Chapter 11
Politics in Virtual Work

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ABSTRACT

Due to their hierarchical structure and limited resources, organizations are inherently political. Employees need to know how to "play the game" in order to get ahead. In this chapter, we provide a background on politics, examining how the study of politics has evolved over time. We also examine the relationship between politics and similar constructs, such as authority, power, and influence. We then apply politics to an increasingly common organizational structure—virtual teams. Based upon research on trust, resource allocation, and influence in virtual teams, we suggest that, rather than being attenuated in the virtual environment, politics may in fact become exacerbated by the use of computer-mediated communication. We end the chapter with suggestions for future research on politics in virtual teams.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational executives are wasting 20 percent of their time dealing with company politics (Communication World, 1995). This statistic indicates not only a decrease in productivity due to organizational politics, but also suggests a potential increase in harmful activities. In order to achieve a desired outcome within their organizations, individuals may go so far as to spread rumors about colleagues, leak sensitive company information to

the media, threaten or sabotage coworkers or projects, or bypass their immediate supervisors (Farrell & Petersen, 1982). Clearly, organizational politics present several causes for concern.

Organizational politics are generally considered to be a type of influence process (Mayes & Allen, 1977), which significantly impacts the relational dynamics of superiors and subordinates in an organization. Politics, power and authority are all intertwined communication concepts. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1979) in her seminal article "Power failure in management circuits" lamented that,

"Power is America's last dirty word. It is easier to talk about money-and much easier to talk about sex-than it is to talk about power. People who have it deny it; people who want it do not want to appear to hunger for it; and people who engage in its machinations do so secretly (pg. 68)."

"Politics" can easily replace "Power" in the passage above and the spirit of the argument remains the same. Politics is an insidious and seductive, yet oftentimes invisible element in organizational behavior.

Advantages and disadvantages of politics in the workplace have been noted in the literature. Gaining and maintaining access to resources and information and the ability to deliver this information to employees in a timely and secure manner solidifies the political clout of managers in many organizations and certainly facilitates positive relational dynamics with employees in a variety of contexts. However, some studies suggest that subordinates who perceive their supervisors as highly involved in organizational politics are less open in their communication and generally less satisfied with their supervisors than subordinates who perceive their supervisors as moderately or minimally involved in politics (Jablin, 1981, pg. 273). The dearth of studies in organizational politics highlights a neglected, yet critical, aspect of organizational life. This is particularly true given the changing nature of work with the explosion of virtual work and an emerging new social contract between employers and employees of what constitutes "work".

This chapter further advances the discussion of politics in virtual work. Due to the lack of consistent scholarship in the area of politics in virtual work, we approach this topic with a standard overview of authority and power in organizations; offer extant theories and definitions of power and politics in organizations; relocate these concepts to virtual work politics and suggest implications and consequences of engaging in organizational politics in virtual work.

BACKGROUND

Organizations are inherently pluralistic and political, divided into competing interests and differing preferences among organizational members. Politics exist in organizations because individuals seek "some end state or valued outcome" such as additional capital or increased power (Pfeffer, 1982, p. 78). However, before developing an understanding of politics, one must understand the complex conceptions of power and authority intrinsic to politics. Power exists in everyday interactions between individuals and teams, but it is authority that determines where power is situated.

Authority in Organizations

Sources of power within an organization often formally originate from authority, determined by Jones (1997) to be "legitimized by the legal and cultural foundations on which an organization is based" (p. 564). Power within organizations is largely the result of the distribution of authority (Jones, 1997). Organizations are innately comprised of individuals with different agendas and motivations who use their authority to achieve their desired outcomes.

As an operational hierarchy of power is established, organizations determine the amount and type of authority to be given to each individual. Distribution of authority within organizations serves to accomplish consensus and coordinate the activities of members (Mintzberg, 1983). Essentially, by making the choice to participate in an organization, members are consenting to the authority of the organization.

Consensus about the distribution of authority throughout the organization develops both formally and passively. Formal consensus is cultivated through established hierarchies legitimized by members, and passive consensus is achieved as members respond to the demands of authority. As members of a corporate group, individuals are, by

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