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Managerially Speaking: Internal Politics — A Necessary Evil or a Disease that can be Cured?

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One of the many reasons several organizations fail to reach their potential is the presence of internal politics. In general, the question is not whether politics are present within organizations; rather the right question is how much politics exist? It would be unrealistic to assume that any organization would be totally immune from politics. There are generally several reasons why politics exist and how much politics exist; however, politics are often ignored and viewed as a necessary evil. This article takes the view that politics do not have to be a necessary evil and that there is a cure... once leaders acknowledge that there is an issue and that they can do something about it.

What are politics?

Essentially, politics result when the organization fails to align the behavior of its employees with the interests of the organization and tolerates the fact that some employees are acting in their own self interest or the interest of a piece of the organization, at the expense of the rest of the organization.

Politics within an organization can be compared to several forces pulling in different directions, as opposed to these same forces all pulling in the same direction. Anyone with some background in physics is aware that forces pulling in the same direction are additive while forces pulling in different directions are subtractive. The end result depends on the intensity of the forces at play and how well they are aligned and how badly they are misaligned.

Realistically, it is difficult to imagine that forces within an organization would always be perfectly aligned. However, it is management's responsibility to monitor the forces at play and to jump in whenever these become too misaligned.

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within the organization and someone has to take responsibility for it. Generally, accountability starts at the top of the organization, division or department suffering from misalignment.

As a side note, politics are not the sole propriety of large organizations. It is also amazingly present in very small organizations, where there are fewer forces at play, but where the intensity and depth of rivalry can sometimes far exceed what can be observed in larger organizations.

Why do politics exist in organizations?

There are a variety of reasons explaining why politics exist within any organization and the intensity of the politics that exist. These can be classified in a number of ways. For the purpose of this article, I have classified them into four categories: i.e., leadership, cultural and organizational issues, staffing and communications.

Leadership

- Obviously, most issues that exist in organizations can be traced back to some form of failure at the leadership level. It is certainly true of internal politics. I look at politics as the failure of leadership to convince people to set aside their own immediate good for the good of the organization. In the absence of a compelling cause being shown to them, people create their own departmental, divisional or personal cause and this is what they fight for at the expense of the organization as a whole.
- Politics are also the failure of leadership to sell their vision to the rest of the organization. Obviously, this assumes that a compelling vision exists in the first place. Whether it is that the vision is not communicated, or people don't understand the vision, or people don't buy the vision, the end result is the same, i.e., you have people



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in the organization not focused on company objectives and leadership must be accountable for this.

- In order to have an organization moving in the same direction and performing as a single entity, there needs to be cohesiveness, and for cohesiveness to exist, there needs to be a shared mindset within the organization. This is what leadership gets paid to do — create a shared mindset to optimize performance.
- Interestingly enough, some leaders create internal politics voluntarily by creating tensions in the organization. This is done with the belief that internal rivalry is good to get the best out of people. I suppose it can work in some environments; however, it looks to me similar to playing with fire. It can be fun, but once the fire is started and out of control, it can quickly become a big mess!

Cultural and organizational issues

- Sometimes politics may be the result of faulty organizational design resulting in lack of clarity and accountability. People end up fighting to clarify what management has not clarified for them through proper organizational design.
- Sometimes people don't feel empowered and there may be a culture of not accepting mistakes. So people become calculating and they avoid taking risks and they make sure they cover their tracks in case something happens. In that type of environment, people are generally quick at blaming each other for mistakes or underperformance, as opposed to focusing on recovering from mistakes and learning from them.
- Closely associated with the previous point, some organizations don't encourage and reward entrepreneurship and creativity; hence, people learn to become good bureaucrats and learn to become survivors, as opposed to contributing to their full potential.

- In many organizations, there is an imbalance between the so-called "staff jobs" looking after corporate type functions versus operational functions. People in staff jobs often initiate and/or execute projects that have not been planned for by people in operations. Then, it becomes an ongoing struggle between staff people who are trying to achieve their goals and operational people who are trying to get out of these unwanted projects and focus on the day-to-day operations. Not surprisingly, one might say that this is also a failure of leadership: to get everybody on the same wavelength, to avoid having people at lower levels slugging it out in an environment charged with politics.
- Finally, one should never discuss politics without considering incentive compensation systems and their impact on politics. A number of incentive compensation systems are there to ensure that total pay is competitive, but ignore the damage that can be done to an organization when mixed messages are being sent through faulty incentive compensation arrangements. That is, if incentive compensation arrangements are in place, they need to be well aligned with the goals of the overall organization.

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Staffing

Generally, politics are not attributable to specific individuals, but rather to some systemic failure within the organization. Sometimes they are due to the people running the organization and their failure to address the issue. However, it may well happen that certain situations are caused by specific individuals who cannot operate in a team environment. This can happen in organizations that focus their recruiting and promotions on individuals with good technical abilities at the expense of people with good teamwork abilities.

4. Communications

A contributing factor to creating a political environment is the absence of proper communications within the organization. One of the roles of leadership is to replace uncertainty with certainty and to replace confusion with clarity. Generally, when people don't know, they assume and when different people and departments don't make the same assumptions, then increased politics is likely to result.

What can be done to minimize politics?

At this point, the solutions that can be put in place to minimize politics should be fairly obvious, i.e., they should be just the opposite of the behaviors that allow politics to exist. A number of these solutions have been explored in previous articles or will be explored in future ones. To summarize quickly, the following are some of the required steps to create an environment with minimal politics:

- Creating and sharing vision.
- Creating a shared mindset.
- Hiring people with the right attitude.
- Having people in leadership positions that can lead and be role models for the rest of the organization.
- Having and executing a proper communication strategy.
- Creating a proper organizational design to serve the best interests of the organization.
- Aligning reward systems to make sure that they support the objectives of the organization.

Conclusion

Politics are a cancerous disease eating away at organizations. Leaders must be capable of diagnosing the disease when it exists, be capable of addressing the root causes and be capable of putting appropriate solutions in place. Ignoring that a problem exists or accepting it as normal is not what leadership is all about. In most organizations, spending time alleviating the issues that create politics is a good time investment on the part of its leaders. □

