



INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATION ACADEMY

Negotiation: The Genesis of Management

NO. 25

Website: negotiation-academy.com

February 2005

COMPANY POLITICS

Why employees play politics?

Individuals and groups in organizations often attempt to "get to the top" by playing so-called, 'business politics'.

By '**politics**' we mean:

- ✍ Actions that are usually **outside** the **formal** and agreed promotion or power system.
- ✍ Actions that are designed to **benefit the person** or group at the expense of the company.
- ✍ Actions that are well **planned** to get and maintain power.

Henry Mintzberg (1983) indicated many years ago that politics exists in organizations and that some individuals are very good at playing politics to their own advantage.

These political games are intended to **resist authority**, **defeat rivals**, and to **effect organizational change**.

Lets look somewhat closer at some of the typical political games that we come across daily:

Typical political tactics

- ✍ **Attacking or blaming others.**

Some employees will quickly run to the boss whenever anyone else (especially those who could be competing with them for promotion) has done something wrong. At the same time

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they will **hide their own mistakes** or blame someone else (e.g. if a tender was not granted after a presentation by a colleague).

- ✍ **Use of information.**

Some workers will **not share** their 'expertise' with others and keep the rest 'hostage' due to the fact that the 'operation of the company' are perceptually dependent on their knowledge (e.g. only one worker at the company knows how to access the software system and to process orders and do not want to share her know-how with anyone else).

- ✍ **Image building**

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If you ask a friend to phone your boss and tell him about your 'excellent performance that was an advertisement for the company', you will possibly be playing a part of this game! Of course there are many ways in which individuals create **images of power**, **excellence** and influence. These are

most often only perceptions, yet can produce great results for the player (often at the expense of the company).

- ✍ **Strong coalitions and alliances**

Some political players '**make friends**' who will vouch for them in crucial times. The more powerful these 'associations' the better. They

'name-drop' and the 'friends' often do not realize that they are only being used by the 'politician' (e.g. when the interview panel has to vote on who is to be sent to manage the French office, it could be difficult for your 'friends' to explain to you later why they did not vote for you).

✍ **Praising others**

If you praise your boss and others who could influence you destiny, the praise is often reciprocated by 'returned favours'. These favours could even include your promotion and bonus or could prevent you from being retrenched during the next re-engineering exercise.

✍ **Creating obligations**

It is quite common for political players to do 'special favours' for their bosses and for people in powerful positions. By doing so they create obligations that can often only be reciprocated by the boss giving the favour back in the form of company privileges (e.g. donating the boss a sought after ticket to the world cup match between South Africa and England).

✍ **The "As-If" game.**

This game is played so as to create a favourable impression to both top management and sub-ordinates. For example, if a supervisor is instructed to discipline a worker for breaking company rules, but does not execute the order, it is often difficult for top management to detect. 'As-If' politics involves **careful lying** to bosses. It could even involve the supervisor telling the subordinate that he is not going to act on the order so as to win the subordinate's favour.

✍ **The Mentorship game.**

In this rather straight forward game, a person **attaches** himself or herself to **someone with power**. The mentor is carefully chosen due to his/her influence over the player's future. Usually someone else with higher power and International Negotiation Academy
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status. The player must of course follow each of the mentor's instructions. Yet, the deal is, if you do what the mentor suggests, there will be rewards at the end of the tunnel. The mentor, on the other hand, receives the credit that he/she played the major role in the player's career.

Having a mentor does necessarily involve doubtful strategies. Yet, if it is done for reasons listed above, it could often be regarded as unethical

✍ **Line versus staff game.**

The 'line manager versus the staff adviser game' has existed for years in organizations. In essence, this game involves line authority promoting operation decisions against the expertise proposals by staff advisers. Individuals in line or staff functions associate themselves strongly with the group to which they be-

long and often join merrily in withholding information, in aligning powerful figures and in creating favourable impressions. They often act as if they identify with organizational goals stronger than the others.

The **line versus staff clash** must be controlled in organizations before it reaches the point at which, because of the disruption, organizational goals are not being achieved.

✍ **Whistle-blowing game.**

This game is played to bring about organizational **change**, or in an attempt to **further your own career** by going outside the normal structures to 'tell the truth' to people of much higher authority or power. This could be a newspaper reporter, a government representative, a director, a boss of a company that is about to buy the company where you work or someone who will 'spread the story'.

For example, an engineer at Ford reportedly told a reporter about the faulty design of the Pinto some years ago. Unfortunately, this whistle-blower was **demoted**. Many of the legal costs and settlements from Pinto crash

victims might have been avoided if the whistleblower's message had been taken more seriously.

Often, whistle-blowing is done **secretly** so that retribution by the authority system is avoided.

Are these political tactics ethical?

If power is used **within the formal** boundaries of a manager's authority and within the framework of organizational policies, job descriptions, procedures, and goals, it is really non-political power and most likely does not involve ethical issues.

But the use of power games **outside the bounds** of formal authority, procedures, job descriptions, and goals is political in nature. When this occurs, ethical issues are likely to be present. Some individuals might go to extreme unethical actions to 'get their way'!

Mintzberg recommends that a manager's behaviour must satisfy certain criteria to be considered **ethical**.

✍ **Win-Win outcomes:**

A manager's actions are ethical when it results in the **optimal satisfaction** of people both inside and outside the organization. In other words, if it results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

✍ **Individual rights:**

It is ethical if the actions respect the rights of all affected parties. In other words, it respects **basic human rights** of free consent, free speech, freedom of conscience, privacy, and due process.

✍ **Legal justice:**

It is possibly ethical if the actions respect the rules of justice. It does not treat people arbitrarily but rather equitably and fairly.

Managing Politics in a Company

One must accept that **politics will always be played**; regardless of managers telling the employees that 'no politics will be played around here'! This is like a mother telling her child that she/he should not cry to get attention!

How do we **manage political behaviour** and channel the actions into positive activities? Managers could perhaps, consider one or more of the following options:

- ✍ Make sure that proper and **clear systems** exists in the company whereby promotion, bonuses, etc. can be achieved.
- ✍ Make political actions **transparent!** For example, if someone gossips about someone else; call the other party and let him/her gossip in front of that person. This will stop the 'game' immediately and the word will spread.
- ✍ Make all other forms of 'favours', that could be perceived as a political game **transparent by involving** more people to first discuss the required 'favour' before accepting it.
- ✍ **Negotiate** and agree with all staff **clear principles and guidelines** as to company mission, ethical behaviour and a 'code of conduct'.

Bibliography: 1983; Mintzberg H, *Power in and around Organisations*; Prentice Hall, N.J.

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