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POWER, POLITICS AND MANIPULATIVE BEHAVIOUR

Prof. Renu Luthra*

Abstract

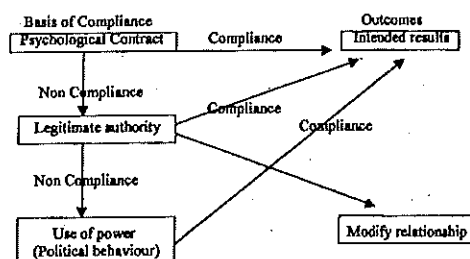
In today's corporate world, power games and manipulations are more real than ever before and in corporate politics today's ally is tomorrow's competitor. Power games can truly damage a company's productivity. With so many organisations implementing work teams into their culture, it has been found that the most frequent explanation for team failure is that the team has raised or allowed other issues to interfere with team goals.

The basis of influence in an organisation are the psychological contract, legitimate authority and power.

Power is a pervasive part of the fabric of organisational life. Getting things done requires power. Every day managers in public and private organisations acquire and use power to accomplish goals and in many cases, to strengthen their own positions. A person's success or failure at using or reacting to power is largely determined by understanding power, knowing how and when to use it and being able to anticipate its probable effects.

Throughout history, human beings have been fascinated by power. In ancient Chinese writings, concern about power is clearly expressed - the taming power of the great, the power of light, the power of the dark. Historical records show differences in the extent to which individuals have pursued, feared, enjoyed and misused power. The image of those who seek power is for the most part negative. Power seekers have been portrayed as either neurotics covering up feelings of inferiority, anxiety or hatred, persons attempting to substitute power for lack of affection or loneliness or trying to compensate for childhood deprivation.

The Basis of influence in organisations



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The psychological contract is the mutual set of expectations that exist between an organisation and an individual. These expectations will include the whole pattern of rights and privileges and duties of the person. As long as requests, commands and directives fall within the boundaries of the psychological contract, the person will comply. Legitimate authority is the right of decision and command that is sanctioned or approved by those in the organisation and is reflected in the organisation structure. Since legitimate authority accrues to a person as a function of his organisation position, it is transferable from one person to another. The acceptance of legitimate authority stems from several sources. First, every culture has a concept of legitimate authority in which it is generally accepted that some forms of authority as well as relationships between superiors and subordinates are appropriate while other forms and relationships are not. Second, when a person joins an organisation, its culture is transmitted through organisation socialisation. Third, the individual's organisation orientation, initially developed by general socialisation affects legitimacy. The organisationalist usually has little trouble with most directives from higher levels. The professional may see many directives as less legitimate and respond more readily to influence attempts from colleagues. The indifferent responds primarily to reasonable job demands made during working hours and probably views everything else as non legitimate. On the other hand power is a force that can be used to extract compliance but it differs from legitimate authority. Power is not sanctioned by the psychological contract whereas legitimate authority is. The use of power, in fact, distorts the boundaries of the psychological contract. This is because

the boundaries of the psychological contract are flexible and can be modified, even though it may take considerable force to do so. Power can be used to achieve organisationally sanctioned ends or the ends desired by the political player.

OUTCOMES OF INFLUENCE:

a) Intended Results:-

Intended results are the outcomes of influence attempts that are desired by the party that exerted the influence. From an organisation's perspective, compliance should lead to organisationally valued results, such as high productivity and profitability. Results, however may also be intended because they are the wishes of a particular person but are not part of the organisational requirements for an employee. Usually when legitimate authority, charismatic power or expert power is used, the target person will react in a way intended by the power agent. The psychological response of the influence target is called acceptance. He or she will engage in the desired behaviour as well as rationalising and justifying his or her compliance as being the right way to behave. When charismatic power is accepted, the target's justification is ideological and normative. For expert power, the acceptance is rationalized by the belief that the competence of the expert is necessary to satisfy the targets needs.

b) Modification of Relationship:-

Some modification of relationships between individuals occurs when a target of influence resists or fails to comply with the influence attempt. The influence agent can take disciplinary action, assign less desirable work, withhold promotion or pay increases or change the personal relationship at work. The target of influence can adopt a resistance strategy by working purely by the book. Influence targets who wish to resist power may try to develop their own power base using approaches to acquiring power such as developing coalitions. Success at these strategies will modify the balance of power.

Considering the complexities and numerous shades of the power game, it would be extremely naïve of anyone to assume that dedication to the organisations' goals and hardwork will eventually help him/her to get ahead. The reality is that people have to engage in power play. Keeping oneself in tune with information flow, making sure people know who you are, understanding how power is wielded and aligning yourself (or at least appearing to align yourself) in power plays is important. One does not have to resort to Machiavellian techniques, become a conniver or a backstabber, but one cannot afford to avoid office politics altogether. Those who find

the whole matter of office politics distasteful and unnatural and possibly counterproductive can at least try to minimise their involvement. More important such people should recognize their own naivete about the business world and competition and play some of the power games themselves. In fact playing a political game is not so bad as long as you recognise it as a game. As a starting point it is important to become aware of one's personality and how it affects others and thereby control the negative aspects and concentrate on the positive. For example, for the narcissistic ("Look at me! Look at me!") personality, his inability to share the spotlight may be causing colleagues to exclude him, giving others some credit will free him from the burden of playing political games constantly.

It is amusing that most people deny involvement in such activities, yet they do them anyway. One has to be wary of those who protest that they do not engage in politics, that they are always honest, straightforward and fair. If they were truly all of that, they would not need to tell anyone so. Neither should one bore anyone with the details of one's political abstinence nor should one believe anyone who says he is above it all. Subtle even subconscious ways people play politics in organisations include hiding information that could help others, evaluating the boss, even co-ordinating arrival and departure times.

The act of hitching oneself may seem like the disingenuous sort of behaviour one would decry in others. Quite on the contrary, one is simply helping someone who is powerful (or is in the process of attaining power) and in exchange that person is helping you. These kind of alliances work two ways - people who are good at moving up often are also good at developing a team which moves up with them. This is the straightforward way that politics and manipulation works. In order to avoid condemnation for your alliances one could attempt to be friendly with everybody and then one would not be resented for being a little friendlier with the important people. The trick is to develop the art of recognising power. There are two centres of power in organisations - those who serve the powerful and those destined for power in the future. If the chief executive relies heavily on a particular person it may be important to get to know the person. More difficult is to identify those who are likely to experience a meteoric rise in the organisation and ally yourself with such a person when he/she is moving up rather than when he/she is already there.

Equally uncomfortable is for a subordinate to be caught between clashing titans. When Apple Computer was virtually

split up between co-founder Steven Jobs and Chairman John Scully and the latter won control he retained most managers who had aligned themselves with the defeated Jobs. Scully has built dissent into the system but the problem is not all bosses permit dissension. Before aligning oneself it is important to assess the titan. Are they the professional types who understand and encourage disagreement? Or are they the type to hold a grudge? It is important to find out the history, the displeasures and the drives of the disputants and the source of the conflict. If one titan is motivated by questionable ethics, then one has to determine how comfortable one will be while supporting him. If the issue that divides the titans is a trivial one, choosing the ally is even more difficult. Most people who survive such situations are those who are honest with themselves, with their boss and even with the people they are competing with. It is advisable here to ally oneself with the one who helps the most and who will support one's goals and aspirations. Another safe option is to build one's own independent base of power so that the rivals both become dependent. Possessing critical skills or knowledge needed by both is helpful in such a situation.

On a concluding note no matter how one decides to proceed to move in the murky world of office power games, politics and manipulations, the secret of success is not to overdo it. It is advisable not to spend the bulk of one's working hours agonising over who's in and who's out and not to treat every shred of grapevine news as an occasion to abandon work for a full afternoon of office gossiping. While it is important to remain alert to the happenings around the organisation it is equally helpful to be competent and nice and useful to people.

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