

Practising the Art of Positive Politics



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What is the role of organisational politics in the management of change?

Jim McCalman examines whether politicking can ever be ethically justified
in the quest for change.

Why do a lot of change programmes fail? The answer seems to be that change more often than not creates conflict, resistance and difference. As part of this process, organisational politics play a significant – though often downplayed – role.

The politics of change is under-researched and this hampers attempts to understand how change is successfully negotiated. It is not that authors and practitioners would deny its existence, but rather there is a preference that organisational politics is not discussed openly in polite circles. And yet, as Jeffrey Pfeffer argues in *Power in Organizations* (1981), if you want to be an organisational player, you cannot sit on the sidelines. "One can be quite content, quite happy, quite fulfilled, as an organisational hermit, but one's influence is limited and the potential to accomplish great things, which requires interdependent action, is almost extinguished," concludes Pfeffer.

Organisational politics have received a very bad press. Machiavelli's *The Prince* has a lot to answer for. When examining the political behaviour of managers there is a tendency to draw attention to the dark side of activities that are deemed negative, against the organisation and self-serving. However, when we look at the practicalities of politics we really need to find out:

What types of political activity and tactics do managers engage in?

Are these characterised by self-serving actions or organisational good?

Can the political behaviour of change managers ever be deemed ethical, and if so, under what circumstances?

Defining organisational politics: still dirty words?

What do we define as organisational politics and the act of politicking? Certain broad similarities tend to come to the fore. For example, there is a definite need to break free from the confines of traditional views of the manager as rationalist. By examining the differences between economic models of organisation and more pluralist perspectives, Ferris and King (1991) argue that "politics is what takes place between the perfect workings of the rational model (efficiency) and the messiness of human interactions." They highlight two main types of political behaviour – conflictual maneuvering and blatantly self advancing/protecting actions. As a result, politics is defined as the use of influencing techniques and tactics aimed at accomplishing goals where uncertainty exists. One of the major questions therefore becomes, are these goals self-serving, organisational or both? What determines whether politicking is self-serving or organisational in intent may be the type of turf game tactics utilised.

WHAT TYPE OF POLITICS GET PLAYED? 'TURF GAME TACTICS'

- **Image building:** enhancing reputation and furthering career – includes dress, supporting the 'right' causes; adhering to group norms; air of self-confidence
- **Selective information:** withholding unfavourable information; keeping useful information from competitors; offering only favourable interpretations; overwhelming others with complex and/or technical data
- **Scapegoating:** making sure someone else is blamed; avoiding personal blame; taking credit for successes
- **Formal alliances:** agreeing actions with key people; creating coalitions strong enough to force their will
- **Networking:** making lots of friends in influential positions
- **Compromise:** giving in on unimportant issues to create allies for the future
- **Role manipulation:** refusing requests on the grounds of 'against company policy', but granting identical requests from allies on grounds of 'special circumstances'.

(Source: Buchanan and Badham, 1999)

Most managers would readily admit to having undertaken most of these tactics at some point in their careers and therefore might admit that political behaviour is acceptable and can serve organisational goals as well as personal career objectives; and that while specific actions may appear unacceptable when considered in isolation, political behaviour is potentially defensible in context. The prevalence of political behaviour is the norm rather than the exception and in many instances is seen as desirable. For example, political behaviour might be seen as necessary and inevitable when one seeks to stimulate creativity and debate.

There is also a need to draw attention to organisational politics as it affects the management of change. Buchanan, Claydon and Doyle from De Montfort University (2000) provide evidence that 70 per cent of managers felt that the more complex and wide-ranging change was in an organisation, the more intense the politics became. Similarly, these managers felt that the change agent who was not politically skilled would eventually fail. The change agent is, therefore, a political animal who needs to be well versed in the tactics of steering change but also have the perspective that they are willing to do so. We simply don't understand how politicking during times of change actually takes place and little seems to be known about the motives, conduct, maneuvering, tactics, power plays, perceptions and self-justifications of

change agents. Similarly, not all organisational members are readily willing or capable of engaging

FIGURE 1: WHAT TYPE OF PLAYER ARE YOU?

The Puritan does not get involved at any level because politics means 'dirty tricks' and is unethical and damaging.

The Streetfighter – the 'pure politician' – playing the game to win, by any means, is the end in itself – and is enjoyed.

The Sports Commentator understands the game and can pass comment and judgement but doesn't become personally involved in the play.

The Political Entrepreneur adopts a creative, committed, reflective, risk-taking approach – balanced with conventional methods.

(Source: Buchanan, D.A. and Badham, R. 1999, *Power, Politics and Organisational Change: Winning the Turf Game*, London, Sage.)

in such activity. Figure 1 details the differing perspectives on politics.

One of the main difficulties in looking at politics in organisations is gaining access to research evidence associated with the behaviour of individual managers. There are two key aspects to this – image and legitimacy. In terms of image, managers dislike discussing subjects such as organisational politicking because they believe that it reflects badly on themselves as managers and on their organisations. Rationalism rather than power plays therefore legitimise decision-making. "Managers often tend to rationalise their activities in terms of technical skills and choose to ignore the influence of politics." (Standing and Standing, 1998). Therefore gaining

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access to such information is a potential minefield. The main difficulty is that within organisations, politics relies on informal behaviours and an oral tradition. It is rare for political activity or deals to be documented. Political behaviour is highly unstructured and difficult to access.

Our research examined 30 cases involving managers who were recruited to a pilot study whilst attending an MBA programme. They were asked to complete an initial open-ended questionnaire aimed at soliciting information on the types of organisational change programmes they had to deal with and the political behaviour they had been involved in over the previous year. The nature of the change project was broadly defined and left to the participant to detail. The researcher then met with each manager and discussed their case in detail, providing commentary on the nature of politics in organisations. Questions covered the awareness of the managers of the term 'organisational politicking', their engagement in political activity within their organisation, their justification for such acts, and an analysis of the outcomes of their behaviour.

Case example No 1: getting others to work on your behalf

"In setting up a production facility I used politics to manipulate others into fighting the battles I faced. I chose people who would hate the apparent underhandedness of the senior manager and armed them with facts. I made the bullets, but someone else fired them. I established coalitions with friendly superiors and peers. I transferred my expert power to them to ensure success without being directly involved."

These thirty cases seem to reveal that organisational politics is a pervasive part of management life. But what do they tell us about managing change and the ethical nature of organisational politics?

First, they do tend to confirm that organisational politics is seen as being an acceptable dimension of managing change. The data also suggest that the role of the political entrepreneur is most prevalent among managers (23 out of 30 can be classified in this way).

Case example No 2: fighting the good fight

"Another senior project manager and I were placed on the same project. I got involved in political manoeuvring to ensure that I assumed overall control. I engaged in behind the scenes dialogue with senior members of the project team (other organisations) in an attempt to influence the way in which they communicated with our team, ie, through myself. I also had an open dialogue with my colleague and made him aware of my intentions. The overall outcome was that my colleague was eventually deemed as surplus to requirements and was removed from the project."

Second, there appears to be a tendency, again confirming the arguments of Buchanan and Badham (1999), to view political activity as being undertaken *via* a formal warrant associated with the organisational change agenda, a tacit personal warrant for political activity, and the maintenance of personal reputation as a credible change driver.

Case example No 3: by all means possible

"Whilst I was working at Hitachi a future re-organisation meant that my group was going to lose a dedicated technical support resource and be forced to share a more general person, not dedicated to my specific customers.

After trying to persuade European senior management that this would affect our support to key customers, they still wanted to

push ahead, as the re-organisation was needed to reduce costs. After it became clear that within Europe I was not going to get the decision changed, I needed to bring pressure on European management by another route. I took the opportunity whilst senior Japanese management were in Europe to visit my two major accounts and at the same time spoke off the record to my customers and asked them to state how important dedicated support was to them. After each meeting I re-emphasised how important this was to our customers and that my team structure could not be altered in any way.

"After my customer meetings, Japanese management met with European management to discuss the proposed reorganisation. At this meeting, the Japanese management expressed their grave concern about my team losing dedicated support – something major customers classed as crucial to the past success. As a result we got to keep our resource when the new reorganisation was announced."

"After using a reasoned argument to European management which failed, I then formed a coalition with Japanese management and used my customers to influence this group of people, who in turn used insistence and assertiveness to influence European management."

"Third, there is a stronger link to conflictual maneuvering than there is to blatant self-advancing/protecting aims. Those who did not match up to such lofty criteria also had overwhelming factors that acted as extenuating circumstances. The politics of change in this context is deemed highly ethical and not illegitimate. Engagement in organisational politics appears to be more strongly associated with the attainment of organisational goals than it does with self-serving actions. Actions aimed solely for personal gain appeared to be

in the minority and although engagement for the organisational good did protect or promote the reputation of the individual, this was not seen as the prime-motivating factor.

So where does this leave the individual manager struggling with the complexities of change? There is certainly recognition that politics does exist and this is a helpful starting point. In this sense, more open discussion of politicking highlights the specific behaviour of managers. This enables others to have a greater awareness of the tactics pursued and to develop responses to these. It may be safe to assume that in an organisational context we have always known of the existence of organisational politics and although managers may claim to have distaste for political activity they seem readily disposed to undertaking such actions. The key lesson may be the need to be able to distinguish between those who do so reluctantly to attain organisational goals and those who see organisational politics as a means to their own ends.

A second set of issues relates to the growing significance of Corporate Social Responsibility and business ethics. As business schools scramble to enhance their teaching of ethical issues and the morality of business there is a slight sense of unease that for decades we have measured managers more on the results they achieve than the process by which they achieve them. Moral and ethical values cannot be inserted into organisations overnight. They form part of the cultural make-up of the firm and in that sense require development and nurturing. ■

FURTHER READING

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