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Author(s): Stuart M. Schmidt

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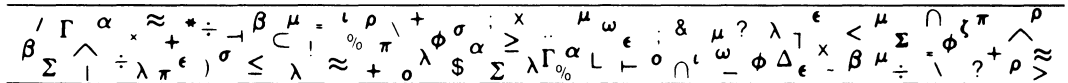
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# Organization Life: There Is More to Work than Working

STUART M. SCHMIDT

*Human Resource Administration  
School of Business and Management  
Temple University  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19130*



Technical professionals who solely follow a rational model may neglect social relations at work. These relations are important for achieving objectives. Ambitious employees use a variety of tactics for influencing others. A successful career depends on building relationships and using organizational politics in addition to technical competence.

**J**ohn Danforth, industrial engineer:

For five years I kept my nose to the grindstone. . . . My supervisors agreed that my performance was excellent. . . . I hardly ever went out for lunch. . . . I usually stayed late finishing projects while others were off having a beer. . . . I often came in on Saturdays to work while most of my coworkers played golf. . . . Where did all this work get me? I have not moved up in five years while many of those I started with have been promoted. . . . Promotions are political around here.

John Danforth, like most technical professionals, used a rational model of his firm to guide his behavior. More often than not, OR professionals are rationally

oriented. They value logical systems and are comfortable abiding by organizational rules. Their training and their personalities suit them to structured settings. Applying the rational model to organizational life, they believe that to do well and get ahead they should produce results and excel at problem solving. They are concerned first and foremost with their work.

Adherents of rational models usually use a mechanistic metaphor to describe organizational life. They see an organization as an engine, using such expressions as "running smoothly" . . . "they mesh well"

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. . . "build a head of steam" . . . "well balanced" . . . "well oiled." They picture organizational life as inanimate and mechanical. In their minds, effective employees are well tooled parts assembled to function in concert as a smoothly running engine. This mechanistic metaphor has no place for the emotions, attitudes, needs, or conflicts of human beings [Morgan 1986]. If anything, human emotions, needs, and wants are seen as undesirable intrusions in the work place. At best social relations are considered transitory aberrations. Such hu-

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man deviations are discredited and avoided.

Technical professionals who hold this mechanistic view consider socializing at work inappropriate. They regard personal banter and relationships as nonproductive. They communicate through logical arguments backed by facts, figures, and data. People who adhere to a mechanistic view of organizational life believe that excellent performance will be recognized and rewarded. Since rules are formally articulated, they think it reasonable to expect those who follow the rules to be rewarded. They do not engage in socializing or self-promotion, because hard work will win the day. But will it?

An alternative to the rational, mechanistic view of organizational life is a political perspective [Morgan 1986]. Typically the term *political* has pejorative connotations. We associate sleazy and disreputable activ-

ities with the word *political*. The popular belief is that decent, hardworking, competent people need not stoop to being political. Indeed, many believe that people with any decency flee from political situations.

However, sociologists use the term *political* without negative connotations. A person with a political perspective recognizes that organizations consist of people who have different perceptions, needs, abilities, objectives, preferences, and power. Furthermore, their interests may legitimately conflict with one another. Those with a political perspective try to describe organizational life as it is rather than as some would like it to be. As long as organizations are designed and staffed by people, they will have human characteristics, for better or for worse. March and Simon [1958] pointed out that human decision makers operate from rather limited information bases, process information inefficiently, and may perceive and interpret the same information very differently from one another. This means that decision making will be, at best, only subjectively rational and subject to human emotions, selective perception, and human frailties.

Going back to John Danforth's situation, promotions may go to those seen as amiable team players rather than to the hardest workers. The criteria for promotion may have been quite different from what Danforth imagined. While he may have been fulfilling his job description as an industrial engineer, Danforth may not have been behaving in a manner appropriate for a supervisory position. As we go up organizational hierarchies, the work requires more social skills and fewer technical skills. By focusing exclusively on his work,

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and not socializing, Danforth insured that no one knew him and that no one observed his ability to get along with others. He may have been seen as a hermit who was unable to function with others.

Did John Danforth have to play politics to get ahead? That depends on how we understand organizational politics. Politics can be thought of as nonrational tactics designed to influence others, especially those at higher levels, to promote or maintain one's vital interests. These tactics usually include ingratiation, bargaining, and the formation of coalitions [Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson 1980]. Almost every strategy except using logic, facts, figures, and data usually is considered nonrational. Even friendliness can be viewed with suspicion or contempt by those who hold the rational, mechanistic view.

Researchers find that approximately 60 percent of those asked reported that organizational politics occurs quite frequently in their organizations [Gandz and Murray 1980]. Politics pervade organizational life.

People play politics in most organizations, more often at middle and upper levels than at lower levels. Gandz and Murray [1980] found over 90 percent of those asked reported that playing politics was more frequent at the middle and upper levels than at lower levels.

People play politics more frequently in some functional areas than in others and among staff positions more than among line positions. Researchers discovered that politics were most prevalent in marketing, sales, manufacturing, and personnel departments [Madison et al. 1980]. They were least prevalent in accounting, finance, and production [Madison et al. 1980].

Even across functions, managers report a higher level of playing politics in certain organizational situations than in others. Two studies found the highest reported incidence of politics in situations where resources were being allocated: reorganizations, personnel changes, budget allocations, and so forth.

Thus, even though people play politics in most organizations, they do so more frequently in certain functional areas and situations than in others, typically in departments and situations that have few standard operating procedures or rules and during periods of organizational change.

Organizational politics is virtually inherent in organizational life. Playing politics is a normal part of functioning in an organization, not an aberration. Playing politics is a multistage process that encompasses the situation, one's objectives, the other players, and their actions.

Organizational politics begin with aspiring, motivated people who want to either obtain more resources and status or defend what they have. They may want a promotion or a share of the department's budget. Ambitious people who are seeking to get ahead are most eager to play politics, to be successful either in their own interest or in the interest of their organizational unit. They have objectives and goals to achieve; needs to fulfill. Ambitious people are a necessary but not sufficient precondition to politics being played.

Burned out, alienated employees who are not ambitious seldom play politics. They tend to be docile, compliant people who are not trying to promote their own interests or those of their organizations.

Staffing an organization with unambi-

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tious people minimizes the probability of organizational politics but insures organizational stagnation. Docile, compliant employees, while easy to manage, are not innovators, nor do they generate organizational energy.

People's objectives in playing politics are not necessarily self-serving, like obtaining a raise. Ambitious employees may play

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**Docile, compliant employees, while easy to manage, are not innovators nor do they generate organizational energy.**

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politics to benefit their work groups or departments as well as themselves. Many managers are friendly and form coalitions with people at higher organizational levels to obtain resources for their work units. Others may engage in horse trading to get work done. Their objectives are in the organizational interest. True, some may be merely seeking narrow personal benefits, such as more pay or less work. Still others may participate in politics to demonstrate that they are team players and, hence, worthy of promotion. In all cases, ambitious employees play politics to accomplish their objectives.

What situations foster people playing politics? Research indicates that departments and situations marked by few standard operating procedures are marked by political behavior [Allen and Porter 1983]. Such departments and situations lack information about how to pursue objectives or about the efficacy of rational tactics. The resulting uncertainty about organizational

processes and outcomes encourages political behavior. An example of such a situation is a company reorganization, an infrequent occurrence with profound consequences for the employees affected, about which they suffer a great deal of uncertainty.

Uncertainty is disconcerting. We try to reduce or avoid it, especially when our vital interests are threatened. We want to know the rules for action. In organizational settings, ambitious employees rely on predictability in objectives. They want an organizationally sanctioned way to accomplish their goals. However in the absence of standard operating procedures, people expand their range of tactics for influencing others. They don't just write logical memos and wait for their good performance to be noticed. They hedge their bets.

Employees try to get their way with decision makers by using a wide range of tactics. Typically they try to create a favorable impression with the boss or form coalitions. Achieving success, for example, getting promoted, often depends on more than objectively measured performance. Promotions are usually based on fitting-in with the administrative team. Adequate technical performance may be a necessary condition, but it is not sufficient. John Danforth's coworkers actively sought out their boss and tried to create a good impression. They wanted to be seen as team players in tune with the boss. To accomplish this, they had to make themselves known. They socialized with the boss. Sometimes merely creating an opportunity for getting acquainted is enough to create a good impression.

Other times, employees have to work more actively to create a favorable impression. They may try to make themselves appear more similar to the boss by wearing clothes similar to hers or his. They may talk about topics of interest to the boss and espouse similar ideas [Jones 1964]. Social psychologists have found that such ingratiation tactics are pervasive in social relations and are often quite effective, though not without costs [Kipnis and Schmidt 1988]. People tend to think well of those whom they see as similar to themselves. They may, however, suspect the motives or competence of someone who relies too heavily on friendliness.

People need to create a good impression before their logical arguments and data are taken seriously. An excellent example of the use of friendliness combined with reason is exhibited by the typical lawyer in a jury trial. First lawyers sell themselves to juries by being friendly and sympathetic. After establishing their credibility, they present their logical arguments and evidence. Effective lawyers know that reason alone is not persuasive. The same tactic works in our organizations.

Unfortunately, many OR professionals neglect or are oblivious to social relations that can influence others, and they pay the price of dissatisfying careers. They rely on a limited repertoire of tactics, mainly reason, believing that anything else is unsavory and inappropriate. Instead of acting according to the rules of an organization created, staffed, and managed by people, OR professionals are often trapped in illusions of how organizations ought to function.

Learning to play politics is important for

OR professionals in industry. They are usually in staff positions, and these positions typically entail high levels of politics. They also institute changes that affect others in their organizations. Those affected often offer stiff resistance. To be effective in their complex jobs and really influence others, OR professionals must use a wide range of tactics that go beyond mere reason. They must move beyond the mechanistic view of organizations and learn to establish effective social relationships in getting the job done.

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