

Organizational Power and Politics



In one aspect, power can be used to get a job done, on the other hand, it can also be used for the wrong reasons and politics is the influence gained from power. The effect of power in modern organizations depends on whether an employee uses the positive or negative type of power to control other employees. There is a focus on developing and using power in an organization because political behavior penetrates organizational life, and it often gives power to people who do not have it from their organizational position. There should be a balance in the use of power and politics in achieving organizational goals and objectives.

Power and politics in organizations are a reality that no organization can ignore. Though the evolution of the modern corporation and the associated rise of the managerial class with a professional way of running the firms is touted to be one of the contributory factors for the decline on power politics in organizations, one cannot just simply say that there are no power centers or people with vested interests even in the most professionally run and managed firms. The reason for this is that **power and politics are as old as human nature and recorded history and hence, one cannot simply wish away the primal urge to resist those in power and in turn, try an impose the will by those in power.** This is the interplay of forces within organizations wherein the top management and the senior leadership often tries to have it their way whereas those in the middle and those who have been passed over for promotion as CEOs and other C level positions try to resist such power moves.

Organizational Power

According to Max Weber (1947), "Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance."

Generally, power is defined as the capacity of a person to exert influence over others. If a person has power, it means he is able to influence the behavior of other individuals. The essence of power lies in having control over the behavior of others. A manager's power may be measured in terms of his ability to: (i) give rewards, (ii) promise rewards, (iii) threaten to withdraw current rewards, (iv) withdraw current rewards, (v) threaten punishment, and (vi) punish.

According to John French and Bertram Raven (1959), there are five different types of power in businesses; they are as listed and explained below:

1. Reward Power

It depends upon the extent to which one has control over rewards that are valued by another. The greater the perceived value of such rewards, greater will be the power. People comply with the wishes or directives of others because doing so produces positive benefits. These rewards can be extrinsic in nature with tangible values or these can be subjective and intrinsic rewards such as recognition and praise. In the organizational context, different forms of rewards can be better pay, promotions, favorable performance appraisal, preferred shifts, etc.

2. Coercive Power

The opposite of reward power is the coercive power, i.e., the ability to influence punishment. Fear of punishment may make the subordinate execute the instructions of the boss. Coercive power reflects the extent to which a manager can deny desired rewards or administer punishment to control other people. The more punishments a manager can impose upon the subordinates, the stronger is his coercive power. The coercive power may consist of reprimanding, demotion or firing the subordinates for unsatisfactory performance.

3. Expert Power

Expert power is based on the perception or belief that the influencer has some relevant expertise or specialized knowledge that others do not have. It is more of a personal power rather than organizational power. If the subordinates view their leaders as competent, they would follow their leader. For example, we follow doctor's advice because of our faith in his knowledge and competence.

4. Legitimate Power

This power comes from having a position of power in an organization; example is being a boss in the organization or a key member of a leadership team. It exists when subordinates of someone in authority obeys orders given to them because they have believe that the person is in a position of power to be able to give them such orders. For example, it is the CEO who decides on the overall direction of the company and also determines the resource needs of the organization.

5. Referent Power

This power comes from being respected and trusted. Leaders in the business industry have gained referent power by entrusting their employees with so much tasks and responsibilities in performing their jobs. This type of power is best achieved in the organization when the turnover of the employee is low and also in a work environment where a personal relationship exists.

Acquiring and Using Power and Influence

A considerable portion of any manager's time is directed toward power-oriented behavior; which is an action directed at developing or using relationships in which other people are willing to defer wholly or partially to one's wishes. There are three dimensions of managerial power and influence which are; downward, upward and lateral. Effective managers build and maintain position power and personal power to exercise these downward, upward and lateral influences.

Organizational Politics

Organizational politics can be referred to as the structure and process of use of authority and power to effect definitions of goals, directions and other parameters of the organization. It can be defined as the management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organization or to obtain sanctioned ends through non-sanctioned influence means. Politics is an important function that results from differences in the self-interests of individuals. It is the art of creative compromise or bargain amongst competing interests. It is the use of power to develop socially acceptable ends and means that balance individual and collective interests.

Political behavior is the getting, developing and using of power to reach a desired result. It often appears in situations of uncertainty or conflict over choices. It often happens outside accepted channels of authority. It is an unofficial, unsanctioned behavior to reach a goal. The use of political behavior is to affect decisions, get scarce resources and earn cooperation of people outside direct authority. The characteristics of political behavior are power and influence.

Causes of Organizational Politics

People play politics in organizations because of the following reasons:

- 1. Lust for Power:** An important reason for politics in the organization is people's lust for power. People want to acquire and enhance power in the organization. They aim at increasing the area of their influence. Conflict between line and staff elements is a typical example in this regard.
- 2. Discretionary Authority:** There are some positions in the organization which have discretionary powers to be used in case of emergency. The use of power depends upon the

sole judgment of the position-holder. That is why; people indulge in politics to grab such positions or to be very close to such a position-holder.

3. **Command over Scarce Resources:** Most of the organizations have limited sources. Any person who has control over allocation of scarce resources enjoys more power. In the process of trying to gain control, political behaviors are exhibited. Political influence plays an important role in how these sources will be distributed to various departments rather than rational needs.
4. **Self-Serving Behavior:** Politics involves behavior that is self-serving as organizational resources are used for personal benefits. In such a case the decision is not rational from the organization's viewpoint. All self-serving behavior cannot be called politics.
5. **Saturation in Career:** To rise in one's career, a person needs competence. But when a person does not have the requisite competence, he cannot rise above a certain level. In such a case, he may resort to political behavior to move up in the organizational hierarchy. This type of behavior is a universal phenomenon in modern organizations.
6. **Organizational Change:** Whenever there are changes in the organizational structure or rearrangement of organization policies, people in the powerful positions have the opportunity to play political games. These changes may include reorganization or a planned organization development effort or even an unplanned change brought about by external forces.

Conclusion

In organizations that can be profit or 'non-profit', effective utilization of the positive types of power and politics cannot be overemphasized because it tells how employees interact positively with each other and controls how decisions are made. After critically examining the realities of power and politics in modern organizations, it is believed that professionalism and appropriate use of politics in an organization is very vital for a leader in acquiring and retaining power in order to accomplish main goals. And more so, the writer aligns himself with the view of Aristotle who said organizational power and politics can be used to reconcile differences through negotiation and consultation whilst still avoiding abuses.

Despite the fact that power and political behavior may be destructive and highly unethical, it can also be constructively used to achieve certain goals and objectives in the organization, and also create a balance in a diverse set of interests. For an organization to be highly productive, there should be a balance in the use of power and politics in achieving organizational goals and objectives and these include giving independence to employees to make decisions, compensating employees who put in effective performance in their works and making them (those who put in effective performance) to oversee other employees whilst also developing a political system straightforward for employees to comprehend.