

10.4: Organizational Politics

Learning Objectives

1. Understand what organizational politics are.
2. Examine political behavior within organizations.

Organizational Politics

Organizational politics are informal, unofficial, and sometimes behind-the-scenes efforts to sell ideas, influence an organization, increase power, or achieve other targeted objectives (Brandon & Seldman, 2004; Hochwarter, Witt, & Kacmar, 2000). Politics has been around for millennia. Aristotle wrote that politics stems from a diversity of interests, and those competing interests must be resolved in some way. “Rational” decision making alone may not work when interests are fundamentally incongruent, so political behaviors and influence tactics arise.

Today, work in organizations requires skill in handling conflicting agendas and shifting power bases. Effective politics isn’t about winning at all costs but about maintaining relationships while achieving results. Although often portrayed negatively, organizational politics are not inherently bad. Instead, it’s important to be aware of the potentially destructive aspects of organizational politics in order to minimize their negative effect. Of course, individuals within organizations can waste time overly engaging in political behavior. Research reported in *HR Magazine* found that managers waste 20% of their time managing politics. However, as John Kotter wrote in *Power and Influence*, “Without political awareness and skill, we face the inevitable prospect of becoming immersed in bureaucratic infighting, parochial politics and destructive power struggles, which greatly retard organizational initiative, innovation, morale, and performance” (Kotter, 1985).

In our discussion about power, we saw that power issues often arise around scarce resources. Organizations typically have limited resources that must be allocated in some way. Individuals and groups within the organization may disagree about how those resources should be allocated, so they may naturally seek to gain those resources for themselves or for their interest groups, which gives rise to organizational politics. Simply put, with organizational politics, individuals ally themselves with like-minded others in an attempt to win the scarce resources. They’ll engage in behavior typically seen in government organizations, such as bargaining, negotiating, alliance building, and resolving conflicting interests.

Politics are a part of organizational life, because organizations are made up of different interests that need to be aligned. In fact, 93% of managers surveyed reported that workplace politics exist in their organization, and 70% felt that in order to be successful, a person has to engage in politics (Gandz & Murray, 1980). In the negative light, saying that someone is “political” generally stirs up images of back-room dealing, manipulation, or hidden agendas for personal gain. A person engaging in these types of political behaviors is said to be engaging in self-serving behavior that is not sanctioned by the organization (Ferris et al., 1996; Valle & Perrewe, 2000; Harris, James, & Boonthanom, 2005; Randall et al., 1999).

Examples of these self-serving behaviors include bypassing the chain of command to get approval for a special project, going through improper channels to obtain special favors, or lobbying high-level managers just before they make a promotion decision. These types of actions undermine fairness in the organization, because not everyone engages in politicking to meet their own objectives. Those who follow proper procedures often feel jealous and resentful because they perceive unfair distributions of the organization’s resources, including rewards and recognition (Parker, Dipboye, & Jackson, 1995).

Researchers have found that if employees think their organization is overly driven by politics, the employees are less committed to the organization (Maslyn & Fedor, 1998; Nye & Wit, 1993), have lower job satisfaction (Ferris et al., 1996; Hochwarter et al., Kacmar et al., 1999), perform worse on the job (Anderson, 1994), have higher levels of job anxiety (Ferris et al., 1996; Kacmar & Ferris, 1989), and have a higher incidence of depressed mood (Byrne et al., 2005).

The negative side of organizational politics is more likely to flare up in times of organizational change or when there are difficult decisions to be made and a scarcity of resources that breeds competition among organizational groups. To minimize overly political behavior, company leaders can provide equal access to information, model collaborative behavior, and demonstrate that political maneuvering will not be rewarded or tolerated. Furthermore, leaders should encourage managers throughout the organization to provide high levels of feedback to employees about their performance. High levels of feedback reduce the perception of organizational politics and improve employee morale and work performance (Rosen, Levy, & Hall, 2006). Remember that politics can be a healthy way to get things done within organizations.

Antecedents of Political Behavior

Individual Antecedents

There are a number of potential individual antecedents of political behavior. We will start off by understanding the role that personality has in shaping whether someone will engage in political behavior.

Political skill refers to peoples' interpersonal style, including their ability to relate well to others, self-monitor, alter their reactions depending upon the situation they are in, and inspire confidence and trust (Ferris et al., 2000). Researchers have found that individuals who are high on political skill are more effective at their jobs or at least in influencing their supervisors' performance ratings of them (Ferris, Fedor, & King, 1994; Kilduff & Day, 1994). Individuals who are high in *internal locus of control* believe that they can make a difference in organizational outcomes. They do not leave things to fate. Therefore, we would expect those high in internal locus of control to engage in more political behavior. Research shows that these individuals perceive politics around them to a greater degree (Valle & Perrewe, 2000). *Investment in the organization* is also related to political behavior. If a person is highly invested in an organization either financially or emotionally, they will be more likely to engage in political behavior because they care deeply about the fate of the organization. Finally, *expectations of success* also matter. When a person expects that they will be successful in changing an outcome, they are more likely to engage in political behavior. Think about it: If you know there is no chance that you can influence an outcome, why would you spend your valuable time and resources working to effect change? You wouldn't. Over time you'd learn to live with the outcomes rather than trying to change them (Bandura, 1996).

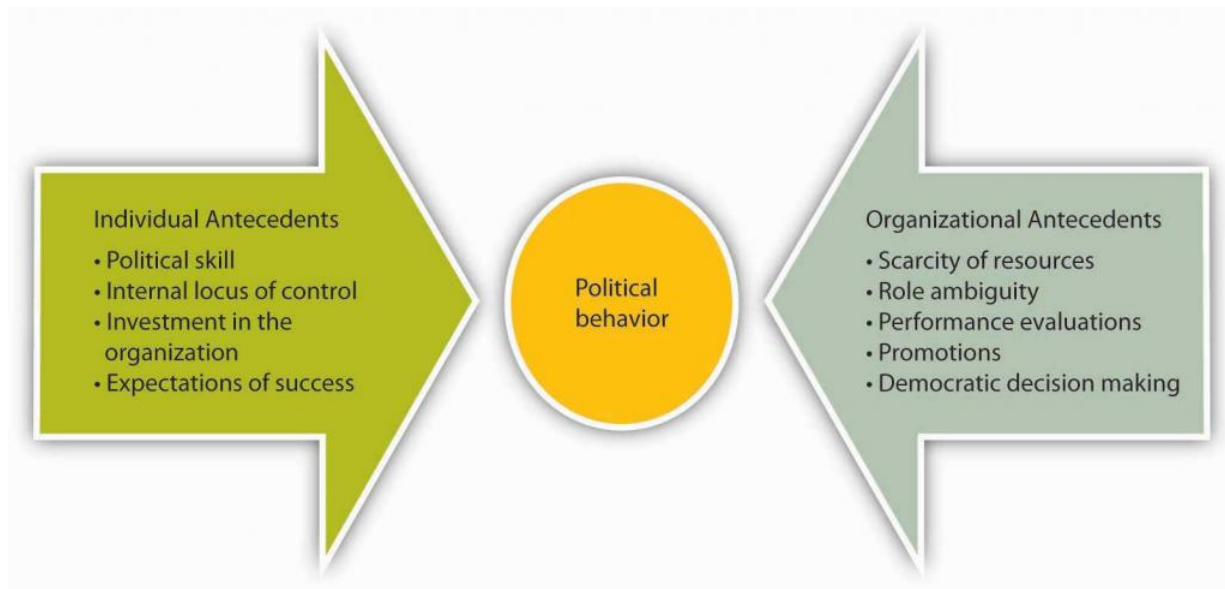


Figure 10.4.10: Individual and organizational antecedents can both lead to political behavior.

Organizational Antecedents

Scarcity of resources breeds politics. When resources such as monetary incentives or promotions are limited, people see the organization as more political. Any type of ambiguity can relate to greater organizational politics. For example, *role ambiguity* allows individuals to negotiate and redefine their roles. This freedom can become a political process. Research shows that when people do not feel clear about their job responsibilities, they perceive the organization as more political (Muhammad, 2007). Ambiguity also exists around *performance evaluations* and *promotions*. These human resource practices can lead to greater political behavior, such as impression management, throughout the organization. As you might imagine, *democratic decision making* leads to more political behavior. Since many people have a say in the process of making decisions, there are more people available to be influenced.

OB Toolbox: Overcoming Ineffective Politics

Author and consultant Patrick Lencioni recommends the following four steps for overcoming ineffective politics due to turf wars. When members of the organization are more concerned about their own area of operations than doing what's best for the

entire organization, in the long run you may have a problem with [turf wars](#). Taking these four steps can help overcome this situation:

1. *Create a thematic goal.* The goal should be something that everyone in the organization can believe in, such as, for a hospital, giving the best care to all patients. This goal should be a single goal, qualitative, time-bound, and shared.
2. *Create a set of defining objectives.* This step should include objectives that everyone agrees will help bring the thematic goal to fruition.
3. *Create a set of ongoing standard operating objectives.* This process should be done within each area so that the best operating standards are developed. These objectives should also be shared across the organization so everyone is aware of them.
4. *Create metrics to measure them.* Measuring whether the standard operating objectives get done is a vital step in the process. Rather than someone else pointing out what isn't working, all the people within the department will have the information necessary to come to this conclusion and correct the problem, because ultimately, everyone in the organization cares about achieving the thematic goal.

Source: Adapted from information in Lencioni, P. M. (2006). *Silos, politics and turf wars: A leadership fable about destroying the barriers that turn colleagues into competitors*. New York: Jossey-Bass.

Key Takeaways

Organizational politics is a natural part of organizational life. Organizations that are driven by unhealthy levels of political behavior suffer from lowered employee organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and performance as well as higher levels of job anxiety and depression. Individual antecedents of political behavior include political skill, internal locus of control, high investment in the organization, and expectations of success. Organizational antecedents include scarcity of resources, role ambiguity, frequent performance evaluations and promotions, and democratic decision making.

Exercises

1. Do you think politics are a positive or negative thing for organizations? Why?
2. Describe an example of a negative outcome due to politics.
3. Describe an example of a positive outcome due to politics.
4. Can you think of additional individual or organizational antecedents of political behavior?
5. What political behaviors have you observed within school groups or your workplace? Were they successful? Why or why not?

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