Tools for Leaders to Leverage Organisational Politics

By Michael Jarrett , INSEAD Senior Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Navigating four typical domains of organisational politics can help leaders overcome barriers to strategy execution.

Many CEOs enter organisations with ambitious plans to change strategies or processes. But they often find themselves up against organisational politics. Historical divisions and entrenched power structures can quickly hobble change. Despite this, leaders often refuse to acknowledge the powerful role that politics can play in the success of a good strategy. Instead, they try to force change and often meet strong resistance.

In the **previous article** in this series, I explained the four typical types of organisational politics that exist in most organisations. In short, these can be defined as "the weeds", "the rocks", "the high ground" and "the woods". In each of these quadrants, personal influence, authority, structure and processes can create barriers to change. But by understanding why and learning to navigate these quadrants, leaders can carefully alter the organisational fabric while keeping it together.

This article will explore the tools needed to overcome the challenges in each quadrant of organisational politics.

Playing with power

Navigating these domains requires awareness of two important dimensions. First is the level at which the political activity takes place. Political dynamics start with the individual player and their political skills. These evolve into group-level behaviours. Also within this dimension is the broader context, where politics operate at the organisational level.

The second dimension of the political landscape is the extent to which the source of power is soft (informal) or hard (formal). Soft power is implicit. It uses influence, relationships and norms. Whereas political activity based on hard, formal or explicit power draws upon the use of role authority, expertise, directives and reward/control mechanisms.

The weeds

The weeds, where personal influence and informal networks rule, can form a dense mat through which nothing else grows. In these circumstances, informal networks can be a countervailing force to legitimate power and the long-term interests of the organisation. For instance, they can thwart legitimate changes needed to put the organisation on a sounder long-term financial footing.

To deal with the weeds, get involved enough to understand the informal networks at play. Identify the key brokers, as well as the gaps – if you can fill the gaps — or ally with the brokers, so you can increase your own influence. Conversely, if the brokers are doing more harm than good, you can try to isolate them by developing a counter-narrative and strengthening connections with other networks.

The rocks

Navigating the terrain here, where hard or formal sources of authority reign, consists of drawing on these sources of power, rather than fighting against them. Your best bet is to redirect the energy of a dysfunctional leader, either through reasoned argument or by appealing to their interests. For example, in the case of an advertising company mentioned in the previous article, the chairman used formal power to stop changes and take people off task forces without notice. Senior executives used the argument of "leaving a legacy" to

get the chairman to see how he was undermining the company's long-term interests as well as his own. In fact, it was this sort of political behaviour and misuse of power that inspired Max Weber, an early organisational scholar, to write the classic *Bureaucracy*. In it, he argued that bureaucracy was the most rational and best way to organise and co-ordinate modern corporations. This leads us to take the high ground.

The high ground

If you find yourself on the high ground, which combines formal authority and organisational systems, you can use feedback from clients, customers or end-users to highlight difficulties and make the case that your current structure or process is constraining the organisation. Since organisations with a problematic high ground tend to be risk-averse, you can also try emphasising that not changing can be even riskier than trying something new.

You can also argue that a separate group or task force needs to be set up to examine an issue or bridge silos. It creates a 'working space' outside of the habitual structures, norms and routines of the organisation. It's vital for innovation and change. For instance, a public agency was hampered because of slow structures and formalised steps to stop potential fraud. It meant that millions in tax revenues were not collected at the end of the year. Senior leaders decided to set up a dedicated task force outside of the formal organisational structure to solve the problem. After the first year, they had reduced the problem by over 50 percent and reached a 95 percent recovery rate by the second year. The organisation then changed its official processes to match these improved methods. Other well-known examples of similar methods include the changes at Nissan, pilot projects at Asda and companies opening up innovation labs in Palo Alto to reduce bureaucracy.

The woods

The woods are characterised by informal processes and guidelines.The challenge here is to make the implicit explicit. Ask "stupid" questions, bringing implicit organisational routines and behaviours to the surface. Ask clients, recent hires or temporary contractors about their observations and experience at the company; a fresh pair of eyes will often identify things that incumbents can't see. Get benchmark information from surveys and specialist experts. Once the implicit assumptions are out in the open, ask your team to reflect on whether they're helping your company or hindering

it. For example, in our consulting with a newly merged, international telecoms company, we conducted a simple exercise to help the newly merged entities to describe their cultural norms and those of the other parties. It quickly generated truths and myths that could be discussed and used to iron out blockages as they rolled out their distribution and cable network – the key to capturing subscribers and business operational success.

Get comfortable

Politics carries many negative connotations, but it is not just a tool for the self-serving. For politics to be an asset for strategy execution, it needs to be reframed as a natural, useful tool necessary to change efforts. Understanding the landscape and how to navigate it can help managers leverage political dynamics. At the very least, leaders need to be aware of the lay of the land so they can defend themselves against the pushback they may receive in the course of strategy execution.

Michael Jarrett is a Senior Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. He is also a programme director of the Strategy Execution Programme, one of INSEAD's Executive Education programmes.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on Twitter and Facebook.

A version of this article appeared in Harvard Business Review.

Find article at
https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/tools-leaders-leverage-organisational-politics

---

About the author(s)

Michael Jarrett is Professor of Management Practice in Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. He is also Programme Director of the **Strategy Execution Programme**, one of INSEAD's Executive Education programmes, and a programme director for the **Executive Master in Change**.