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Politics in Academia: Positive or Negative?

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Politics in Academia: Positive or Negative?

I always thought that organizational politics, especially in academia, was a negative thing to be avoided at all costs. So many times we have heard people say, “I hate organizational politics.” I thought that *politics* referred to the mean and unethical games played by some members of the organization to get something that they do not deserve, or to twist the existing rules to work in their favor or to inflict harm on others through subtle means. Long story short, I was wrong. **Understanding organizational politics is now considered a vital and much needed survival skill. Leaders in academia, as in other public organizations, need to hone their understanding of how politics play out and make it work to their favor so they can effectively achieve the goals of the organization and realize its mission.** The caveat is to maintain ethical standards.

There are a number of strategies and tactics suggested by scholars of Organization Behavior like Robert Denhardt et al (2016), that may be used to balance power in an organization and manipulate the decision-making process. I have added elaborations from my experience in academia on how these strategies may be put to use.

- ***Careful Selection of Committee Members:*** Universities over-rely on committees in making all sorts of decisions, with the assumption that the more people there are represented on a committee, the less bias there is. If you carefully select the members, knowing their aptitudes and knowing something about their inter-personal relations with other colleagues in the organization, you can easily influence the outcome of their deliberations.
- ***Controlling the Agenda in a meeting:*** Some may think that this is not an important thing. After all we may add items to, “Any Other Business,” (A.O.B.). However, determining the items on the meeting’s agenda, what gets discussed first, and what second and how much time is allocated to each item, may make all the difference in the outcome of the decision. Members of a meeting may consume a lot of time and energy discussing the first item on the agenda, and then when it is time to discuss the really significant item, they may be drained of energy, or in a hurry to leave and therefore may approve quickly.
- ***Doing favors to others:*** The more you do favors to others, the more they will be likely to support you in times of need. Sometimes employees may try to convince others that they have rendered them favors, although this may not be completely accurate, but their assumption is trying to convince the other party that they are indebted to them in one way or another.
- ***Controlling sources of information:*** The more you control the sources of information, the more your colleagues will rely on you and you will be perceived as indispensable; although in reality no one is. Up till the present day, and even with the over-supply and easy access to data and information of all sorts, many employees still believe that they should not part with the information they have so as to maintain power over others. They may claim to others that they have inside information from top level management. It may be a tool to convince their colleagues that they have more power than they really do through their proximity and confidante relationship with those at the top.

- ***Picking the decision rules:*** For example in trying to decide on who is the better qualified candidate for a job, if you want to be in control and get the group to choose your preferred candidate, one thing you may do is suggest the selection criteria and the weights to be allocated to these criteria. If the others are not paying sufficient attention, then there is a great likelihood that your preferred candidate will be the one that meets the criteria with the pre-determined weights.
- ***Distributing benefits:*** One way to limit the potential opposition from other parties in the organization is through giving them a piece of the cake. In a university setup, for example, if you are receiving a research grant, if you want to guarantee smooth operation and flexible disbursement procedures, it may be advisable to make sure that other faculty and staff benefit as well. This may be through forming research teams, or tasking them with specific paid activities and allowing them to share in the credit gained when the research is accomplished.
- ***Ambiguity of Promises:*** Some managers intentionally state their opinions in ambiguous terms to be on the safe side and to be able to change their minds in any direction if there is a need to do so.
- ***Reliance on External Experts or Evaluators:*** It is always commendable to get the opinion of an external expert or consultant. However, many times reliance on external consultants may be a means to help convince others of a certain policy you already had in mind. You just use the consultant to make it sound more appealing. After all, you have paid the expert lots of money, so he or she should know what is best.

If you are not going to use these side tracks to influence the decision-making process in your organization, then at least you should be alert when others try to do so.