

Smart Management

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Using Politics in Organisations

David Butcher
and
Martin Clarke

palgrave



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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xii
1 Organizational Politics	1
All Change!	5
The Nature of the Problem	10
Politics is a Dirty Word	13
A Powerful Alternative	18
In Conclusion	22
2 The Illegitimacy of Politics	24
Managerial Mindsets	25
Hierarchy and Top-down Control	31
The Illegitimacy of Politics	34
The Unrealised Value of Politics	44
3 Legitimate Politics	49
The Problem of Power	50
Politics as the Application of Power	66
Managers as Capable Politicians	76
4 The Capable Politician	78
Conceptual Understanding	79
Self-understanding	86
Awareness	88

	Interpersonal Skills	92
	Personal Development Implications	96
5	Working With Legitimate Politics	98
	Understanding What Managers Do	99
	So Why Do Managers Do What They Do?	100
	Activity Patterns of Constructive Politicians	106
	The Complete Constructive Politician	134
	In Conclusion	140
6	Politics – The Essence of Organisation?	141
	The Democratisation of Organisational Life	143
	Education and Political Behaviour	148
	Individual Action, Politics and the Art of the Possible	151
	The Beginnings of an Agenda for Personal Action	155
	<i>Index</i>	158

List of Figures

1.1	The theory of planned change	11
2.1	The circularity of the rational mindset	43
5.1	Don – the rational approach	108
5.2	Dave – the politically capable manager	112
5.3	Gerard – destructive politics	119
5.4	Inica – constructive politics	122
5.5	Colin – the disempowered	127
5.6	Steve – the principled use of power and stealth	130

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Preface

A glance at the titles along the bookshelves, or in the catalogue from which you may have selected this book, might leave you with the impression that over the last few years every fundamental principle of managing and organising has come under the microscope. Confronted with an endless array of potential arrangements for managing customers, suppliers, partners and employees, you could be forgiven for thinking that management can no longer take anything for granted. There is now, more than ever before, a plethora of possibilities for managers to choose from in their quest to create and sustain effective organisations of every kind.

So have these sea changes in the business landscape led to fundamentally different ways of organising and managing? After all we now talk of empowerment and organisational citizenship as routinely as we might have talked of corporate planning and employee loyalty 20 years ago. But when we strip away the rhetoric has anything really changed about our notion of organisations? Many people think so. Sumantra Ghoshal, one of today's leading management thinkers, puts it this way:¹

Companies are trying to implement their sophisticated, multidimensional third generation strategies, through their de-layered, horizontal, second generation organisations – but they are still trying to do that with first generation managers – managers whose personal sense of their roles and value added, and whose personal skills and competencies, have all been shaped by an earlier, outdated model.

This outdated model is one in which hierarchical authority structures still greatly influence managerial thought in practice. Just imagine, for example, that you have been away from your office for a day, and you have returned to find three e-mails. One is from a colleague, one from your team and one from your boss. Each is marked urgent, but there is no other detail. Which do you respond to first? You probably won't ponder the answer for too long. Or consider how easy it is to challenge established procedures, or question a change inspired by the board without this becoming career limiting. Organisations may have become delayed and flattened, but the role of hierarchy and authority still runs deep in managerial minds. Of course hierarchy is inevitable in any form of organising, but it is the way it obscures the value of a different perspective on managing that has prompted us to write this book.

For many years management theorists have discussed the idea that organisations are akin to groups of competing and mutual interest groups that sometimes come together to produce something worthwhile. They are seldom uniform undertakings of rational, hierarchical co-ordination and action. Instead, agendas constantly collide and align around different issues, and managers spend most of their time dealing with this. It is the stuff of politics and managers, whether we like it or not, are politicians.

Many managers understand this of course. They experience it every day, but this insight has never been allowed to develop in a way that can help them understand its centrality to what they do, or how they can use it for personal and organisational benefit. Instead, organisational politics are treated as illegitimate or, at best, with superficial understanding. As if to make this point for us, a recent article in a US management journal described political skill as 'disarmingly charming' behaviour. Another piece in the same issue talked of office politics becoming temporarily suspended when there is a hot job market and increasing economic prosperity. These kinds of misconception are naïve and can seriously mislead managers as to the real nature of organisational politics.

The record needs to be put straight. Management is politics. It is our own view that the illegitimacy of organisational politics is one of the major reasons why third generation strategies are still being implemented with first generation managers. Many managers still feel uncomfortable about challenging the top-down corporatist mindset. For if politics are perceived as illegitimate in organisational terms, then how can alternative views be acceptable? We ourselves believe that ideas such as organisational citizenship and empowerment are more rhetorical than real, and will remain so until managers are able to get to grips with the inevitable pluralism of organisational life. With this uppermost in our minds, we hope that this book challenges your notions of organising and managing, and allows you to develop new and practical ways of meeting your own personal goals in the best interests of the organisation for which you work.

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List of Abbreviations

BULs	business unit leaders
CEO	chief executive officer
HR	human resources
HRM	human resource management
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IS	information systems
IT	information technology
MD	managing director
MNC	multinational corporation
MRP2	manufacturing and resources planning
SAP	systems applications and products
VP	vice-president