

Organizational Contexts and Political Skills: The Challenge of Being Politically Effective

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes three contexts in which political behavior routinely occurs in organizations. Factors contributing to participant perceptions of uncertainty in each context are described. Political effectiveness in light of contextual uncertainty is explained by integrating the self-monitoring construct.

Organizational theorists believe that levels of uncertainty within organizations and such individual factors as degree of job involvement and tolerance for ambiguity level become interactive variables. (1) Individuals who are highly involved in their jobs with low tolerance levels for ambiguity, actively work to acquire information to reduce the uncertainty they are experiencing. (2) While generating information, organizational members display either effective or ineffective political behaviors, depending upon their self-monitoring ability. (3)

This essay: describes three organizational contexts in which such political behavior occurs on a day to day basis; examines characteristics of each context that influence the occurrence of political behavior; and discusses how change within an organizational context is often determinant of how politically challenging the context will be.

Communication among organizational members occurs within dyadic contexts (one on one), small group contexts (five to seven participants), and public contexts (public speaking situations). The most typical communication encounter in an organization is the communication occurring between a superior and a subordinate. (4). According to Goldhaber, these encounters are affected by the perceptions that each holds of the other, their past experiences with each other, the nature of their relationship, the similarity of their backgrounds, the presence of trust as well as the skill each displays in creating and exchanging verbal and nonverbal messages with each other. (5) A relationship between a superior and a subordinate might be characterized as "certain" or "unambiguous." Or, the relationship might be easily characterized as the opposite. What are some of the elements that contribute to certainty and the absence of ambiguity in the employer/employee relationship? Naturally, as indicated above, a relationship typified by a cordial past track record of interaction, trust, attraction (i.e. liking) as well as verbal and nonverbal effectiveness could be more certain or unambiguous than one lacking these characteristics. Other characteristics contributing to perceptions of certainty within the employer/employee relationship might include the employer's ability to clearly articulate tasks on a day to day basis, the employer's ability to clearly verbalize his performance expectations of the employee and the employer's personal preferences as far as dress code, punctuality, formality level

and other procedural norms are concerned. Obviously, in each of these areas, supervisors vary in terms of the amount or obvious nature of the verbal and nonverbal cues that they furnish their subordinates.

The small group is another frequent context of communication within organizations. Small groups also have characteristics that contribute to perceptions of either certainty or ambiguity on the part of group participants. Whether it be a quality circle, a weekly staff meeting, a standing committee or an informal discussion among colleagues, certain factors contribute to the quality of the small group interaction for its members and to their subsequent perceptions of either certainty or ambiguity. Factors such as: the presence or absence of concrete group goals that individual members are aware of and are in agreement on; the clarity of group member roles (i.e. individuals in the group possess clear understandings of the behaviors that they need to enact.); the norms or standards of individual and group performance are acceptable to individual group members; and finally, the group has a leader that helps the group accomplish its goals, assists individual group members in meeting their needs and who facilitates conflict effectively. (6)

The third organizational situation in which communication routinely occurs is the public context. Public communication involves the exchange of information with an audience as in a public speaking situation. For purposes of this essay, we will consider "in house" presentations. (reports, presentations or speeches that are delivered within the organization in which one is employed.) One's familiarity with an audience's predispositions, attitudes, values, educational background, religious and political affiliations as well as past and current employment track records contributes a great deal to the certainty with which one perceives an audience.

As you can see, interpersonal, group and public communication contexts in organizations have characteristics that when present, logically contribute to participant perceptions of certainty, or when absent, perceptions of ambiguity. Previous research has shown that the presence of uncertainty or ambiguity in organizational settings leads to information generation activity on the part of employees. (7) Organizational members who are highly involved in their jobs, and who are suddenly placed in fairly ambiguous organizational circumstances would work to acquire information that would reduce the uncertainty around them. And, as mentioned earlier, those employees capable of carefully monitoring their expressive behavior while discovering useful information in their surrounding environments could be considered politically more effective than those incapable of such monitoring. Self-monitoring is defined by Mark Snyder as the ability of an individual to exert control over his or her expressive behavior. As Snyder argues, there are important and striking individual differences in the extent to which individuals can and do monitor their behavior. The high self-monitoring organizational member is capable of: offering explanations for his behavior or behaving in ways that are strategically responsive to cues emanating from particular organizational contexts; constructing images carefully tailored to meeting the needs of those individuals with whom he is interacting; and of assuming a verbal initiative in situations in which he wishes to control the direction of a particular communicative exchange. (8)

Consider the following example of self-monitoring. A high self-monitoring subordinate working for a rather uncommunicative superior might sense his superior's preference for a very limited interaction of a rather formal nature. The subordinate might subsequently avoid asking direct questions that the supervisor might find offensive and instead, carefully obtain useful information about his job as well as his superior's expectations and preferences from

other sources. This information generation could be accomplished while maintaining the distant and rather formal image preferred by his supervisor.

In developing the self-monitoring construct, Mark Snyder not only defined the consequences of self-monitoring, but also discussed characteristics of situations conducive to influencing the occurrence of monitoring behavior. From his perspective, novel or unfamiliar situations that prompt feelings of confusion or uncertainty, or situations that motivate individual concern for social evaluation and conformity, are conducive to self-monitoring behavior.(9)

One can look at each of the three contexts previously examined (interpersonal, small group, and public) and see that each could be inherently reflective of the characteristics conducive to the occurrence of monitoring behavior. Earlier in this essay we were able to see that small groups, interpersonal relationships and public speaking situations can be characterized by either high degrees of certainty or ambiguity depending on the presence or absence of certain key characteristics.

As the characteristics that contribute to perceptions of certainty diminish in interpersonal, group and public communication situations, the situations themselves often become reflective of the characteristics that Snyder associates with high self-monitoring environments. (i.e. novel, unfamiliar, uncertain, confusing etc.) Consider the interpersonal relationship as an example. In the sudden absence of opportunity to communicate with a superior, or when the limited communication that does occur becomes less frank and candid, we might very well become less certain of where we stand in relation to our colleagues and superior. We have fewer sources of comparison for our behavior and fewer clues available that allow us to determine the appropriateness or acceptability of our behavior.

Often times employee perceptions of certainty on the job are quickly diminished by supervisory changes. Long standing relationships of a very "certain" nature with a supervisor can change overnight. Consider the case of a new supervisor who immediately replaces several individuals in his department and insists that only written communication take place between himself and his subordinates. The supervisory change altered the politics of the department and affected employee perceptions of certainty. The politically challenging nature of this context changed as well. The sudden absence of certainty for the existing employees highlighted both the importance and difficulty of behaving in a politically effective fashion.

Situational explanations, impression management efforts, or for that matter assuming a verbal initiative, are efforts easier to accomplish in unambiguous or certain situations. Relationships characterized by high levels of certainty are much more manageable to an organizational politician than are situations that Snyder would describe as either novel or unfamiliar. It is in these novel or unfamiliar situations that the high self-monitoring individual emerges as politically most effective. As the uncertainty in a relationship increases, so does the caution with which the high self monitor approaches the relationship. The high self-monitoring individual becomes increasingly vigilant for cues indicative of what will constitute appropriate behavior in the relationship itself. If necessary, he will even seek cues to guide his behavior from outside of the confines of the relationship, perhaps from higher levels of management. And the difficulty of acquiring such information and the excitement of obtaining it, perhaps allow us insight into the exhilaration felt by effective politicians. The high self-monitoring organizational member will feel much more comfortable participating in such gamesmanship than the low self-monitoring organizational member.

Similar correlations can be drawn as far as small group and public

communication contexts are concerned. At one time or another most of us have experienced the frustration paralleling the uncertainty or ambiguity that can typify a small group involvement. Consider the difficult case of a formal group leader who is also the supervisor of his group members, thus possessing the power to either reward or punish them for their inputs. This group leader believes that discussing goals is a waste of time and he quickly assigns tasks to his group members without carefully considering their individual knowledge, expertise and status. Hence he also causes resentment among the group members of long standing who have preferences for particular assignments. In this case we are able to see how the absence of those characteristics that contribute to perceptions of certainty in a group, contribute instead to the formation of a more challenging political climate in which to attempt interaction. In such a situation, the psychological tendency of the high self-monitoring individual will be to again proceed with caution as well as with a heightened vigilance for relevant information that will help reduce some of the uncertainty experienced. The high self-monitoring group member will want to communicate a favorable image both to his colleagues and supervisor. Assuming the initiative by volunteering for certain tasks not desired by coworkers with seniority could very well serve the dual purpose of creating a flexible and energetic image in the eyes of his supervisor and an image of fairness in the eyes of his colleagues. In addition, the high self-monitoring group member will probably make an effort to learn as much as possible about both his supervisor and fellow group members. And, this might be accomplished by consulting sources of information outside of the group itself. In acquiring information, high self-monitoring communicators are even more cognizant of the subtle verbal and nonverbal cues around them that aid in the careful monitoring of their behavior in difficult situations.

Communication in organizations not only takes place in interpersonal and small group contexts but public contexts as well (i.e. public speaking situations). Public speaking situations in an organization should be considered from a slightly different perspective. Such interactions are generally of either a planned or impromptu nature. If an employee were suddenly called upon to make a few remarks at a meeting in which he knew very few of the organizational members in attendance, this would be an example of a politically challenging public context for communication. If on the other hand, the employee were asked to prepare some remarks for a group he knew quite well, the context would still be politically challenging but less so than the impromptu situation. Obviously, the more you know about an audience and the more time you have to prepare a message, the greater is your ability to furnish explanations for your behavior that are situational in nature - explanations carefully tailored to meeting the needs of your audience and the occasion. Similarly, knowledge of an audience's beliefs, values, educational level, as well as past and present employment track records permits the careful construction of the most appropriate image for a given situation. High self-monitoring organizational members are more effective communicators in highly uncertain or ambiguous contexts. Consider for example the high self-monitoring supervisor who was unexpectedly called upon to make a few remarks to a group of lower level employees. The suit coat might come off, the language become less formal and the concerns expressed might very well mirror those of his audience. Such on the spot responses to cues furnished by an audience are often demonstrated by effective professional politicians. Yet similar behaviors abound among high self-monitoring organizational members. The challenge of adapting to the complex cues furnished within organizational contexts is often an appealing sport for high self-monitoring organizational members.

CONTEXT	Factors Influencing Perceptions of Certainty	Factors Influencing Perceptions of Uncertainty	Level of Political Challenge	Effective Political Behavior
INTERPERSONAL CONTEXT	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) trust 2) attraction (liking) 3) effective communication 4) clearly articulated tasks 5) clarity of performance expectations 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) distrust 2) absence of effective communication 3) poorly defined tasks 4) unclear performance expectations 	<p>low level when participant perception is certain</p> <hr/> <p>high level when participant ambiguity and perception of instruction uncertain</p>	<p>high self-monitoring most effective political behavior</p>
SMALL GROUP CONTEXT	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) concrete group goals 2) clarity of group member roles 3) acceptable group norms 4) effective leadership 5) absence of conflict 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) unclear group goals 2) unclear group member roles 3) absence of group norms 4) ineffective leadership 5) conflict 	<p>low level when participant perception is uncertain</p> <hr/> <p>high level when participant ambiguity and perception of interaction is uncertain</p>	<p>high self-monitoring most effective political behavior</p>
PUBLIC CONTEXT	<p>Knowledge of audiences:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) predispositions 2) attitudes 3) values 4) beliefs 5) education 6) employment background 7) religious and political affiliations 	<p>Absence of knowledge pertaining to ones audience</p>	<p>low level when participant perception is uncertain</p> <hr/> <p>high level when participant experiences ambiguity and perception of interaction is uncertain</p>	<p>high self-monitoring most effective political behavior</p>

Summary and Theoretical Implications

Communication in organizations occurs in interpersonal, small group and public contexts. Participants in these interactions formulate perceptions of certainty or uncertainty based on characteristics of the situations themselves. As the Table 1 indicates, characteristics of interpersonal, small group and public contexts can: (A) influence perceptions of certainty and be politically unchallenging for their participants; and (B) influence perceptions of uncertainty and be politically challenging for their participants. As the factors that contribute to perceptions of certainty in any one of these contexts decline or change, the difficulty of behaving in a politically effective fashion increases. Because some organizational situations are more politically challenging than others, some situations demand more skill to be perceived as politically effective in one's behavior. High self-monitoring organizational members will tend to be more capable of coping effectively with uncertain interpersonal, small group and public contexts than their low self-monitoring counterparts.

If a high self-monitoring organizational member possesses a low tolerance for ambiguity and high degree of job involvement, uncertain contexts will motivate the individual to strive harder to obtain the information needed to furnish effective political performances. The high self-monitoring construct provides us with insights into a profile of the politically effective organizational member who is able to deal effectively with the uncertainty and ambiguity that can characterize organizational contexts.

Endnotes

1. Susan J. Ashford and L. L. Cummings, "Strategies for Knowing: When and From Where Do Individuals Seek Feedback?," Proceedings of the Academy of Management 1981, pp. 161-165.
2. Ashford and Cummings, pp. 161-165.
3. Donald R. Martin, "Dimensions of Effective Political Performance in Organizational Information Generation," Journal of Applied Business Research, III (1986), pp. 21-27.
4. Gerald M. Goldhaber, Organizational Communication, 2nd ed., Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1979, p. 218.
5. Goldhaber, p. 224.
6. James L. Gibson, John M. Ivancevich, and James H. Donnelly, Jr., Organizations: Behavior, Structure and Processes, Plano, Texas: Business Publications, Inc., 1985, p. 270.
7. Ashford and Cummings, pp. 161-165.
8. Mark Snyder, "Cognitive, behavioral and Interpersonal Consequences of Self-Monitoring," (Paper presented at Symposium on Communication and Affect, Toronto, Canada, (April, 1977), pp. 12-16.
9. Mark Snyder, "Self-Monitoring Processes," (Manuscript supported by the National Institute of Mental Health Grant and the National Science Foundation Grant, January, 1978), p. 47.