

Organizational Politics: Its Role and Impact on Professional Efficiency

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Abstract

Organizational Politics (OP) is a phenomenon that exists in society, and although people are seldom aware of it, it proclaims its ubiquitous presence. An insight into Organizational politics focuses on understanding the progress of Organizational politics. A simple OP Model illustrates how it springs from fundamental differences in perception and ideas and summits in the detrimental, illegitimate stage. Understanding the etiology of Organizational politics leads to a positive approach so that this powerful tactic can be leveraged for benefits. Organizational politics is all pervading. It is wiser to accept its ominous presence and guard oneself from its fangs. The factors indicative of politics are listed for this benefit. Finally, the impact of organizational politics on ethics and its major influence on society is highlighted.

The authors have developed a model to elucidate the etiology of Politics in an Organization. It stems from fundamental differences in perception, and ideas. It contributes a positive approach to the versatile tool of politics and advices on how to use it for benefits. Light is thrown on dangers of politics and to identify indicators of politics.

Keywords : *Organisational Politics, Power and Politics, etiology of Politics, Politicking*

Introduction

One is alone, two is company and three is politics. Politics is a phenomenon seen where people of dissimilar tastes come together. It is used as a means to acquire power. Organizational Politics (OP) refers to those activities that are not required as part of one's formal role in the organization, but that influences or attempt to influence the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within the organization (Farrell and Peterson, 1982). Politics in the workplace is an organizational reality. Effective execution of individual power for individual benefit is politics. Almost all the organizations have the problem of politics, which can affect its growth. People differ in their thoughts, feelings, opinions, ideas, expectations, etc. from others. They tend to execute their individual power or pressure over others and they are called politickers. Individuals with

ambiguous goals, dissatisfied employees, people unable to cope up with the co-workers and unable to use power effectively resort to advance their career unethically, by indulging in politics. This article focuses on the 'how and why' of politics in an organization.

Unlike popular belief, politics does not involve a lot of action; it is all about interacting with people and influencing them to get things done. This can be a good thing, a bad thing, or a neutral thing, depending on the tactics people use. It is the behaviour and impact on people that makes office politics good or bad. Office politics is "the strategies that intelligent people use in both public and private organizations to gain or maintain a competitive advantage in their careers" (Rozakis and Rozakis, 1998).

Politics is a game, where perception matters more than substance, and like any other game, we need to learn and practice. Therefore, before plunging headlong into office politics, it is better to figure out how to play the game.

Power and politics are closely related. Politics cannot be defined, used or examined without power. The employees of an organization attain power formally, or by using their personal influence. Conscious use of power in attaining one's preferred goal is politics. Individuals tend to execute their power and those individuals who crave for formal power play this game.

Organizational theory encompasses politics and the associated behaviours and reactions that individuals and groups sense by working in a political environment. This literature review brings to light concepts related to organizational politics, regarding the perceptions, impact, implications and other factors. The review includes an explanation of the origin of the concept in the literature, conceptions of organizational politics, consequences of lack of organizational politics and skills.

Politics in literature

Politics was spoken of in terms of power and bureaucracy in the early 1970's. (Drory and Romm, 1988). The unrest in power and bureaucracy was felt but was not given a specific name since then. Much of research was not done on Politics till 1980's, except that it was associated with conflict. In other words, wherever conflict arose, a reference to Politics was made. People knew that something uncomfortable existed that sprang up in times of conflict and they were not sure what it was. They were unable to give it a name. In one way or another, Politics was associated with power - power that corrupts. One could exhibit power in an organization by supreme access to resources. One who had control over the resources had power, power to control the

distribution of resources was desired by a politically adept person. The more critical the resource one is controlling, the more powerful one is was a fact that was highly recognized. Lyle et al (2002) examined the political messages shared by individuals in the organizations, their relationship, channels carrying the messages and the receiver obtaining the political messages. Communication targeted to the receiver by knowing their nature, and the way the messages are encoded in mind, play major role in stimulating politics in organization.

There are at least five methods that can be both effective and relatively safe: forcing methods, win-win methods, dialogic methods, third-party methods, and social movement methods (Nielsen, 1996). A good leader must have the ability to identify the people with power and predict their actions. He must be able to think how the person with power will implement strategies and what personal implications they have. These skills are deemed essential for today's strategic manager (Peter Drucker, 1998). An interesting research by **Ferris and Kacmar** shows that Organizational Politics acts as a dissatisfactory phenomenon for employees. This is of concern because politics can lower the morale of an employee if he is not equipped to tackle it. Hence it is increasingly important to arm employees of the nature and etiology of the organization politics bug, and to leave them with a strategy to handle situations that are increasingly vulnerable, like opportunity for promotion, feedback, job autonomy etc. The study also revealed that the work group to which the employee belonged to was another influencing factor for job satisfaction. (Ferris and Kacmar, 1992).

The Politics Model

The authors have explained how politics develops into its ultimate stage, using a systematic conceptual model, illustrated in Figure 1, indicating the stages that increase in

severity, as it gets higher and in the process, a more pronounced effect is created on the organization and the environment. From the literatures on Power and Politics, it is evident that politics in the workplace stems from difference of interest and opinion. The model is framed conceptually by the authors to project that politics starts from the difference in the opinion in the individuals, and it ends in legitimate or illegitimate politics depending upon the intensity of the people involved in politics.

a) 1. Diversity of Interest

Aristotle said that politics stems from diversity of interest. Individual interests are as diverse as people are. It is basic human nature to find solace among birds of a feather. This nature causes discomfort when people with diverse interests confront each other. The manifestations of such differences of opinion can lay the foundation for politics and slowly but surely, you find yourself in the politicking game.

2. Fear of not getting recognition

A progression of the earlier stage leads to competition. Individual differences may create a situation where one competes to gain recognition. Competition is healthy if it improves productivity. However, competition for selfish motives, can lead to conflict and leads to unhealthy competition. This is identified as the second stage. When people compete for recognition, the means of achievement no longer remains an issue. By hook or by crook, he wants to make his point. The fear of lack of recognition eats him to such an extent that he may resort to any means in satiating his desire to get recognition.

b) Frustration

When all means fail, the person gets frustrated. Those, who achieve due recognition, a factor of expectation, move out

or continue to sustain the recognition, the others, get frustrated. They resort to any means to vent out their frustration. The tools they use to overcome frustration determine the legitimacy or illegitimacy of politics.

c) Legitimate

This is the initial manifestation of the political behaviour. The impact is positive or neutral on the victims. Politics is legitimate if it does not harm the players adversely or does not affect the functioning of the organization. The legitimacy of politics is in view of impact on the working atmosphere or on the organization. A few examples include influencing the supervisor's superior in decision making, bypassing the immediate boss, impressing the superior by work and getting favourable resources, purposefully ignoring better performers while undertaking important and crucial assignments, deliberately postponing work, ignoring deadlines, posing a problem to the immediate boss, halo error- superior stimulated drawing of conclusions from ordinary statements, lack of interest, sarcasm and cynicism. These come under the legitimate category because they are benign on the victims and the organization. Sara (2006) studied the political behaviour of individuals in organization and the frustrations in professional life. Further it is put forth that politics is due to social interactions involved with the authority and power and politics cannot be negative always. It can be brought into play politely for personal growth. From this article it can be comprehended that legitimate politics can help individuals in their career growth.

d) Illegitimate

Politics is most noticeable in this phase and it is the ultimate stage. When it crosses tolerable limits, it culminates in this stage. Continuous frustration and failure lead the person to adopt any possible means to vent out or to get even. It manifests as harmful behaviour

that affects the opponent and the organization considerably. It includes whistle blowing, mass bunking, sabotage, and go-slow etc. Effect is a relative concept, as what appears legitimate for one may be a difficult situation for another, simply because perceptions and preferences vary. Examples include manipulations for Position grabbing, Replacing one employee for personal benefits, showing favouritism in Promotion etc. These are intolerable for the victims and they either have to equip themselves with strategies to face the battle or succumb to its venom. Politics becomes illegitimate with the following behaviour "Participating in bad-mouthing colleagues, criticizing supervisors, spreading malicious rumours" etc. (Payal, 2008)

Two sides of Politics

Organizational Politics is assumed to be good or bad depending upon the situation and perception. It is bad when resources are wasted, important units are crippled, personal goals perceived over organizational goals and welfare and rights of others violated. OP is good when it enhances innovation, helps the organization adapt, enhances communication, balances needs of all its constituents and makes up the mistakes of the formal organisation.

Horizontal and Vertical Politics

Politics among people of same level of hierarchy constitutes horizontal politics. This is more pronounced in the competition stage. In the struggle to survive competition, the sum total of means and measures employed to get that edge over the peer constitutes politics. This may take serious dimensions in top-level management. Politics at the same level, when prolonged, can perhaps spread to higher levels, constituting vertical politics. The major underlying causes are competition, demanding work, and stress due to 'Must do – Cant do' conflict.

When the game is played, transcending hierarchical levels of management, it is termed as vertical politics. Sometimes we see friction in superior-subordinate relationships arising from reasons like partial treatment, fear of subordinate taking over, etc. One major contributor in this type of politics is attributed to poor leadership styles. The Superior is not left behind. He kindles politics by criticizing subordinates to coworkers, biased treatment in times of resource allocation etc. People who strive for quick power and position build coalitions with their superiors' superior by bypassing their immediate bosses. Research shows that 80 percent of employees leave their bosses, not their jobs. This is aggravated by the organizations' negligence and lethargy in taking timely actions to tame the situation.

Also, Politics falls into two groups- illegitimate and legitimate, based on the impact it has on the organization and the victims.

Etiology of Politics

Politics is ubiquitous, and everyone is susceptible to its fangs. Like it or not, Politics is a game that lays its prominent hand on every soul in the organization, and its presence is felt in every organization, wherever more than two people work! Here, ignorance is not bliss; it can take you for a ride! It is wiser to be aware of the strategies and effects of the game and play it safe rather than being caught unawares.

The impacts can be alarming - it ranges from mild irritation to third degree cancerous symptoms – it can eat you up alive. Alertness is required in the jungle of politics as a survival strategy. It is wiser to equip oneself with defensive strategies in the wake of an attack. It is definitely required to learn about it at least to not to play it.

Politics can be positive in a sole perception, and it is a dirty game if it is professionally played also. It may be a key survival skill in organizations. Many good corporate politicians are both likeable and effective, that's why they make it to the top.

Activities indicative of Politicking

The activities that lead to politics can be sketched to follow a pattern as discussed in the model. To augment that, activities that we confront everyday that typify the stages, are listed in Figure 2 as the indicators of politics. Consciously or unconsciously, a politicker plays his game. When a person indulges in politics, he uses one or more of these weapons and as with any weapon, it can be used to attack or to defend. They use whistle blowing, rational persuasion, complaining, impressing superiors, forming and breaking coalitions for individual benefit, withholding favourable information, propagating the failure of the immediate supervisor and criticizing the decisions taken by the boss, deliberately and openly criticizing the decisions taken by the supervisor

Activities leading to politics

The actions that lead to politics are identified to provide an understanding into the etiology of this lousy bug. Some common activities like mistrust and misunderstanding, interpersonal conflicts, competing for resources and positions exploiting the resources, conscious and unconscious association with politickers claiming credit for others' task and achievement, criticizing the work of coworkers and gaining popularity and trying to be close to the boss lead to politics. These are represented in Figure 3. It may pave way and nourish a fertile environment for the growth and spread of politics. Individuals who find themselves in such situations have to be wary and prevent or protect themselves from the attack.

Levitating through Politicking

Machiavellianism, a style of behaviour, named after a 16th century Italian philosopher famous for his advice to Princes on how to gain power, involves the following behaviours:

- using deceit in interpersonal relationships
- viewing other people with cynicism
- lacking concern for conventional morality

Machiavelli is misunderstood, for the words of advice as a politicker, but what he advocated was with good intentions. Players of Politicking are expected to play the game judiciously. They need to know the rules.

Is it necessary to learn politicking? If a question like this is asked people refuse to say "no". And it is definitely required to learn about it at least to not to play it.

Politics is regarded as a bug and a dirty game. However, knowledge of politics is necessary for alertness in the dark and dangerous jungle. It equips you with a survival strategy and prevents further activities, which kindle politics or lead it to an illegitimate stage. It is necessary

- to keep away
- to escape from politickers
- to play it (defend yourself)
- to grow (i.e. to get key positions in organizations)
- for survival

The game of politics is strange. There is no guaranty of a win – lose situation. The players can use any strategies against the victim. The means used are subject to their ability and need, bound by delicate set of laws of personal ethics, organizational commitment, and a word of caution can be inserted here on

grounds that there are many ways to play this game. Learning to master politics is like learning to swim; a clear systematic process cannot be formulated. To be cautious, an awareness of the process and its intricacies is required.

This initiative is to create awareness, so that ignorant people are not victims of illegitimate politics. Studies have indicated that self-conscious people may be less likely to become involved in office politics because they fear being singled out as a focus of public attention and being evaluated negatively for engaging in politics. This fear keeps them from seeking power and using it for personal gain.

Figure 1: THE OP MODEL

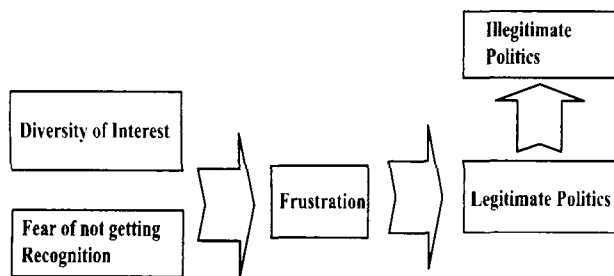


Figure 2: ACTIVITIES INDICATIVE OF POLITICKING

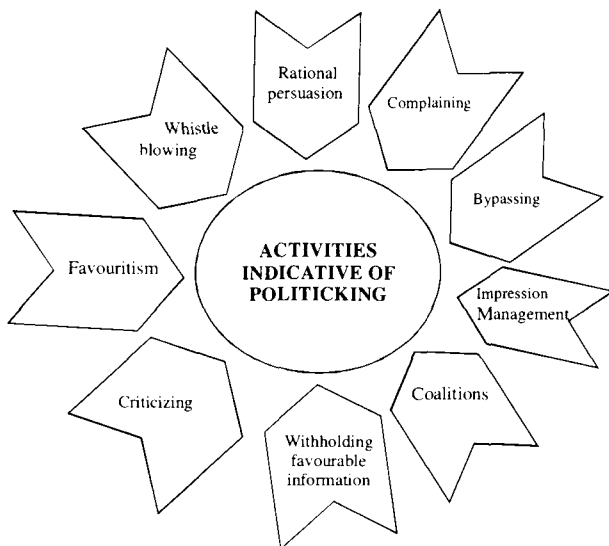
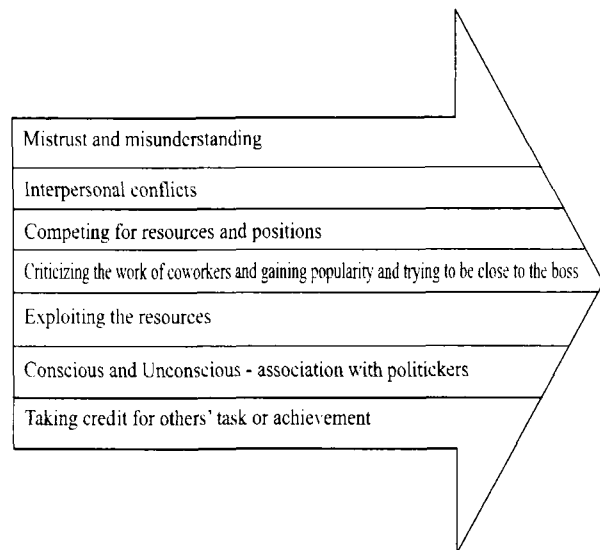


Figure 3: ACTIVITIES LEADING TO POLITICS



Conclusion

An important impact of politics is that it leads to compromise on ethics. Of course, ethics depends on individuals and their perception and understanding on it. Politics is beneficial as well harmful to the people. If properly played, it gives results, but it is considered unethical if it played at the cost of others. Payal (2008) indicated that people refusing to play office politics are the losers. Constructive office politics involves a few steps-building relationships with coworkers at all levels. Networking with key people helps and it is considered legitimate if it is not harmful to the organization and fellow workers. This affects not only the organization, but also the society. India follows a tradition that inculcates ethics right from tender childhood. When a person joins an organization, in the nascent stage, he is more enthusiastic and bubbling to put his ethical values in practice, the drive is the highest at this stage. This dilutes gradually due to untoward incidents of non-performers, unethical people, and dejected, unrecognized, shadowed employees. Richard (2003) in his article, "Why Do We Remain Silent in the Face of Unethical Behaviour?", identifies fear, embarrassment,

too narrow a conception of our ethical responsibilities, friends who are entangled in corruption, organizational structures without political space for voice, and inadequate organizational ethics as possible reasons for organizational silence. The ability to defend their ethical standards depends on how strong the ethics is and how strong the opposing forces are. Hence, in the larger interest of the society, awareness of politics is a tool for safeguarding an ethical society.

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