Political Games in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Power can be used for the good of the organization or for the personal gain of individuals and can thus be beneficial or destructive to meeting organizational goals. Different political games and tactics that are used to gain power in the workplace are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Politics has its place in corporations. Much of it occurs prior to meetings when different factions try to convince others that their agenda is in the best interests of the company. This is politics as usual and may actually help the company if it leads to more effective practices for the company. These instances should be transparent and not meant to curry favor for hidden agendas or power plays. The following are some of the power tactics seen in industry today.

COERCIVE DEFICIENCY

One of the better known types of power plays is coercive deficiency. A manager spends most of the year’s budget in the first few months and then goes to his boss stating that his department will have to stop work since it is out of budget money. The boss then has to decide whether to shut down an important department or take funds from other departments. This ploy, of course, works best if the department in question has a critical function in the organization.

The surprising thing about this technique is that it can often be used year after year. The boss should catch on to this play the first time it is used. Solutions to the problem involve delving into the reality of the claim. Is the department really being asked to do too much with too little budget or is trying to expand their budget at the expense of others? In the first case, careful attention needs to be used in determining the next budget for each department. If the department is just trying for more without cause, strict monitoring of expenditures are in order to prevent this from recurring. In reality, closer monitoring of expenditures on a monthly basis is probably a good course of action in either case.

EMPLOYEES WITH HIDDEN AGENDAS

It is often hard to tell when another employee is using you to get something they want that you may not agree with. Changes in behavior may be the easiest way. If someone is suddenly much nicer to you than in the past, there may be a reason. They could have just realized that you are an asset worth getting on their side as a mentor, etc. On the other hand, they could be using you or your influence to meet their own needs. Asking questions about what has changed and what they really want can help. Keeping up with the political system in the organization and knowing which sides want different outcomes can help
you piece things together and explain changes in behavior as a way to influencing you. With a frank discussion, you may find that you were on the same side all along.

POWER STRUGGLES

Power struggles are usually the most obvious displays of political behavior in organizations. These often involve factions taking sides and trying to get their way and can be very destructive to the company. One example of this was a company that was expanding into the China market. They had an International Division and a separate division just for Japan. The International Division had, thus far, just operated mainly in Europe. Since they were the International Division, they assumed that China would be given to them. The Japan Division thought that doing business in East Asia was totally different, and they should be given China since they had East Asia experience. No solution could quickly be found, and the struggle went on for at least six months with the CEO quitting his job half way through. This type of struggle for power can disrupt the operations of a company for a very long time. Preexisting rules as to what happens in different situations could have stopped the problem before it erupted.

PERSONAL ISSUES AND GRUDGES

Some personalities have difficulty with showing their frustrations in a beneficial way. The conflict resolution literature agrees that getting mad and yelling usually does not give you an advantage in getting what you think you deserve. Many customer service personnel are trained to first, let them yell at you, but realize it is not you they are mad at. This gives the customer the feeling of catharsis in that they feel they have done everything they could to get their way. The next step is to ask the customer what solution they feel would be fair. It is surprising how many times that solution is something within the customer service representative’s power to grant. Giving them what they ask for stops all the yelling and makes them much more reasonable to deal with. If the Rep cannot give them what they are asking for, it is time to escalate the problem to someone with more discretionary power. Unfortunately, there are some customers that can never be satisfied. In extreme cases, you may need to refer them to your competition knowing that due to the time it takes to try to pacify them, your competition will not turn a profit on their business.

These options, of course, depend on the importance to your company of the particular customer or supplier. With important contacts, you might try stepping to their side and acknowledging some of the points they are making. This tells them that you are really listening to them, that you are not a threat to them, and that you are sincerely trying to help. It also usually calms down a potentially eruptive situation.

Problems with fellow employees can make your life miserable. More assertive people expect you to be assertive with them instead of bottling your emotions up inside. The best advice is to meet them half way and being more assertive than you are normally comfortable with. This doesn’t mean you have to become really pushy, but you should push back more than you usually would. Talking to the other person about changes in behavior and what you yourself can do to improve the situation can also help.

What you want to avoid with ill feelings between fellow employees is bringing in other workers to back up your side. It is nice to know you have others on your side, but this nearly always escalates. The person you are having trouble dealing with will also have friends, and soon, the entire office is taking sides in the dispute. This route leads to real problems in the entire department and still doesn’t settle anything. Better solutions are to sit down with the troubling person and an outsider to the dispute that
you both respect. This third party can help you to understand each other’s perspectives and act as a mediator in the conflict resolution process. Another very common solution is to take the dispute to a higher authority who acts as an arbitrator and has the final say in resolving the problem. Workers often go to their boss to make the final decision. One problem with this approach is that you will have to work with this boss in the future and don’t want to change his or her opinion of you for not solving the problem without bringing in a higher authority. This also applies to bringing in the big boss to decide problems between different whole departments.

Dealing with less assertive people can present a very different problem. If you do something that makes them uncomfortable, they are not likely to tell you about it, but instead bottle it up inside and are apt to hold a grudge against you. Since they won’t tell you when you are stepping on their toes, you need to be extra careful to do nothing that could upset them. The last thing you want is for a less assertive person to hold a grudge until it can’t be kept in any longer. The eruption is then near nuclear in scope. Tread lightly.

**EMPIRE BUILDING AND UNDER PRODUCTIVITY**

In some large corporations or government agencies, compensation is based on the number of employees supervised. This is a perfect situation for trying to increase the number of employees working under you. This increase in employees can be obtained by taking over work previously done by other departments, and this may be needed if your department has greater expertise in the area or the other department is overwhelmed with work. These may both be healthy for the organization, but assuming other departments work simply to build an empire within the organization is not. There is, however, another possible way to obtain more employees. If each worker produces less because of the culture of the department or red tape or other roadblocks to productivity are thrown up, there might be an artificial need for more workers to get the needed work completed. This is purposefully slowing the productivity of employees so that a case can be made for needing more resulting in higher compensation for the boss. Upper management needs to keep a keen eye on what work needs to be done and who has the best knowledge and experience to do it. Changes in productivity by a work unit also need to be explained to management’s satisfaction.

**HEAD STANDING**

Many bosses take full credit for the work done by their workers. In effect, they are building their own careers by standing on the work (heads) of others. In most cases, this is organizationally their due, even though it keeps many good employees down and costs the organization in the end. The problem arises when no credit is given to those that actually did the work. Their names don’t appear on the document, and they are not mentioned in the meeting. Some managers go to lengths to keep their best employees from being promoted. This has long been a major complaint about the assessment center technique. The best employees never get to attend the assessment center because their boss fears that if they do well, they will be promoted. Bosses often don’t want their best workers to get promotions because they are the people that make the boss look good.

There is no easy way of correcting this malady without changing the culture of the organization. By keeping the best and brightest minds down lower in the company, the progress of the overall organization will be slowed. Some big companies have discovered this flaw and have taken action to
reduce it. IBM for instance, has built the development of subordinates into its performance appraisal for senior managers. Managers are rated not just on the current performance in the company, but on how their employees are being developed into the future of the company.

The games mentioned in this article can be traced to individuals who value gain for themselves over the goals of the company overall. Some other games can be traced to an organizational culture that rewards only getting ahead in the hierarchy and not cooperation between departments. Cultural change can benefit the organization in many ways, while power games tend to favor the status quo and may delay needed changes.