a winning coalition
- Developing expertise
- Building personal stature
- Employing trade-offs
- Interact with others with the goal of building a positive relationship
- Using research data to support one's own point of view
- Restricting communication about real intentions
- Withdrawing from petty disputes

TABLE 10.2. Political Tactics Derived From Research

Tactics	Description
Pressure tactics	Using demands, threats, or intimidation to convince you to comply with a request or to support a proposal.
Upward appeals	Persuading you that the request is approved by higher management, or appealing to higher management for assistance in gaining your compliance with the request.
Exchange tactics	Making explicit or implicit promises that you will receive rewards or tangible benefits if you comply with a request or support a proposal, or reminding you of a prior favor to be reciprocated.
Coalition tactics	Seeking the aid of others to persuade you to do something, or using the support of others as an argument for you to agree also.
Ingratiating tactics	Seeking to get you in a good mood or to think favorably of the influence agent before asking you to do something.
Rational persuasion	Using logical arguments and factual evidence to persuade you that a proposal or request is viable and likely to result in the attainment of task objectives.
Inspirational appeals	Making an emotional request or proposal that arouses enthusiasm by appealing to your values and ideals or by increasing your confidence that you can do it.
Consultation tactics	Seeking your participation in making a decision or planning how to implement a proposed policy, strategy, or change.

Source: Adapted from Gary Yukl and Cecilia M. Falbe, "Influence Tactics and Objectives in Upward, Downward, and Lateral Influence Attempts," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 75, 1990, p. 133. Used with permission.

activities that provide some, but not all, employees with opportunities to interact with other organization members, which helps build an individual's power base. For example, a boss who invites three male subordinates to play a round of golf and does not include a female subordinate is engaged in a reindeer game that could be considered discriminatory in terms of gaining access to the inner circle of power and influence.⁸²

One of the more comprehensive and relevant lists of strategies for modern managers comes from DuBrin.⁸³ A closer look at a sampling of his and other suggested strategies provides important insights into power and politics in modern organizations.

Maintain Alliances With Powerful People

As has already been pointed out, the formation of coalitions (alliances) is critical to the acquisition of power in an organization. An obvious coalition would be with members of other important departments or with members of upper-level management. Not so obvious but equally important would be the formation of an alliance with the boss's secretary or staff assistant, that is, someone who is close to the powerful person. An ethnographic study of a city bus company found that a series of dyadic alliances went beyond the formal system and played an important role in getting the work done both within and between departments.⁸⁴ For example, alliances between supervisors and certain drivers got the buses out on the worst winter snow days and kept them running during summer vacation periods when drivers were sparse.

Embrace or Demolish

Machiavellian principles can be applied as strategies in the power game in modern organizations. One management writer has applied these principles to modern corporate

life. For example, for corporate takeovers, he draws on Machiavelli to give the following advice:

The guiding principle is that senior managers in taken-over firms should either be warmly welcomed and encouraged or sacked; because if they are sacked they are powerless, whereas if they are simply downgraded they will remain united and resentful and determined to get their own back.⁸⁵

Divide and Rule

This widely known political and military strategy can also apply to the acquisition of power in a modern organization. The assumption, sometimes unwarranted, is that those who are divided will not form coalitions themselves. For example, in a business firm the head of finance may generate conflict between marketing and operations in hopes of getting a bigger share of the limited budget from the president of the company.

Manipulate Classified Information

The observational studies of managerial work have clearly demonstrated the importance of obtaining and disseminating information.⁸⁶ The politically astute organization member carefully controls this information in order to gain power. For example, the CIO (chief information officer) may reveal some new pricing information to the design engineer before an important meeting. Now the CIO has gained some power because the engineer owes the CIO a favor. In the Information Age, the amount of information being generated is growing rapidly; how it is managed can provide power. Specifically, knowledge managers such as this CIO can become powerful in today's firms.

Make a Quick Showing

This strategy involves looking good on some project or task right away in order to get the right people's attention. Once this positive attention is gained, power is acquired to do other, usually more difficult and long-range, projects. For example, an important but often overlooked strategy of a manager trying to get acceptance of a knowledge management program is to show some quick, objective improvements in the quality of a product, service, or process.

Collect and Use IOUs

This strategy says that the power seeker should do other people favors but should make it clear that they owe something in return and will be expected to pay up when asked. The "Godfather" in the famous book and movie of that name and Tony Soprano of the HBO TV series very effectively used this strategy to gain power.

Avoid Decisive Engagement (Fabianism)

This is a strategy of going slow and easy—an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary approach to change. By not "ruffling feathers," the power seeker can slowly but surely become entrenched and gain the cooperation and trust of others.

Attacking and Blaming Others

A political tactic some people try is to make others “look bad” in order to make themselves “look good.” Blaming and attacking deflects responsibility onto others. It is unethical and unacceptable, but is also a common practice in many organizations.

Progress One Step at a Time (Camel’s Head in the Tent)

This strategy involves taking one step at a time instead of trying to push a whole major project or reorganization attempt. One small change can be a foothold that the power seeker can use as a basis to get other, more major things accomplished.

Wait for a Crisis (Things Must Get Worse Before They Get Better)

This strategy uses the reverse of “no news is good news”; that is, bad news gets attention. For example, many deans in large universities can get the attention of central administration and the board of regents or trustees only when their college is in trouble, for instance, if their accreditation is threatened. Only under these crisis conditions can they get the necessary funding to move their college ahead.

Take Counsel with Caution

This suggested political strategy is concerned more with how to keep power than with how to acquire it. Contrary to the traditional prescriptions concerning participative management and empowerment of employees, this suggests that at least some managers should avoid “opening up the gates” to their people in terms of shared decision making. The idea here is that allowing subordinates to participate and to have this expectation may erode the power of the manager.

Be Aware of Resource Dependence

The most powerful subunits and individuals are those that contribute valuable resources. Controlling the resources other persons or departments need creates considerable bargaining power.

All of these political tactics are part of the games and turf wars that take place in today’s organizations. On one level they are inevitable and cannot be prevented. On another, however, they are counterproductive and dysfunctional. They can impede participation and empowerment programs and cause people to waste time and resources. Consequently, many managers believe they must take steps to stop the game playing and turf wars through trust-building and goal-sharing programs.⁸⁷ These efforts are especially warranted in a situation in which an organization is undergoing a crisis. Effective crisis management must, at some level, include social-political and technological-structural interventions, mainly aimed at disruptive dysfunctional political agendas of individuals, groups, and/or departments in order to resolve the crisis.⁸⁸ Some knowledgeable observers have even suggested that managers would benefit from reading Shakespeare in order to understand the intrigues and intricacies of political tactics used in today’s organizations.⁸⁹

A Final Word on Power and Politics

Obviously, the strategies discussed are only representative, not exhaustive, of the many possible politically based strategies for acquiring power in organizations. Compared to many of the other topics covered in the text, there is relatively less research backup for these ideas on power and, especially, politics.⁹⁰ There is also a call for a better framework and guidelines to evaluate the ethics of power and politics in today's organizations. This ethical concern goes beyond the notions of success or effectiveness. For example, of the 10 most unethical activities one study identified, three are directly political: (1) making arrangements with vendors for the purposes of personal gain; (2) allowing differences in pay based on friendships; and (3) hiring, training, and promoting personal favorites rather than those who are most qualified.⁹¹

To help overcome the negative impact that organizational politics can have on the ethics of an organization, the following guidelines can be used:

1. Keep lines of communication open.
2. Role-model ethical and nonpolitical behaviors.
3. Be wary of game players acting only in their own self-interests.
4. Protect individual privacy interests.
5. Always use the value judgment "Is this fair?"⁹²

As one analysis pointed out: "When it comes to the ethics of organizational politics, respect for justice and human rights should prevail for its own sake."⁹³ There is recent research evidence of the role that the perceptions of organizational politics play in fairness and justice.⁹⁴

Besides the possible ethical implications of power and politics carried to the extreme, there are, as previously mentioned, dysfunctional effects such as morale being weakened, victors and victims being created, and energy and time spent on planning attacks and counterattacks instead of concentrating on getting the job done.⁹⁵ There is also evidence that politics may play a large role in both base-pay and incentive-pay decisions,⁹⁶ and in one company the power struggles and political gamesmanship were the death knell of a gain-sharing plan (see Chapter 4).⁹⁷ There is some empirical evidence that those managers who are observed to engage in more political activity are relatively more successful in terms of promotions but are relatively less effective in terms of subordinate satisfaction and commitment and the performance of their unit.⁹⁸ There is research evidence that this finding of the importance of political maneuvering in getting ahead in the organization, but detracting from effective performance of the unit, may hold across cultures (at least in Russia).⁹⁹

The dynamics of power continue to evolve. In particular, information technology and the Internet/Intranet provide information access that was not previously available. Organizations with fewer boundaries and wider, even global, access to intellectual capital have political systems and processes that are altered considerably.¹⁰⁰ Also, the ups and downs of the economy in both the United States and the rest of the world have dramatically changed traditional power bases and processes. In the current social environment, many employees are as interested in jobs with meaning as they are with scoring political points and gaining power. As indicated earlier, this seems especially true of today's younger generation who seem more interested in economic control than in control over people or in status and climbing the corporate ladder.¹⁰¹ In other words, today's organizational participants' passion for the good life and meaning may be replacing their ruthless search for power.¹⁰²

One thing about power and politics, however, remains certain: modern, complex organizations tend to create a climate that promotes power seeking and political maneuvering. And, in today's environment, these political activities extend beyond the traditional boundaries of an organization. For example, Microsoft learned, the hard way, that ingratiation political tactics may have been much more successful than simply trying to bully government regulators when antitrust law violations were being investigated. Other important firms such as Google are learning from Microsoft's mistakes; it makes sense to investigate and carefully implement the best political approach when seeking to deal with outside agencies and individuals who could alter or harm a firm's inside operations and growth.¹⁰³ Power and politics are a fact of modern organizational life, and it is hoped that more future research will help managers better understand their dynamics, meaning, and successful application.

SUMMARY

This chapter examines one of the most important and realistic dynamics of organizational behavior—power and politics. *Power* and *politics* have a number of different meanings. Power can be distinguished from authority and influence, but most definitions subsume all three concepts. Most of the attention given to power over the years has centered on the French and Raven classic categories of social power types: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert. Contingency models for power have also been developed that take into consideration the influenceability of the targets of power (that is, their dependency, uncertainty, personality, intelligence, gender, age, and culture). Overall contingency models have emerged. Closely related to the contingency models of the French and Raven power types is the view of power by McClelland. He suggests that there are two faces of power: negative personal power and positive social power. Finally, the special case of empowerment is given attention. This popular approach goes beyond merely delegating authority to make decisions to include participation, innovation, access to information, and accountability/responsibility.

Politics is very closely related to power. This chapter gives particular attention to a political perspective of power in modern organizations, in terms of resources, decisions, goals, technology, external environment, and change, and to strategies for the acquisition of power. Some specific political strategies are to maintain alliances with powerful people, embrace or demolish, divide and rule, manipulate classified information, make a quick showing, collect and use IOUs, avoid decisive engagement, attacking and blaming others, progress one step at a time, wait for a crisis, take counsel with caution, and be aware of resource dependence. Above all, it should be remembered that, although there may be some changes on the importance and how to attain and use it, both power and politics represent the realities of modern organizational life. The study of these important dynamics can significantly improve the understanding of organizational behavior.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REVIEW

1. How would you define power in your own words? How does power differ from authority? From influence?
2. Identify, briefly summarize, and give some realistic examples of each of the French and Raven power types.
3. Using the Kelman contingency model of power and influence, who would you use to advertise products in the fall, winter, spring, and summer? Explain your choices.
4. Describe employee empowerment, giving specific attention to its operationalization and implications for effective outcomes. How, if at all, is empowerment related to traditional delegation? To social power?
5. In the chapter it is stated: "The political power game is very real in today's organizations." Explain this statement in terms of the discussion in the chapter and any firsthand experience you have had to verify it.
6. Identify three or four of the political strategies that are discussed in the chapter. Explain how these might actually help someone acquire power in today's organization.

REAL CASE: *Fighting Back*

One of the areas in which organizations are finding power to be an extremely important consideration in today's knowledge management is the protection of intellectual property, specifically patent protection. When a firm secures a patent, it gains knowledge power over the marketplace. However, if this patent cannot be defended against violators, it has little value. A good example of a patent protection battle is that of Fusion Systems, a small, high-tech American firm, and Mitsubishi, the giant Japanese conglomerate.

Several years ago, Fusion developed a core technology that allowed it to manufacture high-intensity ultraviolet lamps powered by 500 to 6,000 watts of microwave energy. The company obtained patents in the United States, Europe, and Japan. One of its first big orders came from the Adolph Coors Company for lamp systems to dry the printed decoration on beer cans. Other customers included Hitachi, IBM, 3M, Motorola, Sumitomo, Toshiba, NEC, and Mitsubishi. The last purchased Fusion's lamp system and immediately sent it to the research and development lab to be reverse engineered. Once Mitsubishi had stripped down the product, it began filing patent applications that copied and surrounded Fusion's high-intensity microwave lamp technology.

Fusion was unaware of what was going on until it began investigating and found that Mitsubishi had filed nearly 300 patent applications directly related to its own lamp technology. When Fusion tried to settle the matter through direct negotiations, the firm was unsuccessful. In addition, Mitsubishi hired the Stanford Research Institute to study the matter and the Institute concluded that the Japanese company's position was solid. However, the chairman of the applied physics department at Columbia University, who was hired by Fusion, disagreed and—after reviewing the patent materials from both companies—concluded that Mitsubishi had relied heavily on technology developed at Fusion and that Mitsubishi's lamp represented no significant additional breakthrough.

Mitsubishi then offered Fusion a deal: Mitsubishi would not sue Fusion for patent infringement if Fusion would pay Mitsubishi a royalty for the privilege of using "its" patents in Japan. Mitsubishi would then get a royalty-free, worldwide cross-license of all of Fusion's technology. Fusion responded by going to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative and getting help. The company also found a sympathetic ear from the Senate Finance Committee and the House Repub-