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POWER AND POLITICS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Aristotle made the observation that man is a political animal. Engineers often like to think they are above the fray when it comes to organizational politics, but most organizational theorists believe politics is a fundamental dynamic in any group. This paper examines the various ways that people use power within organizations to negotiate the political interactions in the work place.

INTRODUCTION

Modern organizations often portray themselves as teams or families pulling together for a common goal. While this may be a partial description of organizational dynamics, it is far complete. The contemporary workplace is also a political arena in which individuals are constantly faced with situations in which they must choose how to react to others who exercise power in ways they do not like or support. Pfeffer (2010) wrote an entire book describing the importance of understanding this characteristic of organizational life, and how power is a fundamental skill of career success.

The dynamic of politics and power as a way to resolve conflict is hardly a new concept. Aristotle recognized that political interaction is the fundamental dynamic in human interactions that saves us from barbarism. "Hence it is evident...that man is by nature a political animal....And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil..." (Aristotle, p. 28-29).

Greenleaf also recognized the need for power, even from the perspective of the servant leadership model he developed. The abuse of power is curbed by the influence of equals who are strong, and rely on persuasion and example to lead (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 85). The issue of political dynamics and the exercise of power in the workplace lie at the very heart of leadership. If power and conflict in the workplace are unavoidable, understanding these dynamics can help contribute to workplace health.

How each of us acts in such political situations is a choice. This paper presents an overview of well-known sources of power, and also for contrast a model of power by Rollo May.

SOURCES OF POWER

Technology changes constantly, human nature not so much. The various ways common to the use of power relates directly to basic group dynamics. The following sources of power use descriptions from French and Raven (1959), supplemented with discussion from Bolman and Deal (1991), Morgan (1997), and Pfeffer (1992, 2010).

Reward Power

One of the important insights from French and Raven was the importance of perception in the exercise of power. For reward power to be effective there needs to be the perception all of the following are true: an ability to provide a positively valued outcome; control of the reward; and willingness to provide or withhold the reward at the discretion of the one using the reward. "The greater the perceived value of the reward, the greater your potential power" (Dunham, p. 333).

Providing resources, whether monetary, information, expertise, prestige, or slack (time) is a variation of reward power.

Coercive (Punishment) Power

The target of the power must perceive all of the following: the ability to provide a negatively valued outcome or remove a positively valued outcome; control the outcome; willingness to provide or remove the outcome. Two related phenomena are the "bluff" and "empty threat."

In contrast to the empty threat, Steve Jobs was known for getting high production from his engineers: "My job is not to be easy on people. My job is to make them better" (Beahm, 2011, p. 40).

Withholding resources, promotions, information, and access are all common uses of coercive power.

Legitimate Power

Perceived to have a right to influence. Can be based on formal organizational position (boss), organizational assignment (committee chair), or a social norm (elder). Can be acquired through assignment, election, or informal recognition. Use of organizational rules, structure, and regulations is a common approach to exercising legitimate authority. Additional uses of legitimate power include controlling decision processes and control of organizational committees.

Expert Power

All of the following conditions are necessary to effectively use expert power: perceive possession of expert knowledge they do not have; desire to have the expert knowledge you possess; perception that you are (or will be) willing to share your knowledge.

Creating dependence by providing an important resource unavailable from another source is a type of expert power. Being irreplaceable is an effective approach to creating dependence. "The harder it is to replace a person or what they provide, the greater the power he or she will have. This factor is related to the concept of dependence. It is why engineers, who are difficult to recruit and in short supply, often receive better treatment than other employees" (Steers, Ungson, & Mowday, 1985, p. 435).

Referent Power

Attraction and influence because of personal characteristics. Frequently tied to physical attractiveness, interpersonal attractiveness, fame, prestige, and/or status. "Charisma," personal relationships and alliances, and membership (both formal and informal) in significant groups are all potential sources of referent power.

Coping with uncertainty is a source of power mentioned by Pfeffer and Morgan. Having the personal ability to provide clear and relevant analysis in times of uncertainty can provide a source of personal power within an organization regardless of the level of formal authority.

MODELS OF POWER

Rollo May was an existential psychologist with an interesting perspective on power. In his book *Power and Innocence* (1972), his analysis concentrates on ways through the problems of power, not around them. May recognizes the pervasive presence of power in human interactions, noting Nietzsche's observation the will to power is found wherever you find the living. Power is the birthright of every human being, and powerlessness can corrupt as much as power. Violence often happens when people feel impotent, not when they feel a sense of power in their lives.

The following five types of power were developed by May (p. 105-113) to provide a framework for understanding human existence. He

defined power as “the ability to cause or prevent change” (p. 99). The ancient Greeks defined power as being, there is no being without power.

“The goal of human development is to learn to use these different kinds of power in ways adequate to the given situation” (p. 113).

Exploitative

The simplest and most destructive type of power. Identifies power with force, always presupposes violence or the threat of violence. Slavery is the most drastic example. There is little to no choice on the part of the victims in this type.

Coercive or punishment power is an obvious manifestation of this type of power from the previous models described. An aggressive, often abusive approach to the use of authority is a common application of this type of power. While it is less common to openly advocate this in current organizational settings, in actual practice this approach is still prevalent in many companies.

Manipulative

This is power over another person. May notes this power dynamic might have been originally invited by the person’s own desperation or anxiety. A “con” artist is a typical prototype for this kind of power.

Referent power, relying on personal characteristics, is often used in conjunction with manipulation. Creating dependence, controlling decision-making processes, and being recognized for having political skills are all aspects of manipulative power. Indeed, charisma, a common characteristic associated with personal power, often has a very manipulative quality.

Competitive

Competitive power is power against another. In negative form, going up because an opponent goes down. Can be constructive when the competition gives zest and vitality to human relations. “To have someone against you is not necessarily a bad thing; at least he is not over you or under you, and accepting his rivalry may bring out dormant capacities in you” (p. 109).

Reward power often is an integral part of competition; the point of the competition is to win some type of prize. In an organizational setting competition can be for position, salary, or less tangible rewards like awards or office space. For many positions in a work setting, the competition is a zero-sum game—there can be only one chief engineer, general manager, CEO. For professionals who wish to be perceived as invaluable or irreplaceable, competition can be a constructive dynamic inspiring each one to excel at their position.

Nutrient

This is power for the other. Nutrient power comes out of a concern for the welfare of the group; in the best cases exemplified by teachers and political leaders. May says this is best illustrated by a parents’ care for their children. “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile” (Einstein, 1932).

An example in the workplace would be the ability to cope with uncertainty, particularly being able to provide crucial resources to those in need. This could include providing expert knowledge to a situation, and providing additional help relieving time constraints or personnel shortages. Providing encouragement and guidance as a mentor is another common application of this type of power in the work setting.

Integrative

This is power with another person; my power then abets my neighbor’s power. May cites Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. as examples of integrative power. By holding up a mirror to those wielding abusive or exploitative power, they exercised the power that comes from exposing the true nature of their oppressors.

This is not a new concept of power. May stresses this type of power requires the individual to be authentic; there is not much likelihood it will be successful without a sense of personal integrity. Plato recognized the importance of being genuine in the exercise of this kind of power:

“...but no one is satisfied with the appearance of good—the reality is what they seek; in the case of good, appearance is despised by every one” (Plato, p. 170).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Formal authority established by the work organization is the typical source of power we think of when discussing politics and power in organizations. The constant need for scarce resources by competing groups within an organization results in political dynamics to achieve success. To be successful when competing in the workplace, the use of power is a part of the fabric of organizational life.

This paper provides an overview of common sources of power within an organization. Additionally, a look at the types of power described by Rollo May provides an alternative view of power dynamics. Informal power is available to individuals regardless of the formal authority bestowed by an organization.

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