

## Handling the Politics

### 1.1 Introduction

To be successful you have to learn and understand the organisation's power and politics dynamics. Your eventual success or failure may depend on how well you learn appropriate and inappropriate political behaviours, who has power and who does not, and how to gain power and influence yourself within your new company. This involves you learning: to recognise when the tide is running, to operate the ways of the company, to find the obstacles and then to navigate your way around them. You face a particularly complex challenge here and this checklist is designed to be a starter for ten to help you with it.

### 1.2 Definition

Organisations are designed to be power networks, through which influence is exerted and results achieved. 'Legitimate' power is overtly recognised and/or reinforced through formal authority networks and codified in the formal organisation charts.

However, there are sources of power in organisations other than formal authority, many of these holding more power than that of 'legitimate' power. Your organisation is a minefield of informal systems, processes and interactions which frequently contravene sometimes contradict and often over-rule the formal policies, instructions, organisation charts and so on. The fact that this is the case is widely known but not often acknowledged or brought out into the open by people.

Politics is about the management of the differences between these various power sources. The way the politics work can either enhance or undermine the organisation's capability, performance and well-being.

Anyone who works in an enterprise involving people and interactions knows that despite the way things are 'supposed' to be, in practice people continually jockey for power, position, turf and resources. It is an organisational fact of life that at all times, organisations consist of competing political coalitions of people engaged in legitimate and illegitimate conflicts to define the agenda of the organisation and in doing so shape its course of action.

The part you play in the politics of the organisation will be determined by a number of factors:

- your ability to influence (defined as the act of modifying people's beliefs, knowledge, attitudes or behaviour)
- your skills in acquiring the attitudes, behaviour and knowledge needed to participate effectively
- the way you help transmit and maintain the organisation's culture and norms (and in so doing provide employees with a framework for understanding and responding to events in the work environment and ensuring co-ordination between employees)
- your ability to be quickly able to both model and shape the culture and norms
- your ability to distinguish between those who decide and those who are in the know

### 1.3 Advantages

Accepting politics as a fact of life means you will be:

- aware of the need to read and assess situations for their political content and nuances
- more able to achieve your performance objectives
- more likely to be able to influence others and wield power yourself

## **1.4 Disadvantages/issues**

- You need to deliver quickly when you are still politically naive
- You may feel uncomfortable with the notion of being a political player
- You may find you derail yourself by not learning the political game quickly enough

## **1.5 Action checklist**

### **1.5.1 Notice the initiation 'test'**

New joiners usually feel they have had to pass a 'test' in their first few weeks e.g. a presentation to the Board on their second day or handling a sensitive union issue. Organisations will not usually admit to setting a test but nevertheless they inevitably form part of your 'rite of entry'. The way you handle this sets the tone for the way people will perceive your performance in the future.

### **1.5.2 Be careful how you put things across**

In the early stages of your career in the new organisation it is likely that people will be consciously or unconsciously sounding you out to see if you are an honest player or whether you are overly political, self-promoting or over-ambitious. Be sensitive to the organisation's ways of operating, its culture and heritage – aim to build on the good aspects of what you have inherited.

### **1.5.3 Recognise that people feel threatened if they perceive someone to be encroaching on their turf**

You need to be aware of the sensitivities of others. You may not know the boundaries of the territory in the early days but take time to ask so you are not walking blindly into someone else's patch. It makes sense to test the ground and be sure of your footing before you go-ahead.

### **1.5.4 Identify the subtle pressures that are put on you to conform**

Most organisations have their own inimitable style or way of doing things although few would admit to forcing it on newcomers. However, things rub off or you may get somewhat of a cold shoulder until you conform. The skill here is to balance remaining your own man/woman but adapting sufficiently to be integrated.

### **1.5.5 Explain what you're up to and get more buy-in**

A consultative style, bringing people with you and engaging them in what you are trying to achieve will usually work better than a coercive or authoritarian approach. Pitch your consultations with those who you want to influence and who have power to influence the outcomes you seek. An advantage of a more consultative approach is that you will get early feedback on what you want to do before you do it. This will help you avoid the obstacles you may come across in implementation.

### **1.5.6 Accept that there are 'wheels within wheels'**

What looks straightforward isn't necessarily so and you are not going to be given a handbook on the social/political nuances of the organisation. Thus it is a hard and slow process to learn the navigation skills of experienced organisational members. Don't be too hard on yourself if you make some early blunders but simultaneously be aware that these are likely to be visible. Recovering from them effectively will demonstrate your skills and experience.

### **1.5.7 Look out for the series of trip-wires you don't know about**

If you don't know the formal and informal systems you can fall flat on your face. Common trip wires are how and where decisions get made, who owns what, who are the real gatekeepers of resource. Asking your peers, boss and team members what are likely trip wires within any

situation will help you. Observing patterns and clues and trusting your intuition will also help stop you from tripping.

### 1.5.8 Be clear that it's easier to get business knowledge, than to get business awareness

Business knowledge is about the processes, systems and mechanics of the organisation (the information that is explicit and available on the corporate intranet or in any induction process). Business awareness is about the unwritten, unstructured and uncoded aspects of the organisation. You have to pick up these latter aspects almost by osmosis unlike existing staff who 'know how it is'.

### 1.5.9 Accept that that to be successful you have to 'join the club'

This means bidding your time. At some stage you will know that you have been accepted or rejected as a member. If you are rejected it will jeopardise your chances of a successful career with the organisation. You need to decide whether you are willing to do what it takes to gain membership, remembering that optimum performance is reached if you can both fit in (socially) and get on (achieve your KPIs).

### 1.5.10 Get skilled in handling the tacit, unseen, and invisible

An unavoidable part of any manager's role is dealing with the social realities – the people and politics - of the workplace. Putting on the table for discussion those aspects which are normally covert, undiscussed, or undiscussable, is not just a 'nice thing to do' but an economic and commercial necessity. If you can't handle the people and the politics you are inevitably adding organisational cost, if you can handle them effectively you are going to add value.

## 1.6 *Dos and don'ts*

- Do take time to observe and reflect on the power plays and politics that you notice within your sphere of operation
- Do be aware that people will be watching you to see what kind of political animal you are
- Do think carefully before you indulge in or comment on the politics of the organisation
- Don't think that organisational politics are something you can't be bothered with
- Don't enmesh yourself in political games and one upmanship in the early days
- Don't forget that playing the politics can be a dangerous and risky game

## 1.7 *Useful reading*

Dobson, *Enlightened Office Politics*, AMACOM  
Simmons, A. (1998) *Territorial Games*. AMACOM  
Egan, G. (1994) *Working the Shadow Side*. Jossey-Bass

## 1.8 *Useful addresses*

AMACOM

## 1.9 *Related checklists*

Getting the job you thought you got  
Fitting in and getting on  
Adjusting your style  
Learning what you need  
Working with your boss  
Working with your peers  
Working with your team

Developing your network  
Making an impact

### **1.10 Thought starters**

- How much do you think your boss's political clout has an effect on your perceived organisational performance?
- What effect does 'turf defending' have on organisational productivity and effectiveness?
- How would people you have worked with in the past describe your political and influencing skills?

NOTE: I originally wrote this in 2002 and it was published by the Chartered Management Institute. The series of checklists is still available from them. <http://www.managers.org.uk/e-shop/directory>

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