

## Module 9

### Power and Politics

#### Introduction

This module considers power and politics in the workplace as the source of political behaviour. Various approaches to managing and mitigating political behaviour will be reviewed. We will also define power and discuss diverse types of power as well as consider various 'influence tactics' employed by people in the workplace.

Upon completion of this module you will be able to:



#### Outcomes

- *define* the concepts of power and politics.
- *discuss* the sources of power.
- *show* how managers might use power effectively.
- *explain* the nature of organisational politics.
- *explain* how management can be effective in a political environment.

#### Terminology



#### Terminology

Empowerment:	Increasing decision-making discretion of subordinates.
Legitimate Power:	Legitimate power is a function of one's position within the structure of the organisation. It emerges from one's place within the hierarchy. Legitimate power is strengthened or weakened based on one's ability to manage and work with others.
Organisational Politics:	Organisational politics are defined as the management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organisation, or to obtain sanctioned ends through the means of non-sanctioned influence.
Power:	Power is the capacity to influence others who are in a state of dependence. Power is used to get someone to do something that is consistent with our own planned objectives.
Referent Power:	Referent power is a function of being respected



and admired by others. It is a base of power for anyone in the organisation regardless of the position they hold.

## Case study 9.1



### Case study

#### The Prisoner of Azkaban versus The Spirit Level

The Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 1999 featured a showdown of two fictional characters: a young wizard against a monster-slaying warrior. The controversy surrounded what became a political battle surrounding the selection of a winner. Would Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* win the honour and its 23,000 pounds prize? During the meeting to decide the award, committee members almost broke into a brawl over the decision and one member even threatened it would be 'over my dead body' if his choice didn't win.

Why the controversy? Before the committee even met to make a decision, spokespeople for the rival Booker Prize had already criticised the Whitbread organisers for 'dumbing down' the award by appointing Jerry Hall, model and ex-wife of Mick Jagger, as one of the judges. The English literary establishment mocked Hall's appointment to the prestigious award panel, especially when, in response to a question about her qualifications for the task, she responded, 'I love reading and I love reading to my children.' Other non-academic appointees included actor Imogen Stubbs and Sandi Toksvig, a comic.

*The Prisoner of Azkaban* was also criticised for being a lightweight choice as a finalist for the prize. Even though more than 30 million Harry Potter books have been sold worldwide, London's *Evening Standard* wrote: "Rowling is a brilliant writer of children's books but only readers who refuse to grow up demand that Harry Potter should be treated as a masterpiece for adults too."

By contrast, Seamus Heaney is an Irish poet whose international stature was confirmed when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995. He was a previous Whitbread winner in 1996 for his collection *The Spirit Level. Beowulf*, his translation of a thousand-year-old Anglo-Saxon epic, has been widely praised for restoring a dusty classic to modern readers through a vivid, colloquial style.

During the meeting to decide the winner, Anthony Holden, a biographer and one of nine judges, threatened to walk out and dissociate himself from the enterprise if *The Prisoner of Azkaban* won the Book of the Year Award. Three of the other judges, including Hall and Stubbs, said they would walk out with him.

Holden said letting Harry Potter win "would be a 'national humiliation' and would send out the wrong message about a serious literary

competition.” Robert Harris, also one of the judges and the author of the best-selling thrillers *Fatherland* and *Enigma*, accused Holden of blackmailing the other committee members. After a brief shouting match between the two, Dr. Eric Anderson, the chair of judges, called for a vote in the hopes of restoring order.

Even the announcement of the final decision was fraught with controversy. At first, Dr. Anderson announced that *Beowulf* had won by a clear margin. The next day, another judge said that the 90-minute meeting of judges had been tense and the final vote was five to four.

Source: Robbins & Langton (2000, pp. 324-325).

The case above provides an example of the themes that we will discuss in this module. We will first examine what is meant by the terms power and politics, and identify various sources and types of power. We will also discuss various ways of managing power and political environments.

## Power

Power is the capacity to influence others who are in a state of dependence. Power is used to get someone to do something that is consistent with our own planned objectives. It is important to note that while power is the capacity to influence others, it is not always exercised. While you may have the power to influence the direction your subordinates take on specific projects, you may not exercise that power, because it is inconsistent with your desire to empower those subordinates.

We imagine power being used by senior people within an organisation. While this is often the case, the ability to influence others is multi-directional. Subordinates often have power over their superiors and we often have power over co-workers, because we are able to influence their behaviour based on our relationship with them, rather than our position within the organisation.

Power emerges not just from individuals but from groups as well. And often, we see specific groups within organisations having enormous influence over decision making. This power tends to shift over time, depending on the strategy adopted by senior people throughout the life of an organisation. For example, in a new organisation that is attempting to provide an innovative new product line, the research and development department might have significant power. As time goes on and market share objectives have been achieved, that power might shift to another group or area – operations for example.

## Sources of power

There are five primary sources or bases of power:



## Reward

Reward power allows managers to exert influence by providing positive outcomes that affect the behaviour of others. A manager can influence behaviour by recommending salary increases, promotions, or interesting work and intrinsic rewards such as flattery and compliments.

## Coercive

Coercive power enables managers to deny employees specific rewards when they are not displaying desired behaviour. Employees might be punished with a reduction in pay, a demotion, or they might be given less-attractive work or even threatened with dismissal. But coercive power has its limits, particularly in a unionised environment, where employees might work-to-rule until their demands are given some attention. Coercive power generally has negative consequences in the workplace; it decreases morale, and increases mistrust and fear.

## Legitimate

Legitimate power is a function of one's position within the structure of the organisation. Naturally the CEO tends to have substantial legitimate power. It emerges from one's place within the hierarchy. In most cultures we are taught to obey and respect others with higher authority. Legitimate power is strengthened or weakened based on one's ability to manage and work with others. Therefore, leadership styles also play an important role. An organisation may have five senior managers, all with the same legitimate power because of their parallel positions in the hierarchy. Yet two of these five people may have greater power because of their ability to influence others more effectively through leadership. While legitimate power does not have a negative effect, it often does little to improve attitudes among employees.

## Expert

Expert power emerges from specific expertise, skills, information or knowledge that one possesses within the organisation. Doctors often have expert power in that patients assume they have a base of knowledge and expertise that can be relied upon to make decisions about their health. Expert power, like referent power, is a source of power for people throughout the organisation. Secretaries often have expert power in that they might accrue information over time about procedural or process protocols within the structure of the organisation. Research has shown that subordinate effectiveness seems to be more a function of expert power than any other base of power.

## Referent

As mentioned above, legitimate power is enhanced with personal characteristics of a manager or leader. Referent power is a function of being respected and admired by others. One of the unique features of referent power is that it is a base of power for anyone in the organisation regardless of the position they hold. We are willing to be influenced by people that we like and often employees in middle or lower level

positions have the power through charisma and other personal characteristics to influence the behaviour of their co-workers.

## Managing power

How do we make use of power in an effort to influence the behaviour of others? Research has shown that there are a number of specific strategies and behaviours that we adopt:

1. **Reason:** this involves using rational, logical arguments with facts and data that have been collected. Reason is the most used strategy of the seven listed here.
2. **Friendliness:** we might use goodwill, flattery, or be especially nice to someone before we make a request.
3. **Coalition:** often we will rally others together in order to use those relationships for support, in order to back up the request.
4. **Bargaining:** we might be able to achieve our objective by exchanging benefits or favours with others.
5. **Assertiveness:** we might be direct and forceful, by demanding that people do what is being asked of them. This often involves repeated requests or making reference to rules that necessitate compliance.
6. **Higher authority:** we sometimes seek the support from superiors to back up requests.
7. **Sanctions:** we use organisationally derived rewards and punishments, such as salary increases, promotions, demotions and performance evaluations, to achieve desired outcomes.

These seven tactics are not relied upon equally, and often the selection of which tactic to use is dependent on four contingency variables: the organisation's culture; the manager's relative power; the manager's objective for wanting to influence; and the manager's expectation of the person's willingness to comply. Another interesting finding is that we tend to use reason and rationality more often when we are appealing to superiors. When attempting to influence peers and subordinates, we employ other tactics such as bargaining, higher authority and friendliness.

We often think of power in negative terms, and feel that it is something that others strive to obtain, and then often abuse. This is sometimes the case. However, people also use power responsibly to influence others.

Psychologist David McClelland argues that effective managers:

- Have a high need for power (nPow)
- Use their power to achieve organisational goals
- Adopt a participative or 'coaching' leadership style
- Are relatively unconcerned with how much others like them.



McClelland identified these employees as institutional managers, and argued that they tend to subordinate personal needs to organisational objectives. They make good managers because they show no favourites (as a result of not worrying too much about being liked), and they clearly articulate organisational priorities, instil team spirit and empower others.

## Empowerment

Historically, management has viewed power as a fixed quantity, and therefore it was isolated at the top of the organisation. Lower level employees had very little if any power in organisations. In today's environment, this is not the case. In recent years there has been a movement towards empowering employees. Empowerment means sharing or giving employees the authority, opportunity, and motivation to solve organisational problems using independent decisions.

One of the changes within organisations that prompted the need for empowerment was the elimination of layers of management as well as the emergence of self-managed teams. Fewer managers with larger spans of control must share power in order to facilitate timely decisions. Empowerment changes the dynamics of traditional power within an organisation and employees must adopt a new perspective of power. It is something that is shared in an effort to be both efficient and effective in meeting planned organisational objectives, rather than something that few possess and exercise over others.

Some have argued that empowerment is often a term that is used in organisations, but in reality does not exist. Superiors still make decisions. Empowerment in its true form necessitates access to information, so that employees can make decisions. It also requires a reward system that reinforces appropriate behaviour. In addition, employees must have the authority to make these decisions. When they do not have these opportunities available to them, they perceive empowerment as an espoused theory, but in reality, as a farce. It has been difficult for some senior managers to forfeit power that they have exercised for many years.

Guidelines for implementing empowerment include:

- Delegation of authority to lower levels should be clear and unambiguous
- Planning must be integrated and participative at all levels
- Managers at all levels, especially top levels, should emphasise strong communication skills.

Research has shown that empowerment does increase productivity both at the individual level and the team level. How do empowered people behave? Robert Quinn and Gretchen Spreitzer identified through their research what empowered people tend to have in common:

- Empowered people have a sense of **self-determination**. They have freedom in their ability to select what work they will do, without being micromanaged.

- Empowered people have a sense of **meaning**. They believe in the importance of their work, and are interested and care about that work.
- Empowered people have a sense of **competence** in their work. They believe that they are able to do their work effectively and are confident that they can perform.
- Empowered people have a sense of **impact**. They believe in their ability to influence their work unit and also understand that others listen to their ideas.

Empowerment often necessitates shifts in tactics that managers have historically used. Coercion and appeals to higher authority might not be attractive options; rather reason and friendliness may work more effectively in an empowered environment.

Professor Dan Ondrack of the University of Toronto in Canada argues that four conditions must be met in order to empower employees:

1. There must be a clear definition of the **values and mission** of the company;
2. The company must help employees acquire the relevant **skills**;
3. Employees need to be **supported** in their decision, and not criticised when they try something extraordinary;
4. Workers need to be **recognised** for their efforts.

It is clear that empowerment has been a very successful shift in many organisations. With empowerment, people are able to make effective decisions and solve problems in less time, while employees feel challenged and optimistic about the work environment. Yet it is important to recognise that empowerment is not a switch; one cannot walk into the organisation one day with a magic wand and tell the employees that they are now 'empowered'! This would surely be a recipe for disaster. Research has shown that, while empowerment can be very effective in organisations, it must be viewed as a substantial change that necessitates careful planning and management.

## Organisational politics

Organisational politics are defined as the management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organisation, or to obtain sanctioned ends through the means of non-sanctioned influence. People are engaging in political behaviour once they convert their power into action. What does political behaviour look like? It might emerge from people hoarding information with a view to controlling decision making; it might also entail whistle-blowing, spreading rumours, leaking confidential information to sources with the potential to spread the information (media), exchanging favours with other employees.

Our usual perception is that political behaviour is bad. This is not necessarily the case. There are circumstances under which people within



organisations will use their power to effect positive change and help others, all with a view to realising organisational mandates. Formal authority and standardised procedures, while they exist to facilitate efficiency and decision making, often create bottlenecks and discontinuities. Managers may use their power to align people and resources more quickly than the existing structure would allow. Networking provides a good example of this. Networking is defined as establishing relationships with employees or outside stakeholders in order to accomplish goals. This type of networking is described as functional political behaviour.

## Machiavellianism

The sour side of politics exists primarily because of the characteristics of members within the organisation who are high on the personality dimension known as Machiavellianism (discussed in more detail in Module 2). A series of instruments known as Mach scales can measure one's orientation to this dimension. These people have the following characteristics:

- They act with self-interest, even at the expense of others
- They are cool and calculating, especially when others get emotional
- They have high self-esteem and self-confidence
- They form alliances with powerful people to achieve their goals.

High Machs will not hesitate to lie or behave in other unethical ways in order to meet personal objectives. They will do this by 'stepping over' or defeating others who get in the way of these accomplishments. People who demonstrate high Mach characteristics find favourable tactics that allow them to politick under specific circumstances:

- They are able to have a face-to-face encounter with the person they are trying to influence
- Typically the circumstances are emotional
- The situation is unstructured, with few guidelines for interaction.

## Effective management in a political environment

Politics emerge in almost any organisation where there is more than one employee, so ignore them at your peril. Politics emerge naturally as a result of distinct objectives, interests and values across activities or departments. And there is not a manual or articulated procedure for every decision that must be made. In addition, multiple variables affect the need to move quickly and be more flexible than some organisational structures allow. Politicking is a fact of organisational life, and cannot be ignored. How might you become more politically adept in your organisation? Robbins and Hunsaker have offered the following suggestions:

- **Frame arguments in terms of organisational goals.** Effective politicking requires camouflaging your self-interest. No matter



that your objective is self-serving; all the arguments you marshal in support of it must be framed in terms of the benefits that will accrue to the organisation. People whose actions appear to blatantly further their own interests at the expense of those of the organisation are almost universally denounced, are likely to lose influence, and often suffer the ultimate penalty of being expelled from the organisation.

- **Develop the right image.** If you know your organisation's culture, you understand what the organisation wants and values from its employees – in terms of dress; associates to cultivate (and those to avoid); whether to appear risk-taking or risk-averse; the preferred leadership style; the importance placed on getting along well with others, and so forth. Then you are equipped to project the appropriate image. Because the assessment of your performance is not a fully objective process, both style and substance must be addressed.
- **Gain control of organisational resources.** The control of organisational resources that are scarce and important is a source of power. Knowledge and expertise are particularly effective resources to control. They make you more valuable to the organisation and, therefore, more likely to gain security, advancement, and a receptive audience for your ideas.
- **Make yourself appear indispensable.** Because we're dealing with appearances rather than objective facts, you can enhance your power by appearing to be indispensable. That is, you don't have to really be indispensable as long as key people in the organisation believe that you are. If the organisation's prime decision makers believe there is no ready substitute for what you are giving the organisation, they are likely to go to great lengths to ensure that your desires are satisfied.
- **Be visible.** Because performance evaluation has a substantial subjective component, it's important that your manager and those in power in the organisation be made aware of your contribution. If you are fortunate enough to have a job that brings your accomplishments to the attention of others, it may not be necessary to take direct measures to increase your visibility. But your job may require you to handle activities that are low in visibility, or your specific contribution may be indistinguishable because you're part of a team endeavour. In such cases – without appearing to be tooting your own horn or creating the image of a braggart – you'll want to call attention to yourself by highlighting your successes in routine reports, having satisfied customers relay their appreciation to senior executives in your organisation, being seen at social functions, being active in your professional associations, developing powerful allies who speak positively about your accomplishments and similar tactics. Of course, the skilled politician actively and successfully lobbies to get those projects that will increase his or her visibility.



- **Develop powerful allies.** It helps to have powerful people in your camp. Cultivate contacts with potentially influential people above you, at your own level, and in the lower ranks. They can provide you with important information that may not be available through normal channels. Additionally, there will be times when decisions will be made in favour of those with the greatest support. Having powerful allies can provide you with a coalition of support if and when you need it.
- **Avoid ‘tainted’ members.** In almost every organisation, there are fringe members whose status is questionable. Their performance and/or loyalty are suspect. Keep your distance from such individuals. Given the reality that effectiveness has a large subjective component; your own effectiveness might be called into question if you’re perceived as being too closely associated with tainted members.
- **Support your manager.** Your immediate future is in the hands of your current manager. Since he or she evaluates your performance, you will typically want to do whatever is necessary to have your manager on your side. You should make every effort to help your manager succeed, make them look good, support them if they are under siege, and spend the time to find out what criteria they will be using to assess your effectiveness. Don’t undermine your manager and don’t speak negatively of them to others.

The presence of political behaviour varies widely across organisations. It is likely that politics can be kept to a minimum, or even eliminated, where every member of the organisation shares the same goals, values, and objectives. Yet in reality, this is not typical. As members of organisations, we must navigate our way through complex environments that are often riddled with political behaviour. It is therefore up to us to establish personal standards and manage our own behaviour in a way that can be rationalised to that person in the mirror!

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## Module summary



### Summary

Understanding and managing power and politics is an integral part of a manager's job. Power emerges not just from individuals but from groups as well. Power tends to shift over time, depending on the strategy adopted by senior people throughout the life of an organisation. There are five primary sources of bases of power (reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, and referent) that you learned in this module. Managers can use many kinds of political tactics to increase their individual power. Our usual perception is that political behaviour is bad. This is not necessarily the case. For example, managers may use their power to align people and resources more quickly than the existing structure would allow. Robbins and Hunsaker have offered several guidelines in effectively managing the political environment, for instance, frame arguments in terms of organisational goals, develop the right image, make yourself appear indispensable, be visible, and develop powerful allies, and so on.

Empowerment is a process of encouraging and/or assisting individuals or groups to make decisions that affect their work environments. Research has shown that empowerment increases productivity both at the individual level and the team level. Yet it is important to recognise that empowerment is not a switch; one cannot walk into the organisation one day with a magic wand and tell the employees that they are now 'empowered'! This would surely be a recipe for disaster.

## Case study 9.2



### Case study

#### **Bernd Sterzel at the IVth Medizinische Klinik (A)**

Please read case study 9.2 'Bernd Sterzel at the IVth Medizinische Klinik (A)' in the case study handbook of your study material and analyse it, using the written case format in the handbook. Your paper should be no longer than eight pages.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

1. Describe the bases of power in an organisation. Do you believe that these differ between for-profit, not-for-profit, and government controlled organisations? Why?
2. Which of the five power bases emerge from the individual, and which emerge from the organisation?
3. Prepare a list of positive components of organisational politics. Why might these components help organisations and its employees? Under what circumstance might your use of power be detrimental to both the organisation and its employees?
4. Imagine yourself working with a team of people, one of whom is a high Mach person. What might you do to neutralise his or her behaviour?
5. Differentiate between power and politics. When might power not be an example of political behaviour?



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