

DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE POLITICAL PERFORMANCE
IN ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION GENERATION

by

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This paper furnishes a theoretical description of what constitutes effective political behavior while generating information within an organization. Organizational uncertainties are described as forces that politicize an organizational climate and motivate organizational members to behave politically. The self-monitoring construct is integrated as a way of delineating dimensions of effective political performance within organizations.

It is the object of this essay to probe individual political behavior within organizational settings and attempt to formulate an image of the politically effective member. Although studies have examined managerial perceptions of effective organizational political behavior,¹ this study will approach political behavior as psychologically determined. In so doing, the author will argue that an individual's self-monitoring ability, as defined by Mark Snyder,² contributes to perceptions of his political effectiveness within an organizational structure.

Moving in this direction, naturally necessitates commenting on dimensions of organizational culture that contribute to: (1) the formation of a political climate and (2) the stimulation of subsequent political activities on the part of organizational members. In addition, assessing what verbal and nonverbal communication competencies the politically successful organizational member possesses entails a description of those psychological variables which, according to Snyder, contribute to an individual's ability to monitor his behavior.

Political climates within organizational structures differ markedly in the stimuli they contain that serve to induce political behavior on the part of organizational members. Ashford and Cummings argue that individuals within highly uncertain situations become motivated to seek information relevant to their particular needs.³ And, it is this author's contention that the information gathering process within uncertain organizational climates provides organizational members the contexts in which they can exercise either effective or ineffective political skills depending on individual self-monitoring styles.

Duncan and others have described what constitute uncertain or ambiguous organizational cultures. According to Duncan, our perceptions of environmental uncertainty relate to such environ-

mental components as organizational objectives and goals, technological considerations, personnel processes, or perhaps even intraorganizational conflict.⁴ Budner describes an ambiguous situation as one lacking in structure that furnishes an individual with an insufficient number of cues from which to gauge his behavior or performance.⁵ As previously stated, such situational uncertainties frequently prompt individuals to seek information that will reduce or perhaps even eliminate uncertainty levels and accompanying tensions surrounding the absence of relevant information pertaining to one's organizational role.

Ashford and Cummings further argue that if individuals are highly involved in their jobs and have low tolerance levels for ambiguity, such individual characteristics will contribute to the kind of style an individual will display in generating information to reduce the uncertainties that affect him. The individual highly involved in his job with a low tolerance for ambiguity will assume a more active role in generating useful information than an individual less involved in his job with a more moderate tolerance level.⁶ Thus, the job-involved low tolerant will ask more questions, read more, be more observant and make more efforts to actively acquire information.

Individuals not only differ in terms of the information generating styles they display, but also in terms of their abilities to be politically effective in generating the information they need to reduce environmental uncertainty. This author believes that sources of organizational uncertainty serve the dual function of politicizing the organizational climate by creating information voids that need to be filled and prompting people to behave politically while engaged in information generation activities. For example, in a relatively new organization, performance appraisal standards might be unclear, as are other organizational criteria for allocating rewards. Uncertainties such as these could prompt employees to become quiet strategic in attempting to determine how their performance will be evaluated as well as how rewards will be allocated. An individual with a low tolerance for ambiguity may assume a very active information generation style in light of this uncertainty and be perceived as politically quite ineffective. For example, the individual may ask too many bold questions, hence; his supervisors or peers perceive him negatively. In contrast, another employee might assume a very active information generation style that is quite effective and reflective of his ability to monitor his organizational behavior.

Consider the cognitive, behavioral and interpersonal consequences of self-monitoring and their implications as far as effective political behavior within organizations is concerned. The cognitive consequences of self-monitoring consist of those ways an individual is capable of explaining his behavior in relation to the actions of others.⁷ A high self-monitoring individual is capable of adapting his behavior to cues indicative of situational and interpersonal specifications of appropriateness. Thus, he is able to offer situationally oriented explanations for his behavior. These explanations are tailored to what the high self-monitor assumes is most appropriate in light of the

preferences of the individuals he is addressing in a give situation. Situational explanations communicate little about private thoughts, feelings, or attitudes. If, for example, a supervisor asks one of his subordinates why he did not receive the report that he is expecting to have delivered on a particular day, the high self-monitoring subordinate might respond that he knows the corrections in the document wanted by the supervisor will take longer than anticipated. Associating the "corrections" with the "supervisors's preferences" makes this particular explanation situational in nature. Consider a second example. If a supervisor approaches a subordinate and asks how the processing of travel reimbursement checks could be made more efficient, the subordinate, vaguely aware of a supervisors's desire to maximize usage of computer technology, may recommend a solution involving an increase in the organization's reliance upon technology in disbursement. In both instance, the subordinate's own reasons for acting in a particular way are not acknowledged, but situational elements (i.e. probable or actual supervisory attitudes) are acknowledged in either offering explanations for behavior or in making recommendations to the supervisors. In either instance the situational explanation made by the employee can prompt confirming or disconfirming responses from the supervisor which in and of themselves can be quite informative. For example, "I really appreciate your efforts to save time by making those corrections in advance," or "In the future get the work in on time, and I'll determine what needs to be changed." Situational explanations can strategically function to prompt supervisors to disclose important information about their priorities that can be taken into consideration by high self-monitoring subordinates during future interactions.

The behavioral consequences of self-monitoring consist of the high self-monitoring individual's ability to practice the art of impression management.⁸ According to Snyder, high self-monitoring individuals are considerably more skilled at this particular art than low self-monitoring individuals. Both communication theorists and organizational theorists acknowledge the importance of this particular ability. Roderick Hart and Don Burks argue that an effective communicator is one who maintains a repertoire of roles that can be rhetorically drawn upon in light of the unique characteristics or challenges of different communication contexts.⁹ Organizational theorist Robert Prestus suggests that bureaucratic environments tend to foster "adaptive" personality types.¹⁰ In his research, Snyder argues that individuals differ in their abilities to effectively engage in impression management and the high self-monitoring individual is one capable of verbally and nonverbally portraying images that are carefully structured to meet the needs of a particular situation.¹¹ In other words, the high self-monitoring individual is capable of strategically reading the needs of another communicator and providing the verbal and nonverbal images best suited to meeting these particular needs. The high self-monitoring subordinate would be one capable of determining whether it is important to appear sympathetic, understanding, assertive, witty, or perhaps simply silent. Such determinations obviously influ-

ence the self-monitoring individuals selection of appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Such impression management obviously takes skill. And, high self-monitoring organizational members would be naturally more adept at providing images that are verbally and nonverbally appropriate for given situations.

Unskilled impression management efforts often are perceived as political ineffectiveness within organizational structures. Instances like the following abound in organizations. Consider the young subordinate who is very eager to be evaluated favorably by the supervisor. The supervisor, a man of very few words, offers little or no feedback to his subordinates. This in turn contributes to high degrees of uncertainty within their immediate organizational environment. Eager to please the boss, because of his status and power to reward, the young employee presents one persona in meetings in which the boss is present (i.e. witty, engaging, interesting, helpful, and dynamic), while in meetings in which the supervisor is not present he appears dour, withdrawn, uninterested, critical and arrogant. The obvious cross situational inconsistency in his impression management efforts underscores for his colleagues his rather apparent political motivations. And there is a good change that this inconsistency across situations will become apparent to his supervisor in the long run.

A high self-monitoring individual, skilled in impression management, would not only be capable of sensing the most appropriate roles to play in situations involving his supervisor but also be aware of playing the most appropriate roles in situations involving his peers. The high self-monitor would be cautious of allowing inconsistencies in his role playing to become noticeable or apparent across situational boundaries within an organization.

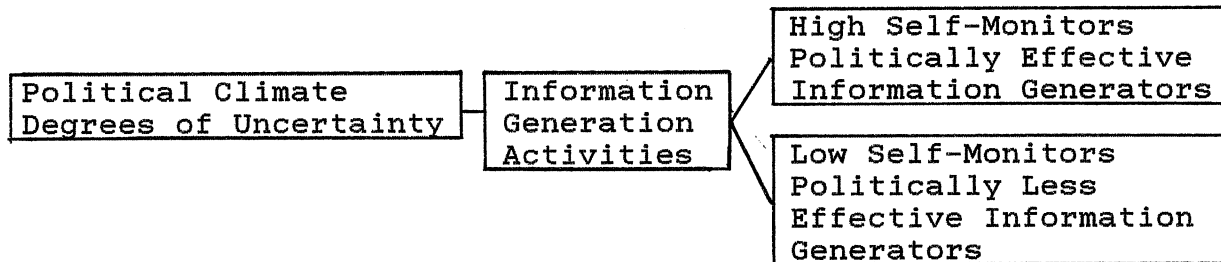
In looking at impression management skills in relation to information generation, one can easily detect the relationship possible between effective impression management and useful information generation. We all tend to speak more freely and be less inhibited about what we say in the presence of a critical listener who is not only concentrating on what we are saying, but also enjoying himself. And, this image could be rhetorically provided by a high self-monitoring individual who detects a supervisor's need for a critical listener. A high self-monitor is able to sense when it is important to appear interested, understanding, sympathetic, or even assertive. These images often prompt substantive responses from others, which might not have been otherwise furnished.

In describing the interpersonal consequences of self-monitoring, Snyder comments on the initiative and regulative roles assumed by high self-monitoring individuals while engaged in communicative interaction.¹² High self-monitoring individuals often speak first and are perceived by others as particularly verbal in their behavior. One can easily envision a high self-monitor assuming a very active feedback generation style. Assuming the initiative, (i.e. speaking first, asking questions, or even making opening comments) within an uncertain situation, could obviously be considered a first step in making an effort to

generate information. High self-monitoring individuals tend to assume the initiative in situations as a way of generating information that will be used in determining the appropriateness of their behavior. Often times, initiative efforts are followed by regulative efforts to exert control over the evolving parameters of a given interaction. For, if one is engaging in self-monitoring, sudden changes within a given interaction makes monitoring more difficult.¹³

The cognitive, behavioral and interpersonal consequences of self-monitoring provide relevant insights when considered as dimensions of political behavior within organizations. A political climate characterized by degrees of uncertainty motivates organizational members to behave politically when engaged in information generation activities. And, those individuals capable of monitoring their behavior in the presence of either their colleagues or superiors are probably perceived as more effective than those with lower self-monitoring abilities.

Table 1



As the above table indicates, the author believes one's political ability, manifested in self-monitoring capability, lends itself to generating relevant information within organizations.

Obviously, as organizational members generate information pertaining to unclear organizational goals, performance appraisal standards, supervisory expectations, sources of power within the organization and other idiosyncratic dimensions of the organizations political culture, perceptions of uncertainty will lessen. Information generation ultimately contributes to a better understanding of organizational structure and functioning.

But, even in a fairly "certain" working environment, lacking in ambiguity, political behavior obviously occurs. But, from the perspective of this argument, it becomes less challenging to be politically effective in an organizational environment lacking in ambiguity.

Snyder argues that it is possible to identify situations with characteristics particularly conducive to high self-monitoring. Situations continuing clear and unambiguous social or interpersonal cues indicative of appropriate behavior are obviously situations more conducive to high self-monitoring. Such situations furnish the high self-monitoring individual concrete information he can utilize in offering situational explanations for his behavior or in constructing appropriate images for particular situations.

Conclusion

Organizational members who are involved in their jobs and low in their tolerance for ambiguity, when working in uncertain organizational environments tend to generate information to lessen the uncertainty that they are experiencing. Information generation efforts can be approached either with or without political savvy. If an employee possesses the preceding characteristics, (i.e. job involvement, low tolerance level) in addition to being capable of high self-monitoring, his political effectiveness as an information generator within an organization will probably be enhanced. And, this employee will be perceived by those around him as a more effective organizational member than those less capable of monitoring their organizational behavior.

Endnotes

- 1 James L. Gibson, John M. Ivancevich, and James H. Donnelly, Jr., Organizations: Behavior, Structure, and Processes, Plano, TX: Business Publications, Inc., 1985, p. 345.
- 2 Mark Snyder, "Self-Monitoring of Expressive Behavior," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, XXX (1974), p. 527.
- 3 Susan J. Ashford and L. L. Cummings, "Strategies for Knowing: When and From Where Do Individuals Seek Feedback?" pp. 161-165.
- 4 Robert Duncan, "Characteristics of Organizational Environments and Perceived Environmental Uncertainty," Administrative Science Quarterly, XVII (1972), pp. 313-327.
- 5 S. Dudner, "Intolerance of Ambiguity as a Personality Variable" Journal of Personality, XXX (1962), pp. 29-50.
- 6 Ashford and Cummings, p. 163.
- 7 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.
- 8 Snyder, "Cognitive, Behavioral and Interpersonal Consequences of Self-Monitoring," pp. 17-19.
- 9 Roderick P. Hart and Don M. Burks, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction," Speech Monographs, XXXIX (1972), p. 77.
- 10 Robert Presthus, The Organizational Society, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978, p. 102.
- 11 Snyder, "Cognitive, Behavioral and Interpersonal Consequences of Self-Monitoring," p. 18.
- 12 Snyder, "Cognitive, Behavioral and Interpersonal Consequences of Self-Monitoring," p. 22.
- 13 Snyder, "Cognitive, Behavioral and Interpersonal Consequences of Self-Monitoring," p. 22.

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