Power and Interdependence in Organizations

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1 Understanding power in organizations

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Almost thirty years ago, Rosabeth Kanter (1979) wrote that power was the organization's last dirty secret. She argued that discussions of power and influence were circumscribed both in the workplace and even in the research literature. Asking workplace colleagues or interview respondents questions such as "who (or what department) has the most power" would earn opprobrium rather than praise, something that Salancik and I experienced personally when we began our research on the effects of departmental power on resource allocations in universities (Pfeffer and Salancik 1974). Power, except for occasional discussion of the bases of power (French and Raven 1968), was largely missing from management textbooks and also from the research literature on organizations and management.

Research on power has recently enjoyed some resurgence, particularly in social psychology, as I will discuss below. And although there are now a number of schools that offer elective courses on understanding power and political dynamics inside companies, nonprofits, and government agencies, such electives are seemingly less common than courses on negotiation, for instance. That is the case even though the two topics are highly complementary. Negotiations classes for the most part focus on how to obtain an agreement when interests conflict, how to claim value, and integrative and distributive bargaining over outcomes in circumstances where the parties already have established strengths and weaknesses and interests. Meanwhile, the study of power and influence, focusing on both structural sources of power and interpersonal tactics such as communications strategies and influence skills, can help people develop stronger positions and more allies and resources in advance of entering into negotiations.

In this chapter I discuss some possible reasons for the ambivalence about power. I argue that because power affects so many aspects of social and organizational life, we need to overcome that ambivalence in both our teaching and our research. I conclude by describing some ways of both understanding power and influence and surmounting our mixed emotions about the topic.

Why "power" makes people uncomfortable

We are clearly ambivalent about power. As Gandz and Murray (1980: 244) noted, most people agree with the statements "successful executives must be good politicians" and "the existence of workplace politics is common in most organizations," and few believe that "powerful executives don't act politically." But at the same time, their sample of managers held the views that "organizations free of politics are happier than those where there are a lot of politics" and "politics in organizations are detrimental to efficiency." Similar sentiments come from students – even MBA students who voluntarily elect to enroll in a course that has been variously titled "power and politics in organizations" or "paths to power". Many may, in fact, enroll as a reflection of their own ambivalence about power. As a colleague, Deborah Gruenfeld, remarked to me, it was her observation that, even though most people spend most of their working lives in hierarchical organizations, a large fraction have trouble with hierarchical relationships. Some individuals are counterdependent, rebelling against the efforts of those senior in the hierarchy to direct or manage them and resisting the influence and direction of others. Some individuals are reluctant to use their own formal authority or, for that matter, to develop informal influence to get others to comply with their requests, believing that they don't have the "right" to tell others what to do or direct their behavior. Both counterdependence and a reluctance to use power creates difficulties for people in their careers, precisely because hierarchy is a fact of social life and people spend a lot of time in hierarchical structures, so being effective in hierarchical relationships is important. Moreover, individuals' conflicted feelings about power and its use can affect behavior at work and possibly the stress that many people experience working in political environments.

There are a number of possible reasons for this ambivalence and the conflicted feelings people have about power and politics in organizations, although few of these explanations have been empirically explored. Understanding the causes and sources of people's discomfort with power and its effects remains an important research task. Ferris et al. (1996) suggested that workplace politics is a source of stress.

Politics may be important for organizational success, but because people are often unskilled and unschooled in building and exercising influence, this discrepancy between their need to do something and their perceived ability to navigate organizational politics effectively could be a source of discomfort.

Another possibility may result from the cultural context and its implications for how people see their social roles. The respondents to Gandz and Murray's survey and the students Gruenfeld and I encounter are largely Western, many from the USA, others from Western Europe. Even those who have very different cultural backgrounds may be somewhat "Westernized" by the time they reach North American companies or business schools. One of the most prominent differences across cultures is individualism. As noted by Markus and Kitayama (1991), Asian cultures emphasize the relatedness of individuals to each other, while, in American culture, individuals seek to maintain their independence from others. The individual ethos of Western culture, combined with the emphasis on individual achievement in school where grading on the curve is common, can suggest to people that they should succeed on the basis of what they do as individuals. This cultural understanding can create the idea that independence and self-sufficiency are both descriptive of others and normatively desirable – ideas that contrast with interdependence and being in relationship with others and getting things done by influencing those others. This line of argument suggests that ambivalence about and reactions to power and interdependence are in part determined by culture and cultural teachings and values.

Cultural ambivalence

The idea that power is a basis for success violates some other important social psychological principles as well. As Lerner (e.g., Lerner 1980; Lerner and Simmons 1966) described long ago, people have a need to believe that the world is just. Such a belief provides a feeling of more control over events and comports with social values of fairness and justice. Because of the belief in a just world, people will re-evaluate the characteristics of individuals depending on what happens to them, derogating victims and elevating the skills and worth of people who may enjoy accidental good fortune (Lerner and Simmons 1966; Hafer 2000). There is evidence that unjust situations create discomfort for people (Hafer 2000) and affect their political judgments, for instance, about income redistribution (e.g., Benabou and Tirole 2006).

For many people, success that is based on political skill or power violates the sense of a just world, since few people seem to believe that possession of political skills and the acquisition of power ought to be sufficient to entitle people to good outcomes. The sense of injustice and unfairness from people succeeding on the basis of networking skills, the ability to strategically influence relationships, and similar political tactics is evident in the reactions of students to both readings and cases that illustrate advancement and success on the basis of political skill and is completely consistent with the just-world effect. This reasoning suggests that just-world beliefs should mediate the relationship between success or failure based on political or networking skills or their absence and people's psychological reactions to those situations.

Another observation that may explain the ambivalence and discomfort associated with observing political behavior in organizations is that people, including business people and students, seem to make distinctions between what might be seen as acceptable and even normatively prescribed behavior at the level of organizations or organizational units and the same behavior if exhibited by individuals in the context of interpersonal relationships. So, for instance, the idea of engaging in industrial espionage, such as the reports of employees of Oracle going through competitors' trash to see if they could glean useful information, is viewed less negatively than the same behavior if undertaken by an individual to obtain some advantage over a competitor for a promotion. Similarly, we teach courses in business schools on strategy and strategic moves – including entering the markets of others to encourage mutual forbearance and other elements of game theory, which has now become part and parcel of many strategy courses. But strategic behavior undertaken at an individual level and focused on people who are competitors seems to elicit greater feelings of inappropriateness. Companies, for instance, engage in advertising campaigns in which they attack the relative merits of competitors' products and engage in other forms of public-relations activities. Except possibly in the domain of political life and elections, such behavior is much less socially acceptable when undertaken by individuals against organizational competitors.

It seems as if personal relations are viewed as being more natural and less "strategic," or at least many people appear to view interpersonal relationships as if they *should* be more honest and authentic than relations among organizational actors. In part this may be because viewing interpersonal relationships from a strategic frame requires more vigilance, calculation, and effort than most people are willing to expend. In part, however, it is also because there is something somehow unseemly about using tactics that would be perfectly acceptable at a more "macro" level against others in interpersonal competition. Why, and the extent to which this is true, remain topics that deserve additional study.

And yet another social psychological process, self-enhancement, may be implicated in the observed ambivalence and discomfort with power and politics in organizations. There is evidence that, in most circumstances, people tend to see themselves as possessing more of good qualities and attributes and fewer negative traits (Krueger 1998). To the extent that being successful on the basis of merit and ability is a normatively valued and socially desirable outcome, believing that one has succeeded because of political skills rather than "merit" is a threat to people's positive self-perceptions.

Finally, when confronted with difficult trade-offs, people are understandably ambivalent. Power and influence ideas can cause people to think about the trade-off, for instance, between being popular and well liked versus being powerful and effective and getting things done. One way to avoid confronting such difficult choices is to pretend that they do not exist – that success does not require such decisions – or avoiding thinking about topics, such as organizational politics, that make such trade-offs salient.

Why understanding power and influence is important – for individuals and organizations

Although people may be ambivalent about power, understanding power and influence is important because power and knowledge about power help account for many outcomes of theoretical and substantive interest. Krackhardt (1990) showed that knowing about distributions of influence can be helpful for one's career and is useful if not essential for targeting sales efforts focused on companies.[1] Power as a

[1] Alston Gardner, co-founder and former CEO of an industrial sales-training company, was one of the largest purchasers of *Managing with Power* (Pfeffer 2002). As part of a three-day sales-training program, most of one day was spent helping sales people diagnose organizational power distributions so they could focus their influence efforts on those most crucial for affecting the final purchase decision.

concept is useful for understanding resource allocations in organizations (e.g., Pfeffer and Moore 1980; Pfeffer and Salancik 1974), career advancement (Moore and Pfeffer 1980; Standing and Standing 1999), people's wages (Pfeffer and Konrad 1991), and decisions ranging from organizational computer purchases (Pettigrew 1973) to CEO succession (Fligstein 1987; Ocasio 1994; Ocasio and Kim 1999).

Power also has profound effects on those with power and on their relationships with others (e.g., Galinsky et al. 2003; Keltner et al. 2003; Kipnis, 1972). Research shows that when people feel they are more powerful their action orientation increases, they tend to focus more on their own needs, they display anger more readily (Tiedens 2000), they increase their social distance from others, and they are less constrained by social mores and conventions – they are more disinhibited in their behavior.

Power and influence are also important topics for understanding some aspects of organizational performance. One of the biggest problems managers confront is the ability to actually get things done. The recent spate of books on execution (e.g., Bossidy et al. 2002; Hartman 2003) is evidence that people recognize that planning and strategic brilliance are, by themselves, insufficient to achieve organizational success. Political leaders such as Richard Nixon have lamented their seeming inability to get government bureaucracy to bend to their will and carry out policies and dictates. Senior corporate leaders, particularly in large organizations, also bemoan how difficult it apparently is to change organizational cultures and to get the myriad people throughout a company on the same page.

Clearly, the ability to get things done requires skill at influencing others. Although measures and incentives are one approach to this influence task, particularly for those with the hierarchical authority to impose such interventions, other interpersonal influence techniques (e.g., Cialdini 1988) are also crucial for inducing people to do what needs to get done to ensure high levels of performance. The importance of influence skills for making things happen, and the importance of execution to business success, is one reason that Kanter (1979) argued that power skills were essential to making companies successful.

Power and influence skills are crucial for individuals. As Keith Ferrazzi (Ferrazzi and Raz 2005) has commented, contrary to what people may have been told or to some conventional wisdom, individuals are not responsible for their own careers. Their own hard work and drive will not, in and of itself, make them successful. In order to be successful, particularly in larger organizations where climbing a hierarchy is the path to career advancement, other people, such as bosses, determine someone's success. Therefore, for individuals to be successful in promotion tournaments, it is important that they be able to get others in their organization interested in their success and willing to spend effort advocating on their behalf. Anyone who has witnessed promotion discussions in law firms, management consulting organizations, investment banks, or, for that matter, academic departments will immediately recognize the truth of this statement.

Lyndon Johnson's enormous political success, first in the US House of Representatives and then in the Senate, depended in no small measure on his ability to first locate where the power was and who held it and then build relationships with these older men – sometimes referred to as Johnson being a "professional son" – that would cause them to want to help Johnson be successful in his endeavors (e.g., Caro 1982). This advocacy by others for someone's success requires, obviously, skill at playing organizational politics and influencing those others to be supporters.

Individuals also need political skills and understanding of power because their success depends on getting things done, too. It is not just at a more macro level of analysis where the ability to solve problems and make things happen is a source of success – this is also true at the level of the individual and his or her career. Frank Stanton (Smith 1990) rose rapidly through the ranks at CBS because he could provide answers – even if those answers just came from *The World Almanac*, about economic and demographic factors that could help CBS make better programming decisions and sell advertising more effectively. Robert Moses, the New York City Parks Commissioner (Caro 1974) got along with his many powerful bosses, including New York Governor Al Smith and New York City Mayor LaGuardia, because he was willing and able to accomplish things, even those things that raised a ruckus. As Al Smith's son said in a television interview, politicians were quite willing to take credit for the public works such as parks, playgrounds, and swimming pools that Moses built even if they clucked in public about his tough methods. As one observer of the New York political scene commented:

> Every morning when a mayor comes to work, there are a hundred problems that must be solved. And a lot of them are so big and complex that they just don't

seem susceptible to solution. And when he asks guys for solutions, what happens? Most of them can't give him any ... But you give a problem to Moses and overnight he's back in front of you – with a solution, all worked out down to the last detail ... He had solutions when no else had solutions. (Caro 1974: 463)

SMWT

Some people erroneously believe that the more collegial, team-oriented settings so prevalent today in high technology and other knowledge work environments have reduced the need for individuals to possess political skills. But quite the contrary. In organizations where hierarchy matters a lot, one can get things done through recourse to formal authority and the rules and processes that constitute the organization's ways of doing things. In less formalized systems, where collaboration and teamwork are the norm, disagreements about what to do and how to do it can, and often do, still occur. These disagreements about the appropriate course of action must still be resolved in order for decisions to get made and things to get accomplished. But now, instead of dictating decisions through fiat, issues will need to be negotiated and influence used to resolve disagreements and move things along. Ironically, then, the more team-based and flatter hierarchies that are so much in the news and the diminished reliance on formal controls and rewards and punishments require more influence skills on the part of organizational members, not less. In more lateral structures and in roles such as project management, getting things done requires being able to influence others without having formal authority over them.

Some ways of overcoming ambivalence and understanding power and influence

Because power is at once important but provokes ambivalence, it is important to find ways to overcome the reluctance of both scholars and students to take power seriously. With respect to research orientations, power represents a theoretical orientation that speaks to the potency of interests, both individual and group, and strategic, intentional actions. Power is notably absent from many theoretical literatures, including population ecology (Hannan and Freeman 1989), many strands of institutional theory (cf. DiMaggio 1988), and transactions cost economics (Williamson and Ouchi 1981) that see environments and their rules and constraints as givens and view human agency and intentional, adaptive action as limited in their explanatory power.

In the fifteen years since writing *Managing with Power* (Pfeffer 1992), colleagues and I have taught numerous sections of material on power and influence, both at Stanford and at other universities, not just in the USA. but also around the world. That experience, as well as the additional research that has appeared over the years, leads to some interrelated conclusions about how to understand power and influence in organizations and how to help others be comfortable with that task.

The most fundamental idea is that hierarchies are ubiquitous in social relationships including in both informal groups and formal organizations (Tiedens and Fragale 2003). Hierarchies among humans facilitate cooperation and coordination. And in order to determine hierarchical relationships, behaviors that create dominance help in making decisions, distributing power, and claiming resources. Therefore, understanding power relations is essential in understanding omnipresent hierarchies, and diagnosing how dominance and influence get both acquired and used is a fundamental task for analysts of social systems and social relations.

power as "omnipresent"

At a theoretical level, there are two complementary approaches to understanding the sources of power, each of which is important and necessary. One approach for understanding the sources of power and influence, and for that matter, their use, focuses on structure, including network structure and the structure of situations. Burt's (1992) work on structural holes represents one research stream in this tradition. Burt found that people who occupy bridging positions between two otherwise unconnected or at best very weakly connected networks – people who, in other words, occupy a structural hole between more densely connected networks of others – can reap the benefits of brokerage by bringing together resources and mediating the interests and objectives of the two separate networks. The idea of brokerage or standing between built on earlier and less sophisticated ideas about the importance of being central in networks. The insight was that centrality, per se, might be less important depending on how connected the other people were to each other, and that what mattered for acquiring power and influence was being able to provide value or benefits to people by accessing information or social ties that they could not.

network

Other research emphasizing the importance of structural position includes the body of work that argues that one important source of power comes from the control over resources. Such resources include obviously money and budgets – one source of Robert Moses' power was that in his position as Parks (and later Bridge) Commissioner, he hired lawyers, floated bonds with their underwriting fees, and built public works, thereby providing money to both contractors and the workers and their unions who worked on the projects (Caro 1974). In fact, during the Great Depression, his access to engineering talent that could build public works permitted him to wind up spending a disproportionate amount of WPA (Works Progress Administration) money in New York. But other important resources include information, access to people and their calendars, often controlled by assistants, and physical equipment and physical space and offices. Certainly, in many universities, laboratory space is at a premium, and those with space have power as a consequence of this fact.

Yet another structural source of power is the influence that comes from occupying a formal position. Positions in organizations, particularly in hierarchical organizations, come with authority rights – the right to make decisions and to allocate tasks and resources. Those positions and their associated influence rights come to be institutionalized (Scott 1995), in the sense of being taken for granted and seldom questioned or challenged. Thus, CEOs have power simply because of their title, as, to a lesser degree, do academic administrators such as deans. Cialdini (1988) has noted how we are conditioned to obey authority, which is why uniforms – sometimes a signal of authority – can be so important. Such deference is often almost automatic and mindless. Thus, titles and positions matter and convey power regardless of the particular qualities of the individual occupying a particular position.

The second source of power derives from individual actions and behaviors, taken, obviously, within structural contexts but not completely constrained by or subject to those contexts. People can gain influence above and beyond what they might be expected to have on the basis of their structural position by what they do, how they act, and how they communicate to others.

As one example, people can, through their effort and insight, find or create resources that become important out of almost nothing. Caro (1982) described how, as a young Congressional aide, Lyndon Johnson took control of a virtually moribund organization of Congressional secretaries, the Little Congress. Having gotten control of the organization, he then made it an important place by inviting prominent politicians to speak, by having debates that attracted media attention because reporters figured out this was a good setting to preview the arguments that would be made about pending legislation, by leveraging the press coverage to get even more prominent people to speak, and, by so doing, elevating his visibility as the organization's leader. Or, to take another example, Klaus Schwab was a not very successful academic until he created a forum in Europe for business leaders to get together and discuss important political and economic issues. That organization evolved into the World Economic Forum, and Schwab's institutional entrepreneurship has provided him with a position of enormous visibility and access as well as one that has permitted him to become reasonably wealthy. On a less grand but still important scale, a junior McKinsey consultant told me how he obtained visibility and access, important sources of power, by taking on the task of organizing seminars for the office, something that others did not want to do.

As a second example, people can enhance their influence through how they behave. Behavior that expresses strong emotion, such as anger, or that otherwise conveys power can produce attributions of power to the individual on the part of others. For instance, recent research shows how the expression of emotions can affect the conferral of status. Tiedens (2001) found that people who expressed anger were more likely to be seen as high status than those who expressed sadness. The basic theoretical argument is straightforward and is based on ideas from attribution theory. In order to express strong emotions, and particularly negative emotions such as anger, it is presumed that people must have the power that provides them the freedom to express those strong, negative emotions. Consequently, when people do display anger, for instance, as contrasted with sadness, others perceive them to have more power and confer more status and power on them. In another study, Tiedens and Fragale (2003) reported that when exposed to a dominant confederate, subjects tended to exhibit a diminished postural stance, again demonstrating how acting as though one had power can actually provide some advantages in acquiring power.

anger v. sadness

Finally, effective communication can also enhance an individual's power and influence above and beyond what structural conditions might dictate. There is almost certainly no more vivid example of this than Oliver North's testimony in front of a joint Congressional investigating committee looking into the Iran–Contra scandal during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Accused of violating federal law in providing aid to the Nicaraguan resistance (the Contras) and also of running a covert foreign policy out of the White House that entailed supplying arms to the Iranians in exchange for the promise to release hostages, and observed by justice department attorneys to be shredding documents (destroying evidence), North was able to win over the American people through a masterful use of language. He framed his actions in terms of achieving higher aims such as saving lives or protecting the interests of the USA. He never appeared defensive or embarrassed about what he did. And he stressed that he always told his superiors what he was doing, and why.

As the literature on conversation analysis and political discourse demonstrates, there are "rules" for giving speeches and for how to frame talk that are more likely to elicit applause and agreement, and conversational gambits that produce power. For instance, interruption, when successful, both creates power and is more likely to be done by those with more power. Studies of cross-gender conversations, for instance, have traditionally found that men are more likely to interrupt women than vice versa. And studies of physicians' interaction with patients found that after about forty-five seconds, doctors tended to interrupt what their patients were saying.

In addressing an audience, be it one person or many, the influence technique of flattery (Cialdini 1988) can be embedded in discourse, praising the audience and telling them how intelligent and perceptive they are. This will generate liking and leave the audience more susceptible to influence. Murray Edelman's perceptive analysis (1964: 123) of political language noted that "political argument, when it is effective, calls the attention of a group with shared interests to those aspects of their situation which make an argued for line of action *seem* consistent with the furthering of their interests."

Atkinson's (1984) analysis of political speeches and what makes them effective found that political language produces emotion rather than thoughtful analysis and, in fact, often precludes rational analysis. Effective political language promotes identification and affiliation with the speaker and his or her ideas. This can be accomplished, for instance, by using "us" versus "them" references as a way of building shared social identity. Atkinson also found that using lists of at least three items was effective in persuasion because it provided the aura of comprehensiveness, and that the use of contrasts, inviting explicit comparisons, was also effective in persuading others.

Much of the research on power and influence adopts either the structural or human-action perspective. Few studies have explored the extent to which structures themselves can be changed by what people do – although Burt's research speaks to this possibility – and few studies of interpersonal influence techniques have placed those techniques in structural context to, for instance, explore the conditions under which they will be more or less effective, or for that matter, the conditions under which they are more or less likely to be used. In both research and teaching, it would seem to be important to incorporate a more comprehensive view of power and political action in organizational contexts.

The idea that power depends on both structure and action also has implications for how we teach these ideas to students. Structure can be analytically understood. So, too, can the various strategies and techniques of interpersonal influence. However, as pointed out elsewhere (Pfeffer and Sutton 2000), there is a tendency to separate knowing and doing, and nowhere is this more problematic than in professional schools where competence in professional practice virtually demands that people have not only the knowledge of relevant ideas and theories but also the practice of using those ideas. This line of argument suggests that having people practice "doing power" – for instance, by using various influence techniques in organizations such as student clubs or part-time employers – while they are learning the concepts will lead to more engagement with the material and more learning and retention of the ideas.

Conclusion

Thirty years ago there was little discussion of power in management textbooks or courses or, for that matter, in the management literature. What discussion there was tended to proceed from French and Raven's (1968) typology of the bases of power. Although over the ensuing years our understanding of social-influence processes has increased dramatically through more research and teaching activity, power and politics in organizations retains a somewhat problematic position in our courses and our scholarly activities. The ambivalence about power that affects our students also affects the scholarly community as its members decide what theoretical ideas and empirical research to advocate and pursue.

Because of this fact, I have argued here that we ought to directly study and understand the sources of the ambivalence about power and politics.

That study and the insight it can produce may have some benefit in helping us, and our students, surmount the reluctance to directly engage with the important topics of organizational power and politics.

I have also argued for a more multidimensional approach to both our scholarship and our teaching, recognizing both structural and behavioral sources of power and power strategies and advocating the need for more studies that incorporate both aspects. People act in context, and their structural positions affect their opportunities for leverage. But that context is created by what people do, and even with given constraints, there is wide variation in individual effectiveness in negotiating those constraints. The dichotomy between action and structure pervades much of sociology, and its resolution has been an important theoretical and empirical topic. Such should also be the case in studies of power and politics in organizational settings.

Finally, I have maintained that the literature suggests that power and political skill have important effects on organizational decisions and individual outcomes, including career outcomes. Because of the importance of these effects, it behooves us to understand power in organizations and to develop even more effective ways of helping our students to understand it, also.

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