

Organizational Politics: How To Get Things Done

Management theory and books on practice seem to suggest that conflict is unnatural and should be smoothed over; that conflict will not occur if things are more transparent and if the volume is turned up on communication. An alternative solution is to jettison the members of the organization who do not fit with the corporate culture or who are not rowing in the same direction as the rest of the organization. The current downsizing trend has probably resulted in the dismissal of many individuals who do not fit with the organizational culture. Simpler and smaller organizations are less political so the problem is solved in the short run. The trend to outsourcing also reduces the politics of organizations, which has moved to inter organizational conflict from intra organizational conflict. However, by ignoring the social reality of power and influence does not make it disappear, it just shows up in a different format. The key point to understanding organizational behaviour is to understand the politics of the organization, and politics has always been about power and influence. Most books on strategic management ignore this aspect of managing, and most training and education programs are devoid of references on how to manage power and influence in organizations. We see a sanitized view of the organization. Power and influence are part of the social interaction that gives life to an organization. By ignoring these two variables we miss a chance for the deep insight so desperately needed to produce large scale organizational change.

Bad press is one of the reasons power and influence have been ignored. Power

and influence are seen as evil or sleazy, as leading to less than honourable objectives. We forget that to get things done, for good or bad ends, we need power and influence. Without them, failure results. Politics is involved at all levels of the organization, although it may increase moving up in the organizational hierarchy. It influences what product goes to market, what courses are taught, who gets a raise or tenure. Management skills are taught in market analysis, strategy making, and finance; however, the equally important skill of implementation is ignored and this is where power and influence come into play. John Gardner (1992) talks about power as “the capacity to bring about certain intended consequences in the behaviour of others.” We should be preoccupied with power and influence in organizations because otherwise nothing gets done it. To be effective, leadership needs the underlying forces of power and influence. Pfeffer (1992) defines organizational politics as “the exercise or use of power, with power being defined as a potential force.” Power brings effort and ability to life. It adds value to “private knowledge”, it “transforms individual interest into coordinated activities that accomplish valuable ends.” (A. Zeleznick quoted in Pfeffer 1992).

Decisions by themselves have no organizational value, implementation has. A decision is evaluated when the results are known, and this is only after implementation. (Pfeffer 1992). Implementation clarifies the consequences of a decision and the key to long run organizational success is how consequences are managed. How are skills in managing consequences acquired? This skill is not taught, but experience provides a good

knowledge base for dealing with consequences. Leaders leave the implementation to lesser organizational lights. Most strategic organizational decisions are made with the assumption that the future can be known and planned for, that strategic decisions are made with an understanding and knowledge of the future. There are three great illusions: that we can remain the same; that things will stay the same; that we can predict what lies ahead. Nature teaches us that the universe is always in a state of flux. (adapted from L. H. Chao's text on the Shaolin system, date unknown).

Implementation

The ability to implement is everything and power is what pushes new ideas, although not necessarily power based on position or formal authority. With the popularity of teams and flat organizations the power of hierarchy has decreased. The cross functional approach to many tasks diffuses the power of position and decision making is often vested in a group. The more accepted process of implementation is through the visioning process where common goals, culture, and direction push implementation. Managing through vision is a closer fit with our view of collaboration and democracy. Building a shared commitment in an organization requires power and influence, but it is a different process. The politics are more overt, and they are surfaced and dealt with by process, not by increasing the volume of communication or by firing. The visioning process demonstrates that power and influence can be wielded in a non authoritarian manner; perhaps collegiality describes the process best. The

visioning process provides the arena where groups or individuals with divergent views and interests can come together. Providing more facts and information is not the way to manage; rather, it is necessary to understand that individuals or groups with the same facts may place a different interpretation and value on those facts.

Understanding these differences is more important than the analysis of the facts. The visioning process allows us to comprehend the various mental maps that are at the root of action, interpretations, and perspectives. With power and influence the visioning process facilitates getting things done.