

## Understanding and Managing Organizational Politics

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this paper is to present a basis for an understanding of organizational politics and provide various approaches to decreasing its presence and generally negative effects on the organization. Self-interest is a common component of organizational politics and is represented by members' interests to preserve one's career (Vigoda, 2000) and to advance one's career (Randall, Cropanzano, Borman, & Birjulin, 1999). The negative effects of organizational politics can ultimately undermine the overall goals of the organization and include: the playing of favorites (Malik, Danish, & Ghafoor, 2009); poor organizational citizenship behaviors (Chang, et al., 2009); the decline in job satisfaction and increases of job stress (Miller, Rutherford, & Kolodinsky, 2008; an indifferent employee attitude, and poor job performance (Witt, Andrews, & Kacmar, 2000); disruption of return on employee investment (Hochwarter, Kacmar, Perrewe, & Johnson, 2003); and lower morale (Chang et al., 2009). Strategies found effective in reducing organizational politics include but are not limited to: involving employees in decision making, fostering teamwork, building trust and social support, hiring politically under-skilled employees, and basing personnel and program decisions on objective criteria. Politics' omnipresence across organizations presents a challenge for managers in that it will never be eradicated but must be consistently addressed if organizational outcomes are to be achieved and maximized.*

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**Key Words:** *organizational support, work environment, job satisfaction, personnel actions*

## **1. Introduction**

Politics is a part of most, if not all, organizations in some form (Brouer, Harris, & Kacmar, 2011). Its omnipresent nature requires that it not only be understood but also be addressed by managers. Generally negative, organizational politics stands to minimize the production of an organization and potentially undermine an organization's ability to function at the most basic levels. Managers can mitigate the detrimental effects of politics by not only executing specific measures that address organizational politics, but also by implementing sound overall management approaches as indirect deterrents to prevent its negative influence on the organization.

A common component included in the many definitions of organizational politics, is members' placement of self-interests ahead of organizational interests (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Mintzberg, 1983; Parker, Dipboye, & Jackson, 1995; Randall, Cropanzano, Borman, & Birjulin, 1999; Valle & Witt, 2001). The disregard for organizational protocol is also a common element of organizational politics (Randall et al., 1999). Members of an organization, supervisors as well as subordinates, who behave in a manner that places self-interest ahead of the organizational goals are engaging in organizational politics, which can compromise productivity.

Whether it be an aspiration for individual power, personal awards, promotions for oneself, or other areas of self-interest that do not support the broad production oriented goals of an organization, acting to achieve these personal agendas is destructive to healthy organizational outcomes. Expending energies on personal agendas such as power are quite common and to be expected; unfortunately though, it leaves those without power disinterested in contributing to the organization (Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010). Given that one's personal agendas can be maintained through politics, politics is often practiced to ensure that structures remain, so as to allow the status quo to also remain, and thus protecting one's self-interest, e.g., power (Parker et al., 1995).

## **2. Organizational Politics Literature**

The on-going presence of organizational politics despite management's efforts to eliminate it, is evidence that members of the organization consistently engage in politics. To not engage in organizational politics could compromise the work-place well-being of the employee. In fact, employees were found to be less likely to lose their job if they were engaged in political behaviors at work (Vigoda, 2000). Not engaging politically, even if only in a minimal manner, could leave one without a support base, regardless of the negative influences of organizational politics. To be politically inept and/or choosing not to engage in organizational politics as an employee could lead to employee marginalization and

exploitation. Choosing to not enter the political fracas could be damaging to an employee's ability to prosper in the organization.

### **2.1 Organizational Politics' Effect on Productivity**

Driven heavily by self-interest, organizational politics can result in myriad negative organizational outcomes that can lead to the ultimate demise of the organization by lowering productivity and profits (Miller, Rutherford, & Kolodinsky, 2008; Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010). Organizational politics sets the stage for a negative work environment (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997), which does not support production. Fear and lower employee confidence are byproducts of organizational politics that support a disruptive organization, making goal achievement difficult (Cropanzano et al., 1997). Employee perceptions of organizational politics can also negatively impact job related outcomes and does so when employees perceive their work environment to be political (Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010). Overall, organizational politics impacts employees negatively because they feel like they have no control within the organization, in addition to a lack of trust of those in power positions (Malik, Danish, & Ghafoor, 2009).

The negative influences of organizational politics that, over time, can render the organization dysfunctional are many and somewhat subjective; thus, those presented here are not to be considered an exhaustive list. Included as negative influences of organizational politics are: the playing of favorites (Malik, et al., 2009); poor organizational citizenship behaviors such as backstabbing among employees (Chang, et al., 2009); the decline in job satisfaction and increases of job stress (Miller, et al., 2008); an indifferent employee attitude shown in decreases in commitment to the organization and its goals, and poor job performance (Witt, Andrews, & Kacmar, 2000); negligent behaviors (Vigoda, 2000); disruption of return on employee investment (Hochwarter, Kacmar, Perrewe, & Johnson, 2003); lower morale (Chang et al., 2009); and higher rates of employee turnover (Randall, et al., 1999). Selected negative influences of organizational politics are deserving of additional discussion.

### **2.2 Decline in Employee Job Satisfaction**

An organization staffed with dissatisfied employees will experience difficulty achieving its goals (Breux, Munyon, Hochwarter, & Ferris, 2009; Vallen & Witt, 2001). Generally, job satisfaction was found to be lower across demographics, when organizational politics were perceived to be present in an organization (Parker et al., 1995). Interestingly, though, the job satisfaction of younger, less experienced employees were found to be less effected when organizational politics was high in comparison to older employees who have been in an organization longer (Malik et al., 2009). Irrespective of employee age, it is important to

understand the detrimental potential of decreases in job satisfaction across employees that is brought on by organizational politics.

### **2.3 Unsettled Work Environment**

The perception of organizational politics heavily influences how employees come to understand the work environment (Parker et al., 1995). Found to negatively influence the work environment, organizational politics creates an environment in which employees question their value, skills, and contributions to the organization; thus, lowering their overall confidence (Hochwarter et al., 2003). Another concern is the contagious effects that negativity can create in the work environment. Organizations that are highly political fail to reward organizational goal based performances, but instead, recognize factors such as membership in a group or amount of power held in the company (Chang, Rosen, & Siemieniec, 2012). When management deemphasizes behaviors that support organizational goals, in favor of politically based behaviors, the work environment becomes unsettled and employees become insecure, making for an environment that sees employees spending time securing their political well-being instead of focusing on goals.

### **2.4 Indifferent Employee Attitude**

Employees are invested in organizations in which they are employed. Whether the employee investments are time, effort, or work related skills, employees expect something in return, e.g., money, and career advancement for their work-place investments (Randall, et al., 1999). Organizational politics has the potential to disrupt returns that employees expect to receive from the organization for their work-related investments. When employees are under the perception that decisions within the organization are politically driven, they become indifferent to formally stated missions, initiatives, and long and short term goals presented to them as organizational initiatives by management. Managers who give employees reason to believe that decisions are made politically should expect employees to become indifferent toward management's formal approach to achieving organizational goals. If management does not reinforce employee behaviors that support the formally stated initiatives of management, it should not come as a surprise when employees become indifferent to the formal expectations of management or even fully disengage from the process and begin to strategize on behalf of their own self-interests.

### **2.5 Favoritism Based Personnel Actions**

Personnel decisions such as pay raises and promotions that are based on favoritism over merit are driven by a political culture that favors those on the powerful end of that culture (Malik et al., 2009). When cronyism, through politics, reaches a point of rewarding employees for reasons other than previously agreed on performance based system, the message is sent to the organization that politicking is more important than performance. If

personal friendships and exchanges of favors become reasons for workplace rewards, it is here that employees will place their energies and not on organizational goals. Managers whose interest it is to manage outcome oriented organizations must reinforce goal-oriented behaviors on the part of employees and not reward political behaviors.

## **2.6 Decrease in Employee Job Commitment**

Demographics aside, employees seem not to prefer politics within an organization. When however, examining age, older employees were found to be less committed to a politically driven organization than younger employees (Miller et al., 2008). It is possible that younger employees are simply focused on directives put forth to them and do not know or care to what extent an organization is political. Often, younger employees do not gain a full grasp on the political environment in an organization until they have experienced it for several years. Contrarily, more experienced (“older”) employees are more likely to fully understand the realities of organizational politics and the unfairness and lack of productivity that it brings to organizations. For similar reasons, international employees also seem less likely to be disrupted by organizational politics than do domestic employees (Miller et al., 2008). Given the generally less stable overall environment, e.g., visa, citizenship, and language concerns, international employees may be less willing to risk the personal damages that can come from choosing not to address or engage in organizational politics.

## **2.7 Diminished Organizational Citizenship Behavior**

The presence of organizational politics holds a negative relationship with “organizational citizenship behavior,” which is defined as: “discretionary behavior that enhances the social context in which the technical core of the organization operates” (Chang et al., 2012, p. 396). In laymen’s terms, good citizenship behavior might be expressed as shared “good will” among fellow employees and management across an organization. When political interactions encroach into the organization and eventually come to control the direction of the organization, citizenship behaviors will reflect the very same self-interest that is at the core of organizational politics. Management must allow good citizenship behavior a chance by not rewarding political behaviors taking place in the organization.

## **2.8 Job Stress**

Job stress can be caused by a variety of factors, such as high pressure situations, obstacles to completing a task, and lack of recognition from managers (Semmer, 2006). It again becomes apparent that managers are positioned to play a positive role in eliminating politically caused stress that can negatively impact organizational production. An environment marked by poor social relationships among employees, conflict among employees, and a lack of social support from co-workers and managers produces some of the most stressful situations in the work environment (Semmer, 2006). Although not exclusively

caused by politics, work place stresses can be mitigated through strategies to reduce organizational politics.

### **3. The Need to Manage Organizational Politics**

Managerial awareness of organizational politics is helpful, if not necessary, for the most effective reduction in politics through the implementation of strategies. Research consistently supports the idea that organizational politics has to be carefully managed, or it will be detrimental to the work environment (Chang et al., 2009; Cropanzano et al., 1997; Randall et al., 1999). There are several options available for managers as they aspire to reduce negative effects of organizational politics.

#### **3.1 Maintaining a Collegial Organizational Climate**

Organizational climate can help mitigate the negative effects of organizational politics. Shared perceptions related to values, norms, beliefs, and procedures, in addition to the social and organizational conditions in which workers perform their assignments, generally support a collegial organizational climate (Ayim & Salminen, 2007). If values within an organization are truly shared across employees and management, a natural collective sense of belonging across members of the organization will create a sense of security that will help decrease political attempts to not only gain security but to also advance within the organization. Thus, focusing on creating an amiable organizational climate, regardless of the degree of political behaviors taking place in an organization, will influence factors such as job performance, work behavior, and motivation levels, which generally support productivity (Ayim & Salminen, 2007).

#### **3.2 Preserving Job Satisfaction**

Organizational politics, if not properly managed, establishes a basis for the unhappiness of those employees who are not the beneficiaries of political maneuvering. It is the responsibility of individuals in leadership positions to ensure that politics does not reduce job satisfaction (Breux et al., 2009). Employees struggle to be satisfied with their job when there is a strong political influence on the organization, which makes it important that the work environment is enhanced through managerial support of employees (Parker et al., 1995). The need to maintain employee satisfaction or at least prevent employee dissatisfaction is of the utmost importance to successfully harness the collective efforts of employees for the purpose of achieving organizational goals.

#### **3.3 Fostering Organizational Support**

Organizational support is necessary if the potentially negative effects of organizational politics are to be diminished (Hochwarter et al., 2003; Randall et al., 1999; Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). It is management that must spearhead organizational support to help reduce organizational politics. Whether it be the support of employee career opportunities

(Parker et al., 1995), or the support of general attitudes and behaviors of employees that are shaped in a positive manner (Foong-ming, 2008) when the organization provides support, positive outcomes in the form of enhanced productivity are the result. When high levels of organizational support are perceived by employees, they feel a greater sense of effort and obligation toward the organization and its goals (Arshadi, 2011; Chang et al., 2009); in turn, agendas of self-interest lose their focus (Foong-ming, 2008).

Overall, there tends to be a feeling that organizational support pushes an organization in a positive and stronger direction despite the persistence of organizational politics and its negative persuasions (Cropanzano et al., 1997). Not surprisingly, politics seems to rise when management does not provide organizational support (Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2013). Without organizational support, employees begin to question whether the organization cares about their well-being (Arshadi, 2011; Hochwarter et al., 2003).

### **3.4 Allowing for Employee Control**

Control over one's work environment was also found to reduce the effects of politics. One form of control of one's work environment, employee self-monitoring, was perceived to help reduce the effects of politics (Chang et al., 2012). When employees are provided with a sense of security through control of their environment, their need to engage in politics to gain control diminishes.

Contrarily, employees with low levels of self-monitoring were found to be influenced negatively by organizational politics (Chang et al., 2012). An astute manager will learn the personalities of his employees and allow employees who he considers capable and responsible, to self-monitor. Allowing proven employees to self-monitor will prevent those very same employees from engaging in damaging politics to gain the control over their environment to which they feel entitled.

## **4. Strategies to Diminish Organizational Politics**

Various managerial strategies that serve the purpose of diminishing organizational politics are available to the manager. Implementing such strategies can be helpful as management aims to reduce organizational politics in the interest of diminishing its stifling effects on productivity, i.e., goal achievement. Strategies found effective in reducing organizational politics include but are not limited to: involving employees in decision making, fostering teamwork, building trust and social support, hiring politically under-skilled employees, and basing personnel and program decisions on objective criteria.

### **4.1 Involving Employees in Decision-Making**

Empowering employees by allowing them input through involvement in the decision making process will meet their need or want to be involved, thus taking away their sense of urgency to engage in politics to become involved. Organizational politics was found to

decrease when employees were included in decision-making within the organization, and doing so reduced the negative effects on relationships caused by organizational politics (Witt et al., 2000).

Involving employees provides them with a greater sense of control over their job, which makes them feel as if they have power within the organization (Witt et al., 2000). Keeping employees involved in making decisions in an organization is one way to suppress the controversial presence of political agendas. A balanced approach, however, should be considered, when allowing employees more involvement in the direction of an organization. Over involving employees who have limited interest in being involved in decision making can actually result in an increase of political behaviors for the purpose of removing oneself from input to decision making and the accountability that may come with it. In fact, the typical employee may prefer limited control over a large amount of control that also requires them to be held accountable (Breux et al., 2009).

#### **4.2 Emphasis on Teamwork**

Management's emphasis and encouragement on teamwork is a strategy to soften the negative impact of organizational politics in the workplace (Parker et al., 1995; Valle & Witt, 2001). An emphasis on teamwork, in a manner that is mutually beneficial to both the workplace and employee can be effective. The manager who artificially props up the importance of being a team player will not be effective in overcoming organizational politics unless the expectations of teamwork also support individual needs of employees. Given that employees engage in organizational politics for self-serving purposes, the wise manager will incorporate a plan that meets individual wants and needs of employees while at the same time brings employees together as a team to also achieve objectives of the organization.

#### **4.3 Building Trust and Social Support**

Trust and social support can act as strong moderators in the relationship between organizational politics and job outcomes (Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010). As organizational politics festers within an organization, managers and co-workers who build trust through morally upstanding actions and who show a genuine interest in employees' personal lives, as employees deem appropriate, place themselves in a favorable position to diminish organizational politics. Trust from employees will only be gained if managers assume a genuine approach to supporting things most important to employees. Managers who work to build trust and social support among employees can help negate the detrimental effects of organizational politics (Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010).

#### **4.4 Hiring Politically Under-skilled Employees**

Job performance and satisfaction was found to be greatest in a political environment when employee political skill was low and managerial political skill was high (Brouer et al.,



2011). Furthermore, Brower et al. goes on to point out that the presence of highly politically skilled employees does not automatically mean that the negative effects of organizational politics will be reduced. In fact, when both employees and managers are politically skilled, the negative effects can be more severe than if employees are naïve in the political arena.

Employees who are unaware of a political environment, seem not to be affected by it (Brouer et al., 2011). However, the presence of highly skilled employees and managers make for an environment conducive to on-going political encounters within the organization. Over-engagement in politics, reinforced by an abundance of organizational members who are skillful in politics throughout the organization runs the risk of members spending an overwhelming amount of time pursuing political advantages instead of actual work related outcomes. As a strategy to mitigate the potential damaging organizational effects of politics resulting from the presence of both politically skilled managers and employees, hiring young professionals who have yet to gain the political wherewithal to engage in the extended amount of politics that can be damaging to organizational productivity, should be considered.

#### **4.5 Base Personnel and Program Decisions on Objective Criteria**

Organizational politics can impact a variety of processes that take place in the work environment every day, including employee performance evaluations and other critical decisions made during the decision-making process (Chang et al., 2009). Personnel decisions include but are not limited to hiring, promotions, and rewards. Although some of the most important decisions are personnel based, decisions are also made that effect program resources and the overall direction of the organization, which can also be strongly influenced by politics.

The employee performance evaluation is a method of employee assessment on which personnel decisions are commonly based. When organizational politics establishes an environment where managers and peers do not use objective criteria to complete employee evaluations, employee behaviors become politically centered in the interest of self-preservation instead of the goals of the organization. When it is politics that influences or even drives personnel decisions, employees will conform by also practicing politics to enhance their probability of gaining favorable decisions. Doing so will further increase a cultural of organizational politics and the negative repercussions that come with it.

### **5. Indirect Deterrents to Organizational Politics**

In much the same way that the pedagogy/teaching literature claims that the best way to prevent classroom discipline problems is to implement sound teaching methods (Sugai & Horner, 2008) one also might argue that the best way to prevent negative outcomes resulting from organizational politics is to implement sound managerial strategies that require the attention and time of employees that might otherwise be spent engaging in politics.

Motivation and employee engagement are two such approaches that are not mutually exclusive. A genuinely engaged employee is a motivated employee. Implementing effective job designs is another indirect deterrent to organizational politics.

### **5.1 Motivation**

With the sense of direction that motivation provides employees, it allows employees a focus that offers the ability to push aside the negative effects of organizational politics. The two common types of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic, can be effective as methods to dissipate organizational politics.

Extrinsic motivation, can be used as a method to focus employee behaviors on the goals of the organization and can overshadow organizational politics. Coming from “outside” a person, extrinsic motivation, can take place when managers align performance incentives/rewards, such as promotions and monetary incentives (Danish & Usman, 2010). If a rewards system is in place that reinforces actions supporting organizational goals, employees will act in manners consistent with the goals of the organization and inconsistent with destructive organizational politics. Recognition and praise also serve as effective extrinsic motivational behaviors and can take place in the form of: personal recognition, recognition of work practices, recognition of job dedication, and recognition of results (Brun & Dugas, 2008).

Intrinsic motivation, which involves employees working on a task because they enjoy and find it worth their time on a personal level (Hardre & Reeve, 2009) can also overshadow the negative effects of organizational politics. Although managers may be less able to utilize intrinsic motivation as a strategy to dissipate organizational politics, they, however can exercise efforts to match employee interests with organizational goals in a manner that will create a natural ‘fit’ between the employees and the organization. In doing so, employees will be intrinsically motivated or motivated from within oneself to engage in efforts that do not include influences associated with organizational politics.

### **5.2 Employee Engagement**

One of the most critical factors on which managers can focus to diminish organizational politics is employee engagement. In doing so, a work environment conducive to employee efficiency and productivity is created. The general meaning of employee engagement, involves employees being involved in work, showing extreme amounts of enthusiasm for work, and expressing a willingness to help the organization achieve success and be productive (Kompaso & Sridevi, 2010). Employee engagement can also be seen in employees that show significant amounts of energy, vigor, dedication, and absorption toward their work (Saks, 2006).

### **5.3 Implementing Effective Job Designs**

One of the ways that managers can work on enhancing employee motivation and engagement in their employees is by implementing an effective job design (Garg & Rastori, 2006). Establishing an effective job design will increase the motivational levels of employees. Although various approaches exist to job design, some common elements of a job design include: providing workers with a greater variety of work, providing workers chances for career and personal growth, providing workers control and responsibility in planning their performance, skill and task variety, task significance, giving employees autonomy, providing employees with feedback, giving employees a sense of responsibility for the work they produce, and designing the job around choice, social norms, and expectations (Garg & Rastori, 2006). Managers who create and implement job designs, based on motivational criteria specific to employees, support an engaged and productive employee whose interest in politics will be minimal.

### **6. Summary**

Astute and strong management is necessary if organizational politics is to be stifled, in the interest of maximizing productivity. Insecure and weak managers will succumb to the political persuasions of the more powerful employees. Therefore it is necessary that leadership of the organization is proficient in establishing and implementing a system of management that is transparent and based on performance based criteria. It is equally important that managers who choose performance and outcome based management over politics are supported from their supervisors. When politics is allowed to disrupt the managerial process that emphasizes data based decisions, employees will quickly adjust and begin to engage in political behavior instead of performance based behavior. If it is political behaviors that are rewarded, employees will behave politically. Conversely, if it is performance behaviors that are rewarded, employees will perform. Not to be forgotten is that in the final analysis, politics in organizations is omnipresent (Brouer et al., 2011). Thus, if one believes that politics can be eradicated from an organization, although refreshing, he is most likely naïve. Even a strict implementation of a performance based approach will not make for a politically free organization. The best one can do is remain focused on reinforcing performance based behaviors and not politically based behaviors, while also utilizing strategies to diminish political behaviors that arise. Assuming all other business circumstances are favorable, if politics can be kept in the background and prevented from being the center of management and employee behaviors, the organization stands a good chance of achieving long term productivity.

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