

POLITICS, POWER & INFLUENCE

How to Adapt and Lead in a Changing World

Ignoring the external and internal politics surrounding your team and organization can be hazardous. Successful leaders, managers and team members must understand the importance of dealing with individuals through personal power and influence. It is very important to analyze the political context in your environment and learn how to convert adversaries into allies and uncover ways to manage politics at all levels.

Politics is always about power and influence. Hence, politics, power and influence are not separated. Whenever there is power and control, the powerful one, be it a manager or a father in a home would exercise influence through politics. Politics is about maintaining power and influence regardless of whether it is done in a healthy/just or unhealthy/unjust way. Politics and power are inseparable. Of course, power and politics are different, their definitions serve to describe their differences. Power can be strength without the use of politics, e.g., in the case of a newly-assigned manager who quits his job and takes the role of an officer in a less powerful position because he wants less responsibility. This manager refuses to use politics in his powerful position. Needless-to-say, such leaders are rare. Many leaders are preoccupied with power because power pays a higher price for work to people than does subordination. Although it involves a great deal of responsibility, the benefits of power are immense. Nevertheless, power is essential seeing that no organization can survive without leaders and their guidance. All leaders must have power, and it is a “given” in any organization. Leaders do not have to base all their decisions with the use of politics. “Like it or not”, politics, power and influence are a part of all organization.”

Knowing this, how should we think of power, politics and influence? Our understandings of power, politics and influence are related to relationships and maintained through interactions with others. When we talk and interact we initiate, maintain, justify, reinforce structures of organizational membership, and acceptance and decision-making. The classical administrative theory portrays organizations as “logical, functional, bland, impersonal, passionless entities that operate according to neutral rules of efficiency and economy.” However, organizations are social constructions characterized by relationships, ownership and membership. Social or persuasive power is manifested through the exertion and ability of individuals and other stakeholders as they generate and maintain their position and relationships. These matters are human and illustrate human frailty, skill, ability, learning capacity, opportunism, willingness to engage, control over passions, self-centeredness, altruism and virtue, ingenuity and disingenuousness.

Social or persuasive power is “the ability to get another person to do something that he or she would not otherwise have done.” The weakness in the social construction argument is that it neglects pure, real, coercive force. The fist speaks louder than words. The person who does not speak but acts, using the sword to force others into submission has power. Coercion albeit mediated by social mores and the law is nevertheless still evident. Moreover, organizational managers in power do not always have to provide reasons for their behavior. Political behavior has been defined as the “non-rational influence on decision making”. To put it another way, organizational politics can be used any time and for any reason. The only requirement for organizational political activity is power. When there is power, there are politics. Both power and politics are different to the extent that power is potency while politics is the use of that potency to acquire higher standards. Organizations are running as they must in the presence of both power and politics, both of which are impossible to do away with seeing that there will always be people with superior abilities and bargaining powers with respect to the others.

