

Issues of organizational politics in the workplace



Introduction

Organizations, like other institutions that bring together human interactions, are bound to have persons of diverse positions in the pecking order with divergent opinions and beliefs. Such divergent opinions and beliefs are manifested in the form of political posturing, and can at times bring an organization's activities to a standstill. Yet these politics in the organizations cannot be circumvented, as a direct consequence of the composite nature of organizational behavior and structure. Arguments may subsist as to whether organizational politics are beneficial or detrimental to the effective running of an organization. Such arguments are informed by the upshots of dissenting views within the organization, whether hierarchical or across departments, that have functional interdependencies. Nevertheless, a clear comprehension and appreciation of the complexity of an organization, regarding its behavioral and structural attributes, will be cognizant of the reality that politics is an intrinsic composition of any human-managed institution. Organizational politics are normally so complexly interwoven within the organizational structure that employee interactions, traditions, activities, performances and results are tremendously affected and shaped by them. It is necessary therefore to understand the impact of politics on organizations and try to channel the employee energy into meaningful output that does not undermine the overriding goals of the organization.

Roots of Organizational Politics

Organizational politics has varied and subjective definitions depending on the nature of the firm. Pfeiffer (1981, p. 7) describes politics as “ those activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop, and use power and

other resources to obtain one's preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is uncertainty or dissensus about choices". This definition by Pfeffer not only reveals the tight rope that managers have to walk when carrying out their managerial duties, but it also unmasks the selfish interests that are always vested in organizations between and among departments. In fact organizational politics could be identified as the selfish and scheming behavior of employees and departments to advance vested interests at other employees and departments' expense. These selfish interests are manifested through the scramble for organizational resources, employee and inter-departmental conflicts, struggle for power and headship and strategic control effected by managers, supervisors and departments. These managers, supervisors and departments in the organization will carry out these activities with the intentions of getting power, cultivating individual significance or stature, accessing sensitive and valuable information, concealing true intentions and crafting alliances.

Browsing through the bulk of management literature one gets the impression that organizational management is a straightforward consensual performance unit, where concurrences on institutional goals readily abide and where managers, supervisors and subordinates freely communicate and merge their individual or departmental interests with those of the entire organization. Some of these literatures claim that conflicts in the workplace can be totally eliminated by communication and transparency, or by laying off sections of the workforce that exhibit dissenting opinions. Such perceptions of organizations are diametric to the research findings of activities and processes within institutions, which reveal the existence of

conflicts at all levels. Indeed, Henry Mintzberg (1989) posits that organizational politics is not an upshot of structure but power, and therefore communication and transparency cannot deracinate politics. Mintzberg goes ahead to assert that organizations only function on the foundation of influential systems like politics, authority, expertise and ideology. He adds “ authority, ideology, or expertise-have some basis of legitimacy. But sometimes those means are used to pursue ends that are illegitimate” (Mintzberg 1989, p. 249). It is clear therefore that the organization management is not a rational process.

It is easy to understand the root of an organization’s politics once we understand the diverse values existent in the system. Different values by different departmental managers in an organization can foster divergent notions as to which part the organization should follow to realize development. This is always the primary cause of organizational conflict; divergent values. It is factual that departmental managers sometimes make arbitrary choices in the workplace and they always cover up their choices by politics. Politics will be used by some managers to ‘ rationalize’ some of their choices when a review into their decisions holds that their choices lacked empirical backing. In short, when a manager’s decision appears to lack empirical and supportive evidence, the manager will attempt frame the problem in a different way and rally colleague who are sympathetic to him or her. Framing a problem differently is always advised by the values of the people who the manager will be hoping to get backing from.

Other than values, special interests subsist in every organization from the top to the bottom. The diversity in special interests is exhibited in aspects

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like funding for projects, allocation of resources to departmental units and career outlooks. Employees, especially managerial ones, are always ambitious in their career outlooks and this creates rivalry within the hierarchical ladder. But the rivalry over career interests is not as clearly manifested as the scramble for funding and resources (Bacharach & Lawler 1980). The division of labor in the organization means a firm is partitioned into functional units also called departments. These demarcated departments are a sure source of political alignments as they line up employees against functional goals, which may not necessarily go parallel with each other.

To illustrate the causal political influence of departments on organizational set up, let us consider a scenario where the marketing department seeks to boost sales by improving delivery time and diversifying company products, while the production department endeavors to reduce the variety of products and having the least possible inventory. Such a scenario can only result in the alignment of employees in the two departments to the interests of their departments. Pfeiffer observes that “ the subunit differences that emerge from the division of labor are reinforced by differences in the training, backgrounds, and prior socialization of individuals recruited into different subunits” (Pfeiffer 1981, p 73). Intrinsically, employees will subliminally have their allegiance to their departments and will side with it in case conflicts arise in the overall set up.

The differences that exist between line and staff can also cause conflicts. R. D Aragwal notes that the relationship between line and staff are “ often characterized more by conflict than cooperation. Staff specialists complain

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that line managers are resistant to their ideas and line managers complain that staff managers are sky-gazing specialists with no comprehension of practical solutions” (Agarwal 1983, p. 151). These posturings in the workplace are prevalent because of a number of reasons. Agarwal lists these reasons as: the evident ambition and idiosyncratic behaviors of the staff managers; the apprehension of the staff in justifying its organizational survival and get the appreciation for its efforts; the dependency of senior staff employees on line staff for their incumbent positions; indistinct designation of staff roles; and ignorance by higher management.

Another source of conflict could be the reality that top managers seek to place themselves in positions that seem very approving in the eyes of the chief executive officers, directors or heads of departments. It is clear, like mentioned previously, that managers are very ambitious and seek promotions. But it is also crystal clear that as the hierarchical organization ladder goes up, the number of plum positions gets fewer and fewer. This fuels competition and rivalry among employees seeking a similar position. Because of the simple fact that promotions require credibility of a candidate, prospective promotion employees will attempt to outdo each other and triumph in small ‘competitive conflicts’. It is the attempts to prevail in smaller conflicts that reveal hidden agendas, which later set the stage for larger political battles. The small conflicts always result in underlying alliances and unspoken networks that are the basis of attaining power.

Positively Exploiting Organizational Politics

The comprehension of an organization’s political set up is extremely important for management to steer the firm towards its objectives. Internally

trained managers, supervisors and departmental heads will have a plus of acquaintance with general political circumstances existing in the company (various alliances and networks of influence, which can unlock an impasse or create one). Poached managers-those brought trained by other firms-ought to apply significant efforts to study and appreciate the prevailing organizational politics, by careful observation and conscientious interaction with various factions of employees. Buchanan and Badham (2008) hold that some of the pointers accessible for managers, supervisors and department heads for assessing the political environment are: overall employee satisfaction in organizational role, positive reaction to inventive ideas, decision-making efficiency and swift and speedy discharging of decisions. Insight is fundamental for management to take advantage of open channels and repress retrogressive organizational politics, and equally boost their personal credibility.

Buchanan and Badham also hold that outstanding managers make use of political influence accessible to them in various situations so as to uphold the overriding interests of the organization. The moment a manager comprehensively appreciates the unique settings that cause the employees in an organization to shift loyalties towards particular special interests; the leaders can use the information about the nature of these politics to the benefit of the organization. A manager with an understanding of the politics of the organization surely has leverage that can enable him use the politics and graduate to higher headship position, with excellent orientation of institutional politics. With proper political orientation; a manager can proficiently time an opening to bring to light his or her contribution to the

organization; guarantee that higher management will back delicate initiative or choices; utilize apposite personnel to communicate their message across; and respect the pecking order regardless of the hurdles it produce. Political insight is always tested when handling aspects like changes in the management or management crises. It is imperative a leader identifies the factions that are going to back him against those that will try to undermine his or her credibility.

Unquestionably, managers are source of organizational influence, power and obviously politics. Because people inherently have needs and wishes and leaders possess the capability to offer these needs and wishes, leaders who accomplish or deliver these wants have power. Dennis Wong writes, “ The most general use of the word ‘ power’ in English is as a synonym for capacity, skill, or talent. This use encompasses the capacity to engage in certain kinds of performance...” (1979, p. 1). Managers can greatly repress political environment that has a negative effect on the attitude of employees and organizational outputs by linking employee wants and organizational objectives, in such a manner that realization of shared objectives also causes routine realization of personal needs. Managers, supervisors, and heads of departments must recognize that organizational politics is a result of the traditions of trust in the institution, which is created through rationalized values and promoted by communication and transparency. Communication and transparency in processes and duties is crucial in generating a climate where cut-throat organizational politics does not completely replace progressive traditions that place importance on achievement of organizational goals.

Politics in the organizational setting has rules and the sooner a manager or leader deciphers the basics, the sooner he or she will build alliances and networks that serve his or her interests. Organizational politics has pros and cons and can sometimes result in loss of job or can alternatively result in promotion, depending on who is calling the shots. Organizational politics is not confined to the higher management as every member of the firm from senior chief executive, department heads, supervisors and normal employees participates in power games at one point. Gilbert Fairholm nevertheless observes that “ Older group members use it more than those newly inducted into the organization. It is beyond doubt an instrument for securing organizational rewards” (2009, p. 38). The basics are simple: respect the chain of command, seek favoritism by appearing credible, improve on speed of decision making and avoid stepping on too many peoples’ shoes. To be the best; be driven by factual data, create alliances, admit mistakes, unravel motives of allies and rivals, align your interests with the organization’s goals, seek common ground in stand-offs, and always agree to disagree (Forster & Browne 1996).

Conclusion

Organizational politics is a contentious issue in many firms and has been the subject of studies by academic writers who have sought to understand the impact of organizational politics in the running of modern organizations. Once considered a hidden power dynamic, many organizations are now embracing the reality that human are inherently political animals and possess diverse values and notions regarding what aspects of organizational life are rational and what are not. Empirical data from renowned sociologists

like Dennis Wong to management academician like Jeffery Pfeffer all agree that suppressing organization culture is futile because human intrinsically compete for supremacy and survival. The workplace, being an area where most humans spend averagely 8 hours of their lifetimes has been transformed into a political arena. In an arena where dependencies prominently subsist, where there exist divergent targets and beliefs regarding innovation and technology use and where scarcity of resources may exist, it is hard not to find competition for resources and stature. While a host of literatures on the subject of organizational politics might spend a considerable volume of their analysis on the merits or demerits of the contentious subject, most of them conclusively appreciate the reality that it is difficult to circumvent politics. Politics is about power and influence, and so is the organization.