

Whether you like it or not, office politics is unavoidable



We meet many people in organisations who have an ingrained aversion to organisational politics. They see politics as divisive, sinister and illegitimate. They say: 'Without politics, this organisation would function smoothly'. They are wary of the competition for jobs, status and power which often leads to dishonesty and manipulation. They fear that political skill is incompatible with personal authenticity or professional competence. They often use politics as a dirty word to describe the bad practices of others, they say: 'I try to do an honest job, but I am not sure about him – he plays politics'.

We say politics in organisations is unavoidable. Whether you like it or not, handling the politics is part of what we do as leaders – in the sense that politics is the struggle for power and position in and across organisations. Politics is part of seeing organisations as they are – complex, living communities with histories, cultures and dynamics of their own. It is also part of recognising people as they are – wonderful, inspiring, maddening, ambitious (often) for self as well as for the organisation or a valued cause. Instead of denying or defining politics as evil, we believe it would be better to recognise that politics exists and find decent ways of working with it, of making a positive difference.

It is time to make politics respectable again – and think how to work with it productively. Here are five steps to make politics and power work for you:

1. Understand your power and authority

In our work we often support leaders in receiving verbatim '360 feedback' from people they work with. We find that leaders are surprised by their authority with others. They are surprised to learn that others follow them not because of speeches or PowerPoint presentations but because they embody values, principles or objectives for others.

How aware are you of your sources of authority with others? There are many different kinds. Talk with your group and others about when they find you at you most powerful. How can you make the most of the person you are? This goes hand in hand with the work to find a settled enough self. Be kind to yourself and keep in good enough shape to lead others.

2. Don't give your power away unintentionally

We all find ways of giving our power away. Sometimes it's as simple as overplaying a real strength so that it becomes a weakness. Find the 'micro-habits' that make you less effective. This can be as straightforward as saying too much or too little, as well as how we present ourselves, or whether we smile and make eye contact.

In today's organisations the number of skilled intelligent people who think of themselves as powerless is remarkable. This is partly the result of the heroic orthodoxy that tells people that it is all up to the one great leader at the top. It is also a matter of choice and life history. We disempower ourselves with our old stories of 'not belonging, not being good enough or being found out'. These stories let us off the hook because we free ourselves of responsibility for what we can do and settle back into blaming others. They don't make us effective leaders.

3. Understand and appreciate the power distribution that surrounds you

You may tell yourself 'I don't do politics', but that's naïve. Others will see your actions as political. In order to anticipate the likely impact of your actions you need to have a sense of the 'power map' of which you are part. Who has power and influence, above and below? Who do you have good relationships with? Who are you prepared to work with? It may help to literally sketch out this 'power map' for yourself.

Imagine yourself in the shoes of the bosses. What is the context for them? What are the pressures on them? What are their needs and objectives? What are their hopes and fears? Are you prepared to see your bosses as ordinary mortals (not devils or heroes) and consider how the world looks to them? Are you able to be curious and explore their interests and views (and not judge or condemn)?

Whatever your context, you are likely to have some operational 'box ticking' as part of your normal work. Don't do it out of hours and resent it, or do it badly because you are angry about it. It may be a necessary, if maddening, part of what you do. Meeting these requirements is part of power and politics.

4. Grow power by connecting your story to others'

It is easy to imagine that power is limited, finite and that we gain more by taking it from others. This may be true of coercive 'power over' others, but it is not so with the 'power to' which comes from creating possibilities by being part of something, with others.

Think about the benefits to others and to the organisation of the things that you and your group are trying to achieve. Listen and enquire, don't sell. Develop some shared ground. How can you develop the necessary relationships and business justifications?

Strategy is a constantly shifting story. How could you make a contribution and develop the story? Instead of being compliant or complaining, how could you fill in part of the picture? What groups or interests do you identify with and/or want to support?

5. See politics as balancing self- (and common) interest

Chief executives are not elected by employees. Nevertheless, the principles of liberal democracies – the rule of law, open debate, limits on the power of any one individual and mechanisms for finding working majorities for change – need to play out in organisations as in society as a whole; power and love working together.

The authority to lead is not something given from above; it is negotiated, day by day, between people as they work together. Winning the support of a working majority is not something to be put off to some imagined future that will never arrive. It is something that, step by step, we can implement in our own world.

Power, politics and group dynamics play out in every meeting we join; there is so much going on that is not on the agenda. In many ways the simplest of meetings is unfathomable. Perhaps that's why meetings are denigrated.

There is what is right in the world and there is what is real. Effective leaders operate at the intersection of the two.



Notes:

- This blog post draws insights from the authors' book [Breaking Free of Bonkers: How to Lead in Today's Crazy World of Organizations](#) (Nicholas Brealey, 2017).
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.

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