

Organizational Politics in a Global Environment– Can You Survive in the Cesspool?

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*They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope
They threatened its life with a railway share;
They charmed it with smiles and soap.*

Lewis Carroll
The Hunting of the Snark
Fit the Fifth

Background

There is only one common thread, which stitches all types of organizations together. Whether it is a rustic school, a MNC with global reach or a teaching institute or a hospital, you will find lecturers trying to outdo the Principal, the manager trying to become the CEO, the surgeon trying to become the Director all at the cost of his or her peers. In all fairness, it can be said that no level in the organization is exempt from this phenomenon.

The medium can create its own political agenda.

Why is playing politics in organizations so rampant and has such an overarching reach? There are perhaps two reasons for this. The first is of course the desire to move ahead whatever the cost. The second is the thrill of playing the game for its own sake. What do these statements imply?

The first is of course self-evident. ‘Vaulting ambition’ as Shakespeare called it, makes people behave in ways which are not quite appropriate in the best of societies; the desire to move ahead can make people do strange things; the sad part is that these are forgotten over a period of time in the organization’s history and there is no stigma attached to the successful executive once he or she has made it to the top.

The unfortunate part is that it is the truly good and capable people who get hit by the political players – the old days are long gone when an employee’s good work could speak for itself; as someone said, if you expect that to happen, please also remember that it will speak in a very low voice.

What about the second statement made earlier about the thrill of playing the game for its own sake? The people who do this are more dangerous than the first group. We can understand the motives behind the first set of people and once we do that, we can put in place counter stratagems to foil their plans as much as we can.

How does the player in the second category act? There are many ways in which they play their games; let us look at the most popular ones.

The first is by the good old whispering campaign – nothing definite but the message will be carried to the potential victim’s superiors that something is not right with Mr./Ms X.

The second is by blowing out of proportion any minor mistake made by the victim - whether the victim is directly accountable to the politician is of course not at all relevant to the issue – in fact, the message to the upper echelons will be conveyed as being done for purely altruistic purposes with only the interests of the organization in mind; this does not need elaboration as most organizational people are familiar with this.

The third is straightforward maligning of character. Here again, the method is more important than the act itself.

Having set the scene, it will be useful to take a look at what the theoreticians have to say on this intriguing subject and see how much of it will be of use to a practicing manager.

Theoretical Expositions

The theories on organizational politics are many in number and it is difficult to ascertain what can teach anybody about the real art of playing politics and surviving in a political atmosphere.

This paper will now look at three randomly selected expositions on organizational politics to reinforce the point we are now making, and follow it up with two typical employee categorizations which are available to anyone looking for inputs in this area. *Comments on the expositions are given in italics at the end of the section.*

It is emphasized that this paper is in way trying to put down or debunk the work put in by the theoreticians – the basic approach and stand taken in this paper is that theories of organizational politics are not of much help to the manager who is coping with the realities of day-to-day organizational politics.

Exposition 1

Abstract: (1) The political nature of work environments has been discussed for quite some time; however, surprisingly little is known about the personal and situational factors that influence employees' perceptions of organizational politics. In this study, portions of a model of organizational politics perceptions proposed by Ferris, Russ, and Fandt (1989) were tested in two studies using samples reflecting considerable variability on jobs, age, sex, and education, as well as hierarchical level, across four different organizations. In Study 1, regression analyses, used to empirically examine a proposed model of organizational politics perceptions, demonstrated that feedback, job autonomy, skill variety, and opportunity for promotion contributed significantly to the explanation of variance in perceptions of organizational politics, after controlling for variance due to organization. In Study 2, a new expanded measure of organizational politics perceptions was used to provide a more refined analysis of the antecedents and consequences of politics perceptions. Directions for theoretical and empirical research on organizational politics are discussed in light of the present results.

Exposition 2

The tensions between pluralistic/democratic and unitary/ monocratic arrangements are not unlike those found within corporations that move in the direction of empowerment of those located toward the bottom of the pyramidal hierarchy (2). As I have suggested, this pyramid is not just one of positions and authority but also of command and control. That is, as long as the pyramid remains a pyramid, even slightly, it is a power arrangement governed by rules that, with rare exceptions, are themselves the outcome of a power struggle. Serious efforts to empower persons who have not had very much power, or who through empowerment will come to exercise more of it than in the past, clearly imply a widening and deepening of participation in decision-making both in the making of corporate policies and in their implementation. It is no wonder that changes of this kind, as well as those designed to bring stakeholders meaningfully into such processes, are fraught with complications and that they usually degenerate into not much more than lip-service platitudes (Coopey 1995).

Exposition 3

Regardless of the degree to which employees may be committed to the organization's objectives, there can be little doubt that, at least occasionally, personal interests will be incongruent with those of the organization. (3) Organizational politics arises when people think differently and want to act differently.

In most organizational politicking occurs in the internal-vertical- legitimate realm. An example would be individuals trying to achieve personal gain by giving "voice" to their demands/needs.

This could be done by complaining to supervisors, bypassing the chain of command, or obstructionism (ignoring requests or missing deadlines). In less autocratic organizations, political activity can be expected to occur most frequently in the internal-lateral-legitimate cell. This activity includes coalition formation, the exchange of favors, and reprisals.

The paper will now look at two types of employee classifications, the first one based on Transactional Analysis (TA), and the other classification typifying a variety, which is popular among theoreticians.

1 Transaction Analysis Related

This is a very popular classification and the topic of many workshops and executive development programs and divides employees into three categories based on the behaviors they exhibit. These are:

Parent

There are two forms of Parent we can play.

The *Nurturing Parent* is caring and concerned and often may appear as a mother-figure (though men can play it too). They seek to keep the Child safe and offer unconditional love, calming them when they are troubled.

The *Controlling (or Critical) Parent*, on the other hand, tries to make the Child do as the parent wants them to do, perhaps transferring values or beliefs or helping the Child to understand and live in society. They may also have negative intent, using the Child as a whipping boy or worse.

Adult

The Adult in us is the 'grown up' rational person who talks reasonably and assertively, neither trying to control nor reacting. The Adult is comfortable with themselves and is, for many of us, our 'ideal self'.

Child

There are three types of Child which people play.

The *Natural Child* is largely un-self-aware and is characterized by the non-speech noises they make (yahoo, etc.). They like playing and are open and vulnerable.

The cutely named *Little Professor* is the curious and exploring Child who is always trying out new stuff (often much to their Controlling Parent's annoyance). Together with the Natural Child they make up the Free Child.

The *Adaptive Child* reacts to the world around them, either changing themselves to fit in or rebelling against the forces they feel.

The foregoing is a very condensed version of TA types. As can be seen, it definitely has tremendous value but is not what we were looking for. The paper will now examine a typical academic classification of employee types, popular with theoreticians.

What follows is an excellent typology (4) and divides employees into nine different types depending on their individual characteristics. It will be very useful when planning transfers or career moves and can be put to good use by the HR department in a company.

A The Idealist

A self-observing *Idealist* can be a wonderful leader: wise, tolerant, balanced, and focused on standards of excellence in ways that provide an exemplary vision for followers. Ones are often the purveyors of quality in an organization.

B The Mentor

The most interpersonally oriented of all the leadership styles, healthy *Mentors* are unconditionally caring leaders who derive deep satisfaction from seeing and encouraging the development of others; they are typically great supporters of customer service.

C The Star

Star leaders are often expansive, risk-taking go-getters who ensure high productivity for their organizations. Formidable models for others, they are efficient and supremely goal-oriented; consequently, they tend to rise to top organizational levels, or to run their own companies.

D The Innovator

Innovators are vital to the health of an organization because they are able to view things from a new slant and are not bound by tradition; they can keep an organization from slowly dying out of untested and outdated assumptions.

E The Synthesizer

Because of their ability to take in the whole picture and integrate its components in creative ways, well-developed *Synthesizers* can be consummate strategists and visionaries. Often very bright, they are extremely capable of influencing others through their knowledge.

F The Partner

Partners at their best are highly team-oriented leaders and excellent managers who bring out the best in everyone. These are energetic executives who attend to interdependent organizational needs, which shows up in their language as thoughts about the group.

G The Futurist

Charming and easy to talk to, highly evolved *Futurists* are the organization's cheerleaders because of their natural optimism. They focus on long-term perspective and possibilities. Equality is important to them, so *Sevens* sometimes have to work around organizational constraints.

H The Advocate

Advocate leaders who have paid attention to their own development are able to shoulder huge responsibility without having to control everything. Right beneath the surface they are softhearted. They have loyal followers and can truly move mountains.

I The Diplomat

Serene and centered, well-developed *Diplomats* bring cooperation to any organization; they are highly capable of dealing with others' problems and building consensus. They have a natural tendency to honor diversity, and can get along with almost anyone.

All this is fine – but how will they help the person in a department struggling to keep his or her head above the water and also coping with a highly charged political atmosphere? For this person, regression analyses will not be of much help, for this person understanding what pluralistic/democratic and unitary/ monocratic arrangements are will not hold much water. Much less will this person be intrigued and interested by theories relating to internal-vertical-legitimate or Machiavellianism.

Perhaps what is needed and may be helpful from a practical point of view is a basic common sense rooted typology of the players (political and non political), which can provide some kind of organizational route map for the beleaguered manager or the new entrant in an organization. It is emphasized that there is no guarantee that this will solve all or even any of the problems; all that is being done is try to provide guidelines which may come in useful when the going gets tough. And also provide new entrants with some kind of yardstick with which to tap their way ahead (if you will pardon the mixed metaphor).

Methodology

The hypothesis being tested was ‘ An understanding of employee types, if given at the B School level, will assist the new employee in his/ her career progression’.

It was decided to see the 'levels' of understanding, which B School students possessed by the time they left their college, in terms of knowing the different types of people they will be working with soon in an organization.

Draft questionnaires were prepared which had the express purpose of checking if new entrants to an organization (i.e. B School students on the verge of passing out):

- Had any idea as to what to expect in terms of the types of employees they would interact with in the organization, and
- Were given inputs in B Schools from which they had passed out as to the practical aspects of managing different types of employees when they transitioned to the corporate world.

These were pilot tested across 10 students and then refined to take into account some of the inputs, which came from the students. For example, the question, 'How would you react to an employee who professed willingness to help you tackle a time bound assignment, but later backed out?' was removed as it was felt that the question could not be fully understood in all its nuances by those who had no work experience. Again, the question, 'What type of employee would you naturally form a bond in the initial stages in a company?' was also removed, mostly for the same reason.

Sample

The final sample (judgment sample) consisted of 40 students, of whom only four had prior work experience, ranging from one to two years, in banking institutions and manufacturing companies. Ages varied from 24 years to 26 years. Ten questionnaires were dropped out of the sample as it was felt that the questions were not properly understood.

Analysis

What came out clearly was that the majority of the students did not have any idea on what to expect in terms of employee types when they joined a company. On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 stood for 'Have no idea' and 5 stood for 'Complete knowledge of what to expect'), 95% had indicated 1 or 2 as their choice.

Again, the majority (85%) of the respondents indicated that they did not possess the skills on how to tackle employees who were deliberately trying to mislead them. In fact, 74% indicated that they would not realize if they were being misled or not.

An analysis of the coefficient of correlation showed the value of 0.44, which meant there was a significant correlation between a prior knowledge of employee types and career progression.

The same lack of the skills required to get along without major problems (especially in the initial stages) in an organization was evident in the response to the question, which asked the whether they would be able to distinguish between the genuine helpers and those who were trying to jeopardize their early career progression.

What was evident was that the respondents possessed only a rudimentary idea of what to expect in terms of understanding their colleagues and superiors. These were evidently skills, which are not considered important to impart as part of their B School training. It was felt that this analysis was revealing insofar as the new recruits were evidently being 'thrown to the wolves' without the skills on how to survive, especially in a politically driven company.

An attempt will be made to provide a practically oriented typology in the next section.

Political ‘Types’

In this section we will classify the employees in organizations into what we consider to be a typology, which could possibly assist the newcomer or the experienced manager under threat. The typology *per se* will not solve the problems for the manager but can provide the individual with some kind of indication as to what type of behavior should be avoided (and what type of behavior will help), and so help him or her survive the pressures typically found in a company. The basis of the typology is the range of employees we have seen and interacted/ are interacting with, during our careers. It does not claim to cover all the different types of employees in a company, but deals with only the select few and distinctive types which are to be mainly avoided or cultivated. We have named it the Gopinath-Nayar typology of employees.

In order to make the typology understood clearly, the employees have been classified in terms of characters created by a few of the finest writers in English literature; William Shakespeare, Conan Doyle and PG Wodehouse. To those familiar with the characters, a further explanation with regard to what they stand for will not be necessary; they may however find the typology of interest and use. For a deeper understanding of this typology, the uninitiated are requested to familiarize with the character types in their original settings.

1 Sherlock Holmes

Characteristics - Very rare to find in a company. The individual brings reasoning and common sense to the work place. May be taciturn and not easily approachable at all times. Will be impatient with those not intellectually up to the mark. However, there will not be any vindictiveness in the person and will have the potential to help and guide those in need. The person will have few friends but will be enormously respected in the system. Will not be reliant on anyone or anything in the system but will go his or her own route, which will almost in all cases be the right one. Can be a potential goldmine for finding out of the box solutions but care has to be given to acknowledge the contributions with respect and due credit.

Will be a repository of knowledge, which will be shared willingly. Opinionated but not in an offensive manner. Workplace will be a mess but will be able to find what is required without any problem. Fixed hours will be anathema and will work at a pace, which suits him or her. Has the potential to rise very high in the structure at a fast clip.

Recommendation - Latch yourself to this person’s star and you will go places within the organization.

Downside - May smoke a pipe, if male. Will not keep windows of the office open. Extreme cases may even tend to play the violin though against office decorum.

2 Prof Moriarty

Characteristics - The Napoleon of crime will, in the context of the organization, be the Napoleon of office politicking. The person will be the collector of information, which is the most precious commodity for this person, through various sources, and use it for someone’s downfall at the appropriate time. Highly intelligent and negatively motivated, the sole purpose of this person’s existence is the promotion (literally) of self. Will reward the coterie, which is invaluable to the success of this type of individual. A meticulous planner with the sole and ultimate objective of feathering his or her nest.

Can be seen at all levels in the hierarchy and a few even make it to the top. Will tend to distance from the effects of his or her activities and will willingly let someone else take the blame. Do not try to engage in a battle of wits unless you want an assured exit from the company. Will keep long hours and expect the team to follow the same pattern because imitation will be taken as a virtue. Will tend to react emotionally to issues/ problems.

Recommendation - To be avoided at all costs, but if circumstances bring you in close contact with this type of person, use all your skills to protect yourself for the time being and get a transfer at the first opportunity and never mind the place to which where you are transferred.

Downside - May oscillate head in a reptilian manner, which can tend to put off people especially at meetings.

3 Iago

Characteristics - This is a junior version of the Professor Moriarty type and tends to be more an executor of plans given by his superior than a creator of plans to do down employees. Most comfortable when casting innuendos and aspersions with regard to hapless victims. A time server with 'loyalty' only to his boss. Can be seen at all levels in the organization and, if sufficiently intelligent, will be a Moriarty in the fullness of time and even move up the organization.

It will be difficult to gauge this person's actual stand on an issue as his or her perspective will keep changing depending on the consensus or what the boss is saying.

Do not let your real feelings about anyone show in front of this character type as what you say will be promptly reported to the appropriate quarters and will boomerang on you fairly quickly. Most comfortable when putting down people and can be seen in the boss's residence at every opportunity. A timeserver par excellence with moving up the organization the only agenda in his or her immediate horizon.

Recommendation - Avoid whenever possible, but if you have to work with an Iago, keep your guard up to the fullest extent

Downside - Will show an undue interest in people with nasal afflictions, especially in their handkerchiefs.

4 Dr Watson

Characteristics - A thoroughly sincere and nice person, the Watsons of this world are a rare breed and not much seen in a company, especially one that is aggressive in its approach. This is because they would have been forced to leave reasonably early in their careers by more ambitious types. Will not carry tales or try and put down people and will be very loyal to the boss.

This person is definitely intelligent, but what is lacking in them is plain and simple street smartness. Will not be able to see behind what is apparently being said and will land themselves in trouble by being too trusting and valuing the spoken word. A Watson will require a strong boss to carry him in the organization and will be at a loss with a boss who is a Moriarty or an Iago. Can be relied on to be a workhorse in the organization and will be a team player to the extreme. This person will speak his or her mind when under pressure and never mind the consequences.

Recommendation - Befriend the Watson and try and help them in their careers in the company. But avoid being a Watson if you want to move up the ladder. Consciously change your approach and mind set if you feel you are one. Mid management is about the highest they can reach and that too with difficulty.

Downside - May be absent from work especially when the weather is damp as the Jezail bullet lodged in the individual's shoulder - or leg - will cause problems in walking.

5 Bertie Wooster

Characteristics - Thoroughly amiable and friendly, the Woosters in a company will be liked by almost everyone. The problem is that mere liking will not carry a person far as it has to be coupled with intelligence and drive, which are factors, which Woosters do not possess in abundance. They can be termed as a disaster just waiting to happen and will land themselves

wittingly or otherwise in one organizational crisis after another. Their good fortune may carry them for a while, but they require a strong and understanding boss even to manage day-to-day affairs, and such bosses are rarely seen. Woosters generally tend to fade away soon and old colleagues may miss them for a while but they are more remembered for the classic messes they created which will be told and retold.

Recommendation- If you are the sympathetic type, by all means try and help the Wooster but do not let people make an association between you and the Wooster as some of the negative traits in the latter may unfairly be perceived in you also.

Downside- Quality of output may be worse than usual when the aunts who fill his or her life are chivvying the Wooster.

6 Hamlet

Characteristics – This person will be very articulate and scholarly and will be an excellent sounding board for new ideas, which the company may wish to try out. He or she will do well in the strategic planning division, as they will have an enormous amount of data and wide ranging information on which they can base their conclusions.

The problem will be that they will not work to a time schedule and will let extraneous matters intrude on their thought processes and delay the primary work on which they should focus. They are prone to having intense likes and dislikes (both of people and activities), and this will again come in the way of their work. Once they get going however, they are capable of churning out output of a high level; they will have to be carefully handled as otherwise they may start sulking and further slow down their time schedules. Prone to over analysis of a given matter and this is a tendency which will have to be carefully monitored and corrected by the boss.

Recommendation - The Hamlets of this world are basically extremely good people and will not harm anyone in the organization. If you have one as a subordinate, try and not to antagonize the person; all efforts should be made to bring out the best in him or her and to endure they are of use to you. A Hamlet as a boss on the other hand, is a very difficult proposition, and care will have to be taken to see that their negative traits are not seen by others as your own inadequacy especially when a time bound decision is required from your section.

Downside – *May sometimes have a human skull on his desk and will gaze at this intently in moments of deep thought. There will also be a tendency to talk to himself. Both these activities can be disconcerting to sensitive visitors. Will require a secretary who can handle unusual situations with ease.*

7 Jeeves

Characteristics - This is a very rare individual in an organization. They are capable of rising to the top through sheer brainpower and will not be dependent on any kind of support system within or outside the organization. The closest they have as a parallel in the organization is the Sherlock Holmes, but without the latter's intellectual arrogance. In that sense, they will be more approachable especially when there is a crisis to be solved. The Jeeveses of this world are at their best when giving advice or solving knotty problems and are most satisfied when they get an opportunity to do this.

They will also be superb mentors and have the potential to develop subordinates. They are essentially good people and will never think of harming anyone in the company in order to move up

They may not have many close friends within the system but this does not mean they are unsociable. They will not display the Holmes's extremes of activity but will proceed at a seemingly deceptively slow pace and let the end results speak for itself.

Recommendation – In line with what we said about his closest counterpart in the organization, if you come across a Jeeves, latch your wagon to him or her and find yourself going places. Whether you prefer working with a Holmes or a Jeeves will depend entirely on your own mental make up.

Downside – *Will seem to be totally emotionless and the lift of an eyebrow will convey a lot of meaning. This meaning will have to be correctly interpreted by colleagues and subordinates.*

This then, is the typology of the characters that stand out in an organization. We trust you will find it of use and provide you with some guidance at the required time. In the next section we will try and see how best the system, which includes this milieu of characters, can be managed.

Conclusions

So where does all this leave us? Are organizational politics helpful and beneficial? Or are they simply something that cannot be ignored?

Sometimes, it is felt that being good at organizational politics is a form of literacy, like computer literacy: not much good in and of itself, but just try ignoring it. We think one has to acknowledge that the political scene is there, and know how to work it to some degree. Even more important, one has to admit that it's fascinating, intriguing, and, if it hasn't turned on you, lots of fun. People are interesting; power is exciting. And both can turn against you and make you very, very unhappy.

One should be skeptical of those who get right into the politics, and equally skeptical of those who take the high moral road and deny any interest in or knowledge of the games that are taking place around them. The middle road is the best one: to be aware of politics and power as an inescapable fact of the environment and a source of fascination, but also to keep one's perspective, and to keep better, more important objectives at the center of one's agenda.

For, in the ultimate analysis, it is perhaps clear that by that by focusing strongly on your career objectives, keeping yourself up-to-date with knowledge and being a strong and fair executive, are the important factors, which have long lasting value. These are factors which will stand the test of time and be facets of your make up which the political player will find hard to hit against. And finally, when you leave a company, you should ensure that people are not breathing a collective and heart felt sigh of relief; there should be genuine regret that you have left and that the organization has lost a valuable employee.

Is that not accolade enough for anyone?

End Notes

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