

ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS: THE POSITIVE & NEGATIVE SIDES

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Abstract

There are two ways of viewing organisational politics: either as a symptom of social influence processes that benefit the organisation, or a self serving effect that goes against the organisational goals (Mintzberg, 1985: 148; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498). Nevertheless, the concept of organisational politics is a key social influence process that can be either functional or dysfunctional to employees and organisations (Allen *et al*, 1979: 82). Organisational politics, as argued by various researchers, can be either positive or negative (Othman, 2008: 44) and this paper delves into both sides of the organisational politics by offering examples from literature and research carried out throughout the years.

Keywords: Organisational Politics, Organisational Behaviour

Introduction

According to Vigoda-Gadot & Dryzin-Amit (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), organisational politics are important since these provide an understanding of the informal processes of conflicts and co-operations in organisations, and their impact on the employees' performance (2006: 7). Othman (2008) mentions two sides of organisational politics in his paper on the role of justice, trust and job ambiguity (2008: 44), namely the negative side, which involves convenient and illegal behaviour, and the positive side which is a social function that is important for organisations to survive (2008: 44). Negative organisational politics are disapproved of because of the ethical dilemmas encrusted with them and the workplace conflicts that are generated, whilst positive organisational politics results from the amalgamation of shared goals and stimulating collaboration (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 196; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 509).

The Positive Side of Organisational Politics

Organisational politics and their processes are often understood to be the organisational defensive routines that alter and filter legitimate information (Seo, 2003: 11). However, organisational politics do not have to be about power manipulation, trust issues and hidden agendas. Organisational politics can also be functional in ways that are beneficial for more than just a politically-skilled and politically motivated minority (Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 41). The person-based interactionist approach empirical study of Rosen *et al* (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), regarding the understanding of personality traits in politics, demonstrates that organisational politics may not always direct towards negative effects, since different personalities may perceive politics more positively than others (2006: 47).

Positive organisational politics may provide the basis for competitive advantage, especially when people are appropriately politically skilled. It has been suggested that politically skilled management successfully manages those organisational environments that are under stress – a political skill that includes an aptitude to employ actions that support feelings of trust, confidence and sincerity (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 195; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 504). This means that positive politics are mainly visible when individuals know how to use positive influence behaviours and strategies, and evade negative behaviour. Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010) argue that when one develops a set of positive political skills, an effective political environment is created that does not suffer from injustice, unfairness and inequity (2010: 197).

Some view organisational politics as a means for working through conflicts in organisations, and employees use their perception of organisational politics to make sense of the environment they work in (Ladebo, 2006: 256). Others argue that being politically skilled may improve an individual's and the organisation's success, and can facilitate organisational change and adaptation to the environment (Ladebo, 2006: 256, 259; Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 41). Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) argue that political behaviour is positive when it serves the organisation's vision and objectives, develops teamwork and confidence, and is ethically well-balanced (2006: 337). Moreover, positive or constructive political behaviour can be advantageous to greater organisational equality (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 505). This is because constructive political behaviour is seen as a necessity to bring together the dissimilar interests of stakeholders, depending on the ability to set in equilibrium the competing motivations and views of organisational members.

Extending this line of argument, Butcher and Clarke (2006: 297) argue that managers who are keenly aware of the political environment in their workplace are more likely to be able to manage those political behaviours in order to promote equality. This is also because, according to Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), organisational politics is a key leadership concern taking into account the prospective influence of political behaviour on the environment and efficiency of an organisation (2006: 331). Consequently, if political behaviour is perceived to be a natural and constructive thing in organisations, than political strategies may be viewed as affiliation, setting up of connections, alliance-creation or even guidance (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498). Moreover, according to Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), those connections and alliances that are shaped on trust and conformity, and are as well in line with the organisation's goals and objectives, may be considered as "*politically positive*" (2006: 341).

Coopey & Burgoyne (2000) argue that a liberal form of politics may have a positive effect on learning, regardless of the role and status of individuals in their organisation (2000: 869). More specifically they argue that an open form of politics stimulates individuals of an organisation to become more persistent towards learning ideas (2000: 879). Coopey & Burgoyne (2000) use the institutional theory to illustrate that learning throughout an organisation is a function of open political processes at group level that involves various individuals. They also state that organisational politics might enhance the flexibility and innovativeness of organisational forms. This would allow the interconnectedness within communities of practice to disseminate learning (Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000: 882). Similarly, Engeström (2001) claims that some conflict, as well as the process of finding ways to resolve that same conflict, may promote workplace learning.

Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun (2005) provide a set of positive outcomes of politics, namely "*career advancement, recognition and status, enhanced power and position, attainment of personal and organisational goals, successful accomplishment of a job or policy implementation, and feelings of achievement, ego, control and success*" (2005: 256). This means that political behaviour may be necessary in all of the cases mentioned above, especially if someone wants to advance in an organisation or needs to be acknowledged by his or her co-workers (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 195).

Mintzberg (1985) presents several positive aspects of organisational politics in relation to his identification of games (in Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 41). He states that organisational politics can sometimes be used to pursue rightful ends, for example, when one uses the whistle blowing and Young Turks games, it could be beneficial to correct

irresponsible or inefficient behaviours or even to effect beneficial changes that are otherwise resisted (Mintzberg, 1985: 148, 149). Also, politics can provide alternating routes of information and promotion, as when the sponsorship game enables a manager to rise over a weaker manager. In this case, political games may provide an insight on the potential for leadership.

According to the findings of Luthans *et al*'s study (1985) there is a relationship between successful managers and the frequent use of organisational politics (Vigoda-Gadot & Dryzin-Amit in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 7). Infact, Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that leadership is “*a political art rather than a strategic science*” that involves human management and political skills (2006: 331). Organisational politics may also encourage a variety of voices to be heard that may be beneficial to the organisation (James in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 53; Mintzberg, 1985: 150).

The Negative Side of Organisational Politics

Although organisational politics are widely accepted to have positive potential, studies show that individuals still predominantly perceive these as negative (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 195; Othman, 2008: 44; Poon, 2003: 138). A famous and interesting statement presented by Block (1988) states that “*If I told you, you were a very political person you would either take it as an insult or at best as a mixed blessing*” (1988: 5). Therefore, usually political work environments are perceived negatively by individuals and may induce a sense of unfairness, deprivation and inequity (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Harris *et al*, 2009: 2669; Ladebo, 2006: 256; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 258). Consequently those employees who perceive their organisation as being politicized will tend to withhold useful information (Beugre & Liverpool in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 125).

Organisational politics may mute and warp the voices and opinions of individuals, facts that spawn defence mechanisms and uphold uncertainty (Vince, 2001: 1344). Within political environments, employees tend to feel threatened by the uncertainty, ambiguity and the self-interest actions that occur with individuals (Harris *et al*, 2009: 2680). Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen (2010) argue that genetic tendencies such as forcefulness, power and control need, manipulation, rank rivalry, and egotism can all materialize in response to common organisational circumstances of uncertainty, resource shortage, and disagreement (2010: 35).

In fact, several researchers found that organisational politics have a negative affect on the job performance and organisational commitment, especially to the lower status employees (Drory, 1993; Ferris *et al*, 1989: 158; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 258). Others propose that organisational politics are the source of stress and

conflict at the workplace (Ladebo, 2006: 263; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 259). Cropanzano & Li (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) mention Ferris *et al*'s study of 1993, in which it transpired that politics were strappingly related to job anxiety for those with less perceived control (2006: 143). This means that employees with a lower level of power feel more stressed when they perceive politics in their work environment.

As a result, organisational politics may cause an individual to detach either physically or mentally from the workplace (Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 260). Therefore, whilst people may be present at the place of work, their mind could be elsewhere and may lack concentration. Studies that focus on the notion that organisational politics refers to the strategic behaviour that promotes self-interest, offer a negative image of workplace politics, and thus individuals continue to enforce their negative perspective of organisational politics (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007: 662).

Some state that political behaviour restricts information sharing and communication (Curtis, 2003: 296; Poon, 2003: 138) and thus inhibits learning. In this case, Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that communication and information are the key players in political practices and their control is of huge significance to the political processes in organisations (2006: 339). This is because both information and communication are the ways for producing and making aware those issues and actions taking place at work.

Political behaviour is included in the cultural factors that may also inhibit learning. Bishop *et al* (2006) state that cultures that give importance to the attainment and hoarding of technical skills that are used independently by individuals are less likely to support knowledge-sharing networks (2006: 20). Likewise, cultures that are distinguished by a lack of trust will probably not encourage the transfer of knowledge from the individual to the group or the organisation (Bishop *et al*, 2006: 20). Albrecht (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) notes that when employees feel that they cannot trust other employees and the procedures of an organisation, they tend to reduce their dedication, put in less effort, and engage in withdrawal behaviour (2006: 109). Moreover, different groups or jobs inside the same organisation may have completely dissimilar views about which knowledge is valuable or applicable (Bishop *et al*, 2006: 19). An example of this is the study by Fuller & Unwin (2003) in which three different organisations and their type of apprenticeships were considered.

Fuller & Unwin's study shows that one organisation enabled apprentices to accomplish a quick passage to full participation, but at the expense of moving beyond its boundaries to meet new learning potentialities (2003: 417). Another organisation demonstrated an unclear function and path of the apprenticeship, which weakened the learning process, even when

the apprentice was allegedly given the opportunity to participate in a new community of practice within the company (Fuller & Unwin, 2003: 417). Both these companies presented a learning horizon for apprentices, which were truncated by the lack of opportunities built into their apprenticeships to belong to communities outside the organisation. Here the apprentices were deprived by being engaged as novices to companies where there was no tradition of apprenticeship prerequisite (Fuller & Unwin, 2003: 417). This means that the learning opportunities in these two companies have been restricted.

Organisational politics is also linked with the issue of trust. Trust often affects the behaviour of individuals, and employees are more likely to be suspicious of the intentions of others if they work in a low trust climate (Othman, 2008: 45; Poon, 2003: 142; Zaleznik, 1971: 58). This results in informal highly political behaviour. In addition, Cropanzano & Li (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that political climate can have negative consequences even for those who are not directly affected by the primary political activity (2006: 146). This is because according to Vigoda's (2002) study, politics create anguish which in turn generates violent behaviour, causing more anguish among colleagues (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 146).

Some individuals tend to be more highly political than their counterparts due to differing characteristics. Curtis (2003) mentions the 'Machiavellianism' and 'locus of control' as examples of particular characteristics of highly political individuals (2003: 293). People who tend towards Machiavellianism are portrayed as being rational rather than sensitive, do not value camaraderie, and like to manoeuvre others and lie in order to accomplish personal objectives (Rosen *et al*, in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 32). Other writers comment that organisations often become crippled by these so called organisational politics or 'workplace toxins' as referred to by Chircop (2008: 9). In her article, Chircop argues that leaders with awareness of and expertise in the management of workplace politics are needed.

Conclusion

Provis (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) argues that the 'unitary' notion of organisations affirms that the members of an organisation work towards common goals and objectives in a pleasant setting wherein political action can be seen as anomalous (2006: 95). This may not be the case since organisations are a combination of various individuals and a plurality of interest groups (Smith, 2001), and thus internal politics may be a natural thing. Of course, one cannot ignore the possibility that people with certain personality types are more likely to engage in organisational politics, such as

those with Machiavellian orientations and those with a ‘grand’ need for power (Curtis, 2003: 293). In addition, Lawrence *et al* (2005) argue that employees need to be appropriately politically skilled in order for ideas to flow from one process to another. This may be seen as a positive effect. Lawrence *et al* (2005) also argue that managers must understand that organisations need active actors who are willing to engage in political behaviour that pushes ideas forward (Lawrence *et al*, 2005: 190).

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