**WORK 5003: Organizational Politics**

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Course

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Date

**Introduction- Organizations as Political Arenas**

All organizations are sites and arenas with different interacting interests. This is because of differences in individual desires, goals, competing demands and scarce resources that force people that form an organization to either compete or collaborate. These competing interests and incentives for either collaboration or cooperation create an environment where control, authority and influence are important aspects of an organization’s functioning and culture- influencing the organization either positively or negatively according to the power and political dynamics of the organization. Politics is a pervasive aspect of the management of any organization.

***What is Organizational Politics?***

*Organizational politics* (also known as workplace politics) are the collection of self-serving behaviors within an organizational setting in which employees use to influence decisions and events in an organization meant to increase the probability of obtaining personally beneficial outcomes within the organization in question (Aamodt, 2015, pg. 541). These personally beneficial outcomes might include access to tangible assets in the organization, intangible benefits such as status and the strategic positioning that makes the employee influence the behavior of others within the organization.

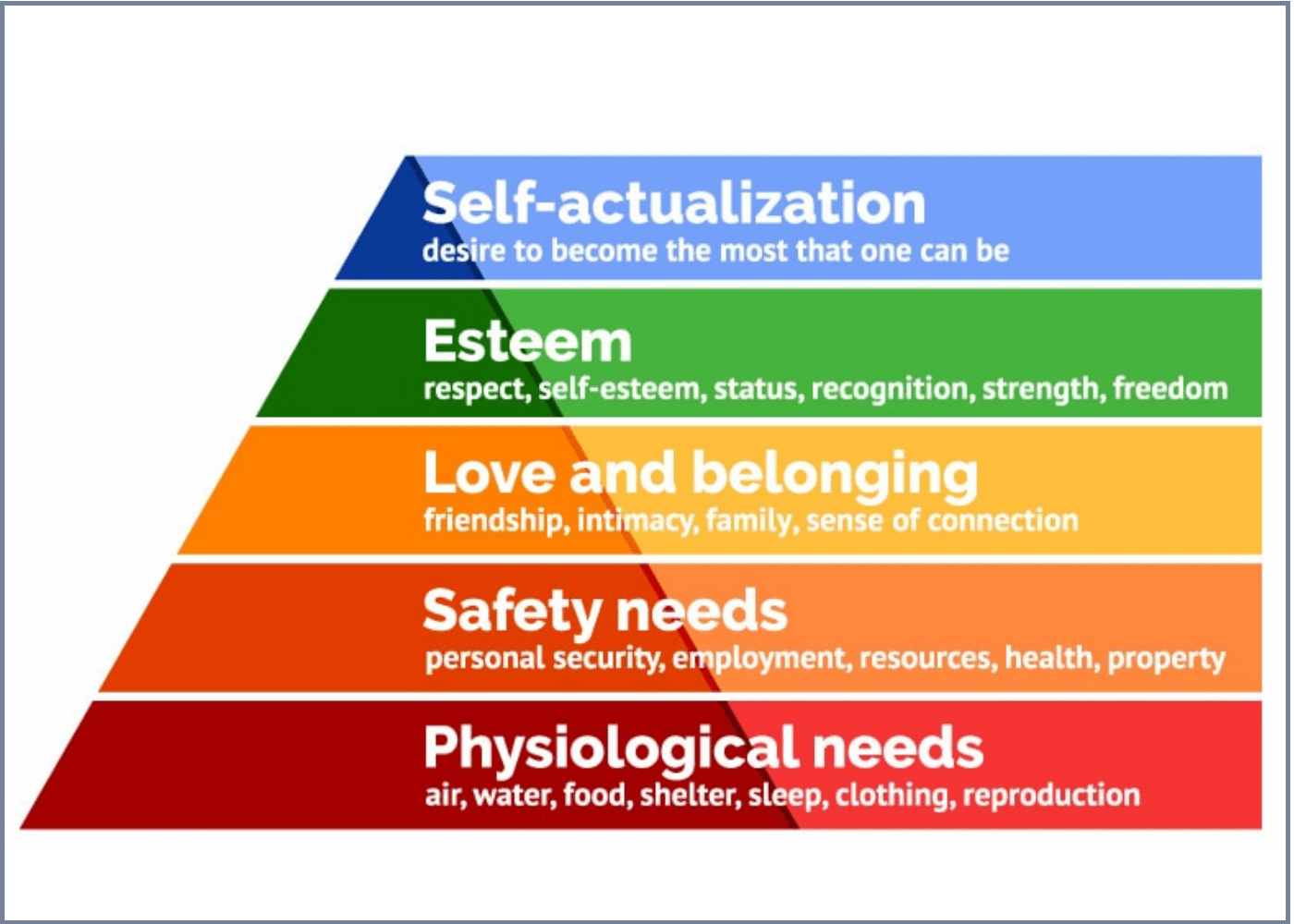
***Why Organizational Politics Are Necessary for an Organization- the Necessary Evil***

Positive political behavior in an organization is generally designed to influence the behavior of colleagues, superiors and subordinates in a manner that helps the organization achieve its goals apart from helping the person playing the political game. Perfect examples of positive political behavior in the organizational context include volunteering, portraying a professional image, complimenting others on their achievements and positively contributing to the organization through collaborative problem-solving and offering support to colleagues and subordinates (Aamodt, 2015, pg. 541). On the other hand, negative political behaviors are essentially designed only to meet personal goals and interests. They are mostly manipulative and destructive behaviors like spreading rumors, deliberately withholding important information and, in some extreme cases, sabotaging an employee’s tasks or image in the organization. Behaviors classified under negative political behaviors also can reduce efficiency, collaboration, problem-solving, and increasing conflicts (Aamodt, 2015, pg. 541).

Notably, negative organizational behaviors negatively influence an organization through derailing cooperation, information sharing and other important organizational functions. However, research shows positive organizational behaviors have the potential of enhancing organizational efficiency, helps form positive and proactive interpersonal relationships, aid in organizational change management and overall benefit personal and collective organizational interests (Clarke, 2011). The only differing element in political behavior that distinguishes between positive and negative political behavior is how personal interests overlap or are in congruence with organizational interests. Positive political behavior means the individual’s interests are aligned with organizational interests, which serves as an incentive for positive organizational behavior. As Pfeiffer suggests, politics in an organizational setting is necessary to ‘get things done’ (Pfeffer, 2015). Politics has also been described as the ‘lubricant that oils an organization’s internal gears.’

***Values, Value Systems and the Psychology of Organizational Politics***

The dynamics of power relationships in any organization that influence the political relationships and landscape within an organization can be described as a psychological process of gradually meeting the needs of members of an organization. This psychological process was excellently described by ***Marlow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory***. The hierarchy is summarized in the diagrammatic representation below:



***Figure 1: Marlow’s Hierarchy of Needs that Describes Motivations Behind Positive or Negative Political Behavior in Organizations (Rajan, 2019)***

An individual joining an organization through employment is primarily motivated by the *need to meet physiological needs*- to afford food, shelter, clothing and other basic needs for survival (Taormina & Gao, 2013). This need for independence facilitated through actively engaging in work and receiving financial rewards motivates employees, especially in the early stages of employment.

Sustaining such output levels is hypothesized to induce a positive image within the upper echelon of an organization, task allocation, completeness which increases the indispensability of the individual to the organization or upper echelon employees. This leads to meeting the second need of an individual in an organization- *safety needs*. This is described as economic safety (Taormina & Gao, 2013) in the context of organizational politics. It is achieved through job security that is manifest through, say, additional training that develops an individual’s skills that are applicable and beneficial to an organization. It is often marked by increased pay and promotions. Safety needs ultimately lead to the third need in the hierarchy, love and a *sense of belonging*. This is the desire for acceptance within the organization as an important part of the overall organizational machinery. It is met through enhanced teamwork and cooperation within the organization, often with satisfactory responses (praise and compliments) by colleagues, superiors and subordinates (Taormina & Gao, 2013).

Spatial recognition in the organization leads to the fourth need in the hierarchy of needs- *self-esteem*. This stems from the personal need for recognition, respect and distinguishable status in the organization. It is usually achieved via promotions and rising through the ranks to the upper echelon of the organization (Lussier, 2019). The culmination of these needs is *self-actualization*, the notion that an individual reached their full potential in the organization.

***The Power Dynamics in the Organizational Political Landscape***

The political landscape in an organization comprises several formal and informal hierarchies that link the players in an organization’s political game. The political landscape in the organization starts with the ***formal hierarchy*** of an organization (the reporting structure in the organization). It describes who has the *authority* to delegate tasks, fire or hire employees at different levels of the organization.

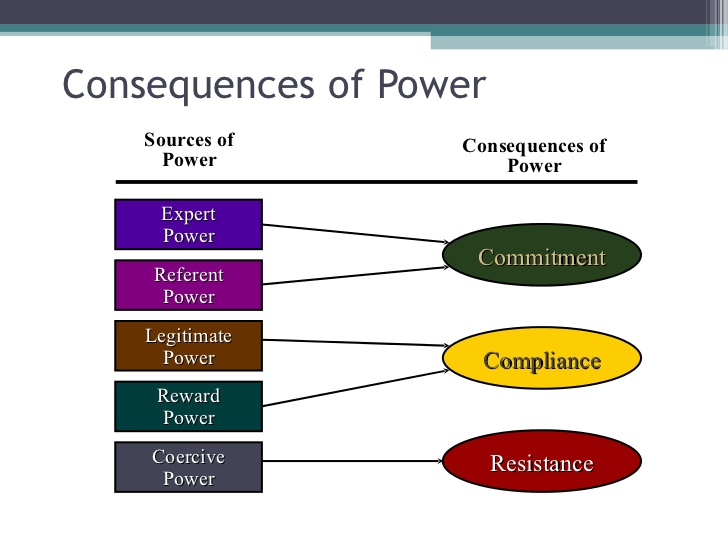
However, working together in organizations is as much a function of this formal hierarchy as it is a function of the quality of interactions and communication in the organization. This means the more employees work together within the organization; the more ***informal hierarchy*** is developed. This is the extent to which employees value and rate each other in an organization- the influence an employee has on colleagues, subordinates, or superiors in an organization (Shakoor, 2020). It mostly develops from positive interactions with other employees, which leads to respect, admiration, and influence (the ability to induce voluntary behavior in an organization.

***Power Versus Authority in an Organization***

From an organizational perspective, organizational *power* is the ability to influence behavior (the force that induces this behavior or the store of the potential to influence behavior). *Authority* in an organization refers to legitimate power- power that develops from an organization’s formal hierarchy, determined by an individual’s position in the echelon of the organization (Grenadier et al., 2014). An employee, regardless of their position in an organization, can influence the behavior of other employees if they are the recipient of respect and admiration in any organization. Therefore, managers and upper echelon members of any organization need to consider the various sources of power as they help set precedence for organizational culture and the political dynamics in any organization.

***Sources of Power in an Organization***

Influence is the primary and metaphorical *SI Unit* for measuring power in an organization, which in turn describes the political dynamics of an organization. Therefore, the sources of power in an organization are how an employee or members of an organization can motivate employees into certain actions or behavior. Authority motivates out of fear and formal consequences, while influential power is based on internal reverence and quality of interpersonal relationships between employees in an organization.



***Figure 2: Different Sources of Power in an Organization and Consequences (Faizan, 2011)***

The power dynamics of any organization are influenced by the formal and informal relationships between people and teams in the organization (Ramos et al., 2019). As such, power is generated, cultivated, maintained, or lost within this relationship context. Research suggests an organization is more efficient if employees can work independently, with minimal surveillance through their own internal volition, self-generated motivation.

Based on the aforementioned research postulations, at the bottom of the sources of power in an organization is *coercive power*. It is based on the belief that a superior can administer unwelcomed and feared sanctions and penalties if the employee does not meet their expectations. It is essentially fear-based motivation- an employee is motivated by the fear of reprisal rather than a personal drive to complete tasks and meet expectations (Taucean et al., 2016). Leaders and managers that incorporate coercive power micromanage employees, one-way communication, use threats of punishments to influence behaviors without regard for employee experience or opinions, offering little support. Most employees feel undervalued and demotivated if exposed to coercive power techniques over time, leading to bare-minimum output and high employee turnover. It also lowers the leader’s informal hierarchy in an organization. It *leads to resistance* among employees.

The next source of power is *reward power*, which is based on the internalized belief among subordinates that compliance would be rewarded through valuable tokens of appreciation that the employee desires. These rewards include raises, vacations, job promotions and organizational awards. Employees are comparatively more motivated because the rewards are of value to them, albeit with some of the demerits of coercive power like the need for constant surveillance, mainly using one-way communication and acceptable performance (Taucean et al., 2016).

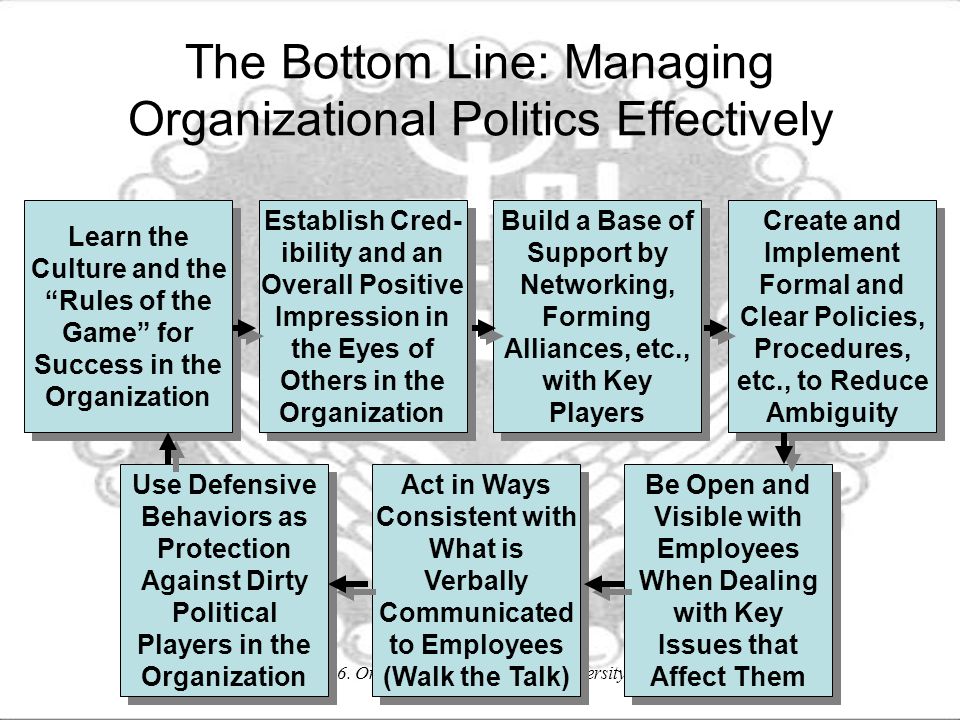
*Legitimate power*, the other source of influence in the hierarchy, stems from the formal hierarchy in an organization. An employee understands that it is part of their job description to take and execute orders from their superior. It is based on rank and places the leader at an advantage over superiors, allowing them to form interpersonal relationships and organizational culture in an organization. What a leader or manager does with legitimate power determines how the manager uses other sources of power- reward, coercive and reverent power and internal motivation of subordinates (Taucean et al., 2016).

However, the most important source of power is *referent power*- based on the internalized perception among subordinates that the manager or leader possesses admirable personality traits and professional abilities that should be emulated (Chinomona, 2012). The leader is viewed as a source of motivation because they are held in high esteem by subordinates. Subordinates strive to meet the leader’s expectations, not because of fear of reprisal or rewards, but because they view the leader as a benchmark for success and the datum for performance.

Reverent power is cultivated through positive interpersonal relationships with employees, two-way responsive communication, engaging employees in problem-solving & decision making, and offering support. It is also cultivated by a commendable performance - showing involvement in the work, taking an active role in the organization’s operations and showing dedication to the organization’s goals and objectives (Chinomona, 2012). The last source of power is *expert power*, which is based on the belief that a leader has superior knowledge of a task, hence the legitimacy of any directions. Expert and referent power has the highest ranks among sources of power since they induce commitment from employees (Chinomona, 2012).

***The Bottom Line: Managing Organizational Politics***

It should be the desire of every leader to manage organizational politics and create an environment where positive political behaviors can describe the organizational culture (Mölk & Auer, 2018). Leaders and managers must leverage knowledge on sources of power (forming management strategies aimed at increase the cultivation and utilization of referent, expert, and reward power as compared to coercive power in people with legitimate power), as it aids in enhancing control over the organization while inducing self-generated motivation among employees eventually leading to improved performance outcomes in the organization (Mölk & Auer, 2018). It is also important in talent development and training since there is an increased likelihood that employees might be influenced to take after their admired and respected leader.

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***Figure 3: Diagrammatic Representation of Steps Towards Effective Management of Organizational Politics (Scott, 2019)***

Formal hierarchy is pre-established through legitimate power. Relationships with subordinates develop informal hierarchy (Mölk & Auer, 2018). It is prudent that managers establish credibility by offering support and presenting themselves as an example of dedication and commitment to the organization’s goals. It is also established by forming alliances with employees with the admiration and respect of employees (higher in the informal hierarchy), practicing effective and responsive communication, and engaging employees in decision-making and policy formulation.

***Mintzberg’s Mechanisms of Coordination- Practical Steps of Conquering Organizational Politics***

The main reason managers/leaders should be at the top of organizational political hierarchy is controlling. Control is needed to reduce uncertainty and enhance predictability in the organization. It represents the power of the leader and dependency- their ability and capacity within the organization to set goals, initiate & monitor processes, implement change and modify behavior among subordinates (Gittell, 2000). If exercised correctly, control management strategies are useful tools for reconciling potentially conflicting interests within an organization. Control is achieved via coordination, using neutral techniques and competencies that align antagonistic personal interests with organizational objectives to induce competent behavior among subordinates and common to strive towards the common goals/objectives through sharing similar values and beliefs (Gittell, 2000). This requires the deliberate and strategic applications of a mix of techniques described by ***Mintzberg’s Mechanisms of Coordination (Matheson, 2009)***:

* *Direct supervision*- should be applied to comparatively low-skilled workers with low levels of commitment and require a significant level of monitoring, instruction, supervision, and training in work that may be highly formalized or specialized. Its demerits are little autonomy and limited communication, increasing the risk of low motivation and compliance (Matheson, 2009).
* *Standardizing skills*- training and skill development aids in reducing the need for direct supervision. It helps to define and refine who is allowed to complete tasks through continued direction on techniques and duties that come with the task (Matheson, 2009).
* *Standardizing output*- trained employees should be given a target datum, an expectation to meet that is beneficial to them and the organization. Meeting performance standards should be reciprocated with rewards.
* *Standardizing work processes*- skilled employees who meet performance standards should be informed on expectations and formalized work through bureaucracy and collaboration (Matheson, 2009).
* *Mutual adjustment*- leaders should show trust in employees that are performing in compliance with work process standards. This technique is comprised of increased informal, two-way communication that shows a belief in an employee’s skills and commitment to the organization.
* Mutual adjustment leads to *standardization of norms*- establishing an organizational culture that assigns control to upper echelon management and sharing of mutual beliefs, values, and common goals among employees, regardless of their position in the hierarchy.

**Conclusion**

Workplace politics mainly involve a set of self-benefitting practices and behaviors in an organization that induce positive outcomes such as increased material rewards, status, and authority over subordinates. Different ideas create politics in the workplace, personal desires, goals, formal hierarchy and limited resources in an organization that makes employees either compete or collaborate. However, while it may appear as an inhibiting aspect of an organization, it is a necessary element of an organization that makes it possible to ‘get things done.’ Organizational politics generally benefits both employees and the organization if a culture is developed that aligns personal goals and the rewards of playing the political games are aligned with the organizational goals. This requires inducing the practice of positive political behavior that propagates relationships towards referent power dynamics.

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