Revisiting The Good And Bad Sides Of Organizational Politics

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory study re-examined the common types of political behaviors that typical organization members are prone to engage in and the results expected from such behaviors. The study utilized a purposive and convenience sample of 30 manager-level senior undergraduate students in a University that targets professional career-focused individuals. The study participants were asked eight questions in a semi-structured interview format. The main research question was “What types of political behaviors have you experienced in an organization that you have worked for?” Further, study participants were asked which of the behaviors, in their estimation could be termed as good or bad and why they categorized them as such. The data obtained from the study were analyzed for patterns and themes using the NVivo 8 computer software. Results showed that, in general, organization members view in positive light political behaviors that are used professionally and that thus foster co-operation among organizational members. On the other hand, organization members view in negative light political behaviors that are perceived as self-serving and destructive to co-operation and team spirit among the various units within the organization. There was a small group, however, that seem to believe that at times, the meanings read to some behaviors by organizational members may be wrong as some of these behaviors may not necessarily have political undertones.

Keywords: Organizational Politics; Political Behaviors; Co-Operation; Destructive; Self-Serving; Political Undertones

INTRODUCTION

The fact that organizational members engage in political behaviors is no news to organization members, in general, and the academic community, in particular. Such political behaviors are exhibited in different forms and at different layers of the organization. According to Bolander (2011), it is self-deceit to believe that one's organization has no politics. The reality of any organization with more than one person is that politics is the lubricant that oils the organization's internal gears. When the proper lubricant is applied, things will work fine. When we forget to lubricate it, the organization will grind to a halt. Thompson (2008) therefore asserted that political action in an organization focuses on how people use power to affect decision. This is more-so the case as power in an organization is not evenly distributed among people and teams in the organization (Thompson, 2008). Organization members therefore tend to use different methods to secure for themselves as much power as can be cornered to enhance their position in the organization, increase their status, and ensure their long-term existence.

Ferrell and Peterson (2006) asserted that political behavior in organizations involve those activities undertaken by organization people that are not actually required as part of the individual's formal role in the organization. However, such activities influence or attempt to influence the distribution of advantages or disadvantages within the organization. According to MSG (2012), organization politics have been known to turn friends to foes, to cause serious disaffection between teams and to make permanent enemies out of erstwhile easy-going individuals.

At the same time, political behavior has been known to be helpful to organization teams and to have contributed to organization growth and accomplishments. When organization members associate with powerful

managers, for example, they may be able to push through, very easily a proposal that is highly beneficial to the organization but which could, otherwise, have been brushed aside (George & Jones, 2009). No wonder, Alagse (2012) submitted that organizational politics is so intricately woven with management system that relationships, norms, processes, performance and outcomes are hugely influenced and affected by it. Therefore, Alagse (2012) suggested that it is extremely important for leaders to understand, exploit, and smooth the political climate in the company to maximize the organizational outcome and satisfaction levels of the people.

No doubt, the culture of an organization will have a lot to do with the general political climate of the organization. According to Thompson, Strickland and Gamble (2010), company cultures vary widely in strength and influence. Some are strongly embedded and have a big impact on a company's practices and behavioral norms. Others are weak and have comparatively little influence on company operations. Unhealthy cultures include those that are highly political and characterized by empire building, those that are change-resistant, those that are insular and inwardly focused, and those that are ethically unprincipled and driven by greed (Thompson, Strickland & Gamble, 2010). Therefore, where political behavior in an organization is hinged merely on inter-departmental competition in the form of wasteful desire for empire building and competitive actions between individual managers, it will ultimately produce detrimental results for the organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have, for many years, looked at the different facets of organizations. According to MSG (2012), an organization is a set up where individuals from diverse backgrounds, different educational qualifications and varied interests come together to work towards a common goal. The idea of commonality of goal is central to this definition. In a similar vein, Jones (2007) asserted that an organization is a tool used by people to coordinate their actions to obtain something they desire or value. Further, looking at the production function of a business, Heizer and Render (2009) submitted that an organization creates value by converting inputs to outputs through a transformational process.

In all of these definitions of organizations, people, either as individuals or groups, play major roles. It is these people with diverse backgrounds, multiple interests, and varying needs that attempt to achieve the goals of the organization. In doing so, power, in its entire ramification, comes to the fore. Since resources in organizations are not inexhaustible and organization members need these resources to carry out their different functions within the whole, then there is power play in the allocation of resources.

According to Macionis (2008), power is the ability to achieve desired ends despite resistance from others. In this regard, Thompson (2008) reminded that power is not evenly distributed among people and teams in organizations. Hence, there is the tendency for organization members to want to secure power. To this end, Robbins (2003) submitted that the use of power in organizations creates politics. Therefore, when organization members are using their power, they are engaged in politics (Robbins, 2003).

No wonder, Macionis (2008) submitted that politics is the societal system for exercising power. It is the social institution that distributes power, sets a society's goals, and makes decisions. Pfeffer (1981) therefore stated that organization politics comprises activities carried out within organizations to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain one's preferred outcome in a situation in which there is uncertainty or disagreement about choice. Political action in organizations therefore focuses on how people use power to affect decision making (Thompson, 2008). In this regard, Ferrell and Peterson (1982) noted that political behavior in organizations involve those activities undertaken by organization people that are not actually required as part of the individuals' formal roles in the organization. However, such activities influence or attempt to influence the distribution of advantages or disadvantages within the organization (Farrell & Peterson, 2006).

According to Kinicki (2008), all organizations are subject to conflict and competition between the desires and interests of different departments, teams, and individuals. It is the process through which these rival interests are played out and eventually reconciled that is known as organizational politics. Understanding the political system of an organization is therefore necessary for a leader to operate effectively and reach desired goals (Kinicki, 2008). Bolander (2011) warned that leaders should not deceive themselves by thinking their organization has no politics.

The reality is that politics is the oil that lubricates the internal gears of the organization. The important thing, however, is to secure the appropriate level of lubrication for the organization (Bolander, 2011).

METHOD

The study was a qualitative exploratory review of individual experiences with the phenomenon of organizational politics during their working lives. 30 working class manager-level professionals in a career-focused proprietary University were interviewed. The sampling was judgmental, purposive and convenience. The study participants were asked eight questions in a semi-structured interview format. The main research question was “What types of political behaviors have you experienced in an organization that you have worked for?” The study participants were also asked which of the behaviors, in their estimation could be termed as good or bad and why they categorized them as such.

A qualitative exploratory review was appropriate for this study because the focus of the study was to explore and identify current perception of the modern day organization member on the issue of organizational politics. These notions are then compared with the literature on the subject to identify possible shifts that could have been brought about by the changing demands of the modern day organization. Such changing demands and approaches to doing things might have been brought about by such factors as globalization, economic pressure, technological changing, emerging cultures, changing demography, outsourcing, and other environmental factors.

The researcher protected participants’ confidentiality secured informed consent of each study participant and ensured participants’ right to privacy (Cooper and Schindler, 2008, p. 40). Following description of the data, they were analyzed for specific themes and aggregated into large clusters of ideas that provided information that supported the themes (Stakes, 1995; Moustakas, 1994). Pattern matching was also used for data analysis (Creswell, 2007). The NVivo 8 computer software was used as a resource for data analysis.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Tables 1 and 2 below provide some demographic information on the study participants. Tables 3 through 5 provide results obtained following analysis of the participants’ responses to the interview questions.

Table 1 Gender of the Study Participants

Gender	n	%
Female	10	33
Male	20	67

Table 2 Age Range of the Study Participants

Age Range (Years)	n	%
30 - 34	6	20
35 - 39	5	17
40 - 44	7	23
45 - 49	6	20
50 - 54	3	10
55 - 59	3	10

Table 3 General View of Organizational Politics

View of Organizational Politics	n	%
Positive	6	20
Negative	24	80

Table 4 Political Moves Witnessed in Organizations

Political Moves Witnessed	n	%
Increase Indispensability	4	13
Increase Centrality	3	10
Association with Powerful Managers	6	20
Building and Managing Coalitions	3	10
Influencing Decision Making	5	17
Controlling the Agenda	3	10
Actions that promote personal visibility	4	13
Proposal that expands one's responsibilities	2	7

Table 5 Political Behaviors Personally Experienced in Organizations

Political Behavior Personally Experienced	n	%
Misuse of power to gain undue advantage	5	17
Tarnishing others' reputation for advantages	6	20
Telling the boss only what he wants to hear	4	13
Divide and conquer	5	17
Turf protection	4	13
Demonstration of team spirit	2	7
Actions that enhance well deserved promotion	4	13

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The results contained in tables 3 through 5 showed that 80 percent of the respondents still view organizational politics in mostly negative terms. 20 percent believe organizational politics manifests more in employees' association with powerful managers while 17 percent associate same with employees' attempts to influence decision making. 13 percent of the respondents associate organizational politics with employees' attempts to increase their indispensability and employees' actions to promote personal visibility, respectively. Equal number of the respondents (10 percent) associate organizational politics with attempts to increase individual centrality, building and managing coalition, and controlling the agenda, respectively. Only 7 percent of the respondents associated organizational politics with an employees' proposal that eventually results in expansion of the employee's responsibilities.

20 percent of the study subjects claim to have personally experienced attempts to tarnish others' reputation for advantage while 17 percent claimed to have experienced misuse of power to gain undue advantage and divide and conquer tactics, respectively. Equal number of the subjects (13 percent) claimed to have experienced telling the boss only what he wants to hear, turf protection, and actions that enhance well deserved promotions, respectively. 7 percent of the subjects claimed to have experienced demonstration of team spirit within the organization.

According to Thompson (2008) good political behavior may help attain a well-deserved promotion or sell management on the merits of a proposal that may expand one's responsibility and ultimate growth in the organization. Such behaviors may help one gain personal visibility, enhances co-operation with other members of the organization, and is in no way destructive to other members of the organization (Newstrom, 2007). Good political behavior therefore contributes to the individual's professional growth as well as the organizational growth.

On the other hand, bad political behavior is used in a self-serving, manipulative, and deceitful fashion (Newstrom, 2007). The main aim of such a behavior is competition rather than co-operation. They include the misuse of power to gain undue advantage, tarnishing the reputation of others so as to get ahead, turf protection, divide-and-conquer, and the no bad news tendency in some organizations (MSG, 2012). According to Robbins and Coulter (2009), such behaviors are counter-productive as they reduce the productivity of individuals who spend so

much time on such negative tendencies. Such tendencies affect relationships among individuals, cause lack of trust at the workplace, result in increased conflict, tension, and negativity, and may stunt organizational growth (MSG, 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Open communication is necessary to reduce the negative effects of organizational politics. In this regard, Witt (1998) asserted that when employees and their managers are agreed on organizational values, there is improved employee-supervisor relationship and enhanced co-operation.
2. Be professional; treat others as you would wish to be treated, and strive to always do your job well (MSG, 2012).
3. Leave work at work, strive to make peace, and always see the bigger picture; nothing is permanent (Smith, 2012)
4. Always be aware of your strengths and weaknesses and take positive steps about them

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