

Would You Rather Be Right or Effective? Using Power and Politics Constructively On the Job

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Many people think of power and politics as something sordid and destructive, a tool used to create damage and havoc in people's organizational lives. If power and politics are viewed from this perspective, the following choices emerge:

- Should I act in an honorable way and be right (but, most likely, lose the battle)
- Should I engage in organizational politics (perhaps, acting in a manner I am not proud of) in hopes of being effective?

The above choices, however, need not be made if power and politics are understood in a different way.

Power, in and of itself, is neither good nor bad. Power is, simply, the capacity to influence the attitudes, behavior, or actions of another person or group. This power can be exerted in one of three ways: upward (toward organizational superiors), downward (toward subordinates), or laterally (toward peers) (Figure 1). Like gasoline in an automobile, power enables you to move, but it doesn't dictate the direction. Where you go and what road you take is determined by you.

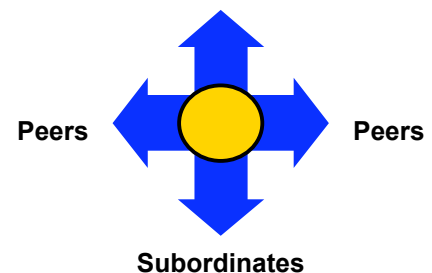
Politics, both an art and a skill, involves getting, using, and maintaining power, often unobtrusively, in order to achieve one or more of the following three objectives:

- individual goals (i.e., what the individual defines as objectives in his or her own best interest)
- team goals (i.e., implicit and explicit objectives for the good of the team or work unit)
- organizational goals (i.e., as desired outcomes in the best interests of the entire organization)

Obviously, when individual, team, and organizational objectives are in alignment and therefore compatible, the organization is most likely to be effective. Similarly, in an aligned organization, the organization's political culture will also be most effective. However, even in an aligned organization, if the individual, team and organizational goals are not lofty or enlightened but are self-serving and negative, the organization's political culture will be damaging and destructive.

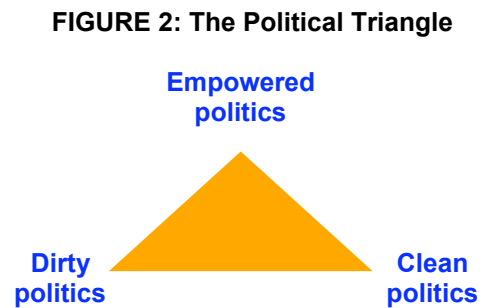
For better or worse, power and politics are part of every organization's life. Why is this so? First, work must be done and, especially as organizations get flatter and more work is done in teams, every employee must learn to effectively influence other people over whom he or she has no direct authority. Second, decisions must be made every day; conflicting viewpoints and interests are reconciled on a regular basis. Third, resources, increasingly scarce, must be allocated; this increases both potential conflict and the need to influence other people. All of these reasons provide a breeding ground for heightened political activity in organizations.

FIGURE 1: POWER
Superiors



THE POLITICAL TRIANGLE

Political activity in organizations can take one of three forms (Figure 2). At one extreme, an organization with a "dirty" political culture uses a power paradigm that is both damaging and dysfunctional. Political activity often involves back-stabbing, undercutting and, in its worst case, a duel to the death. Power is viewed as a scarce resource to be grabbed and held closely -- a zero-sum game. At the opposite pole, a "clean" political organizational culture uses a power paradigm that allows people to get the job done and get acknowledged for it. Power is defined as a resource, which, through bargaining and exchange, allows people to accomplish organizational tasks. Clearly, this is a healthier political culture than the "dirty" political environment. There is, however, a third power paradigm of organizational culture, the "empowered" political culture, where service and contribution to others are valued and rewarded. In this type of political culture, power is viewed as an abundant commodity -- the more you give away, the more you create and get back.



The three types of political cultures also differ along other dimensions, such as goals people hold, how conflict is viewed and dealt with, the acceptable directions for organizational power to flow, feelings typical of that culture, and how organizational objectives are developed. These dimensions are depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1: DIMENSIONS OF POLITICAL STRCUTURES

	Dirty politics	Clean politics	Empowered politics
Goals	Personal self-interest.	Either what is good for the self or what is good for the organization.	Enlightened self-interest (i.e., what is good for the self is good for the organization and vice versa).
Conflict	Seen as duel to the death, win-lose; differences are sharpened, common interested submerged.	Seen as an inevitable part of organizational life and something that must and can be managed.	Seen as the basis for creativity and change, differences encouraged.
Directions of power	Top down only; upward seen as illegitimate and disruptive; lateral given little attention.	Top down legitimate; upward legitimate under certain conditions; lateral necessary for bargaining.	Top down minimal (used for vision and strategy); upward desired and sought by top level; lateral essential, valued, and trusted.
Feelings	Fear, paranoia, anxiety, stress.	Accepting, careful, relaxed but watchful.	Excitement, exhilaration.
Objectives	Preserve prevailing power structure (formal and informal); hierarchies are the only legitimate form of authority.	From the top and through bargaining among levels and groups.	From vision/strategy and values, using critical mass of significant stakeholders and constituents.

Two questions often arise. The first question is *"What can I do to change the political culture of the organization or work unit in which I work?"* The answer to this question is straightforward and realistic. Sometimes you can't change your organization's political culture very easily. Organizations that are very large, quite old, or where the results of people's work are vague and hard to measure frequently foster, often unintentionally, "dirty" political cultures. Large and old organizations can tend to become rigid and bureaucratic, thus paving the way for backroom infighting and influencing. Organizations where it is difficult to measure performance (or organizations that do not choose to do so) provide the context for people to find indirect and political ways for people to exert their importance and status. Similarly, if the leader of the work group or organization has an authoritarian management style and plays favorites among her or his staff, the political culture of that work unit or organization will tend to be highly political and very negative. All of the above organizational characteristics make changing the political culture from "dirty" to "clean" or "empowered" very difficult.

If these factors are not present, however, individuals can more easily influence the political culture, depending on their role in the organization. If you want to change your organization's political culture from "dirty" to "clean," here are some suggestions:

1. Develop a fair-minded, equitable leadership style.
2. Have decision-making based on data; use some participation from different levels in the organization.
3. Make certain your reward system is merit-based and consistent.
4. Begin to increasingly share accurate and timely information throughout the organization or work unit.
5. Reduce rigid hierarchical boundaries; develop task teams and flexible organizational structures.
6. Make sure the employees are trained and competent.
7. Promote people using clear and consistent criteria and processes.
8. Get your performance management systems in place (i.e., mentoring, career development, performance appraisal).

If you want to change your organization's political culture from "clean" to "empowered," the following guidelines can be helpful:

1. Develop a visionary, risk-taking, and values-driven leadership style.
2. Move decision-making to the lowest possible level and provide people with continuous feedback about their work.
3. Create a reward system where rewards include performance-driven, team-based rewards.
4. Openly share information throughout the organization (without overloading people) and support organizational learning from experience.
5. Create a flexible, team-based organizational structure based on processes rather than function.
6. Emphasize contribution rather than promotion.
7. Develop simple, integrated performance management systems; make sure to use 360-degree feedback (i.e., peers, bosses, subordinates, customers).

The second question that frequently arises is *"What can I do to increase my political power and leverage without engaging in "dirty" politics?"* First, you need to accurately assess the situation in which you work. For example, in work units or jobs where the work accomplished is either not central to the work of the organization or, not considered strategic to the organization, people who work in these units often find difficulty in influencing people outside their work area. Similarly, individuals who actually work inside these organizationally valued areas possess the potential to exert a great amount of influence. In a hospital setting,

for example, primary caregivers such as doctors and nurses usually have a greater impact and influence than people who hold other types of positions. Human resource groups and other staff support groups, too often perceived as not central to the critical work of the organization, often feel undervalued and non-influential.

A person's degree of potential influence is also affected by actual hierarchical level or professional status accorded to different occupations. In most medical contexts, doctors have higher status and, therefore, greater potential for influence over others than nurses do. However, should a nurse have expertise in a strategic area for the organization, that nurse might well have more power than a physician. Those who perceive themselves to be low in political impact (resulting from either non-valued work, low hierarchical level, or low status occupation) often feel frustrated. What can occur in these under-valued work units is political infighting of a more "dirty" type, as individuals try to differentiate and assert themselves in indirect ways. This is, obviously, not always the case, but when it is, an individual's ability to change the political culture becomes more difficult.

Once you have accurately assessed your organization's and/or work unit's political culture, you then need to examine your own personal sources of power in order to determine whether any action on your part will be successful. These fall into three areas -- knowledge, personality, and relationships.

KNOWLEDGE POWER

Knowledge can be a source of power in three different ways -- expertise, information, and cultural competence.

Expertise. Knowledge power can be based on expertise so that your input is solicited and valued by others in the organization. Knowledge expertise can easily augment a person's power base, which may be low because of other factors. To increase your power based on expertise, you can:

1. Develop skills in areas the organization values.
2. Let your co-workers know what expertise you possess.
3. Avoid jargon when talking about technical subjects.
4. Don't give advice beyond your scope of knowledge.
5. Use data to support your conclusions so others will trust your judgment.
6. Share expertise freely, keeping in mind that the more you share, the more everyone gains.

Information. Another important source of knowledge power is information. Organizations are essentially information processing systems for disseminating and utilizing knowledge. People with access to important organizational information are in key positions to influence others. This information can be about topics (i.e., new technology, customers, environmental trends, employee attitudes). To increase information as a source of your power, you can:

1. Find out what type of information is important in your organization
2. Maintain and increase your present network
3. Share information to help others, not to gossip
4. Respect confidentiality in information sharing where confidentiality is required; otherwise, people won't trust you

Cultural Competence. Knowledge power also includes having knowledge about your organization's cultural traditions. You can learn these by asking, by observing, or by making mistakes (not the recommended option!). Knowing the culture gives you the organizational savvy to expedite tasks as well as gain support for new ideas. People in the organization will also be more likely to see a culturally competent person as a team player.

PERSONALITY POWER

Personality, the second source of power, can come from three roots -- charisma, reputation, and professional credibility.

Charisma. This is the ability to lead and inspire others, even if you are not the boss. Some people confuse charisma with extroversion. However, being outgoing does not mean you will inspire others nor does introversion mean you can't lead. To possess charisma, you must know yourself well and be able to project your ideas and values to others. Reading self-development books, attending seminars, and simple self-reflection can help you develop the ability to convey a sincere message to others. Being able to listen well to what others say (and what they mean) and letting them know you understand them contributes to charisma. Telling interesting stories with a message and using metaphors also helps.

Reputation. People's positive perceptions of who you are and what you are capable of doing is your reputation. Some people use the adage "It's not who you know but how you're known that is important." Look for opportunities to be visible in positive ways. Find opportunities for small successes, sometimes called "low hanging fruit" (i.e., items that are easy to achieve). Publicize your accomplishments without looking (or being) self-serving or, better yet, have someone else champion you.

Professional credibility. The third type of personality power, refers to how you are perceived outside your organization. Being perceived highly outside your organization has a "halo" effect inside the organization. To increase your professional reputation, you need to become visible professionally (i.e., join and be a leader in professional organizations, write articles, give speeches, earn advanced credentials, etc.).

RELATIONSHIP POWER

The last type of power base is relationship-based power. This type of power comes from both your access to the political power structure in your organization and the type of support you have from different levels in the organization. To improve your political access, network every chance you get, show a genuine interest in other people, and find yourself a good mentor. To increase the amount of organizational support you have, it helps to think of support coming from three areas mentioned at the beginning of this article -- subordinate support, peer support, and boss support. To be most influential, you need positive support coming from all three areas. If you think of your power base as a three legged stool, with one leg representing your subordinates, the second your peers, and the last leg representing your boss, you can

understand how you need all three to be most influential and organizationally effective. A stool with less than three legs will collapse.

To assess your power bases, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I support and empower my employees? Do they respect me?
- Are my relationships with my peers collaborative and do I give them what they need when they need it?
- Do I understand and work well with my boss's management style? Do I make her or him look good in the organization?

If you answered "yes" to all of the above questions, you are likely to be quite powerful in your organization. If not, you have some work to do.

Understanding the bases of power described above gives you the information to assess your own individual sources of power. Use and appreciate those bases of power you already have. Try to develop the ones that are less familiar to you. Three maxims can help you honor the power you have.

Don't get between the dog and the fire hydrant

Translation: Stay out of the middle of "dirty" political situations you don't have to be in.

Be the knife but not the cake

Translation: Observe the politics in your organization but don't play in the "dirty" political arena.

You may be the Prime Minister but you are not the King or Queen

Translation: If you gain a good deal of political influence, remember that if you don't use it wisely and justly, you can easily lose it.

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