

Tussen vrijheid en beperking

Een onderzoek naar de politieke dimensie in arbeidsorganisaties

In between Freedom and Constraint

An Analysis of Political Behavior within Organizations

Proefschrift ter verkrijging van het doctoraat
aan de Nyenrode Business Universiteit
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus, prof. dr. M. Džoljić
en volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties.

De openbare verdediging zal plaatsvinden
op vrijdag 1 februari 2013
des namiddags om 16.00 uur precies
door Mathijs Leonardus Maria de Vaan,
geboren op 21 juni 1952, te Brunssum

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Summary

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An Analysis of Political Behavior within Organizations

Everyday work life is a complex and dynamic social fabric in which an employee tries to realize his ambitions and needs. In this endeavor he is often confronted with conflicting organization goals and rules and the interests and power play of others. Yet, to be successful an employee may use influencing qualities and behavioral skills in different situations. He will not only act for his interests in team or project meetings or assessment talks with his superior, but also in small and big talk activities behind the scenes, trying to influence relevant others. This informal social activity - called workplace politics - is the object of this study.

In the past five decades the social phenomenon of workplace politics has been widely studied. Initially scholars focused on theory building and modelling. During the seventies and eighties of the last century more empirical studies were undertaken. Some scholars described organizations as political arenas, in which interests, conflict and power defined social dynamics. In the last two decades popularity of studying organizational politics grew extensively. In a significant number of empirical studies relations were explored between the perception of organization politics and stress and other negative consequences for employees. In recent years studies also show positive effects of workplace politics for its users.

A substantial proportion of recent empirical studies is of a positivist nature. Besides ethnographic studies, that provide an extensive and detailed insight into workplace complexity, only a few studies approach day-to-day political activity in an inductive way, whereby qualitative techniques are used to explore and explain the behavior details of the political game.

This study tries to fill a part of this gap. The aim of this research is to grasp social power dynamics behind the scenes by revealing the somewhat hidden reality in day-to-day work situations. It is expected that results will contribute to the understanding of the wheeling and dealing, backstabbing, gossiping and clever power play that may be viewed as instruments of social influence processes to promote individual and group interests.

Research questions and design

To limit the study to realistic proportions, the exploration of the political game is focussed at *middle managers*. These officials take position between their superiors and subordinates in terms of hierarchical position, function and role. A middle manager translates policies from the top to his employees while at the same time he has to relay wishes of his subordinates to the top of the organization. Precisely because of this in-between-position, of balancing, defending and expanding interests in a complex day-to-day activity, political manoeuvring looks to be common for middle managers.

Considering this complex interest position, political behavior is explored through the eyes of middle managers in twenty different selected organizations. To do this the following main research question has been formulated.

In what ways do middle managers in selected organizational contexts realize their interests in the formal and informal day-to-day reality? In what ways do they take account of organizational constraints and interests of others?

This study of the political game is also aimed at discovering relevant consequential insights regarding management and leadership in organizations. For this reason a second research question was formulated.

Regarding the political dimension in organizations, what is the leadership and management relevance of gained knowledge and developed theoretical concepts?

A constructivist interpretation of the Grounded Theory method (Charmaz, 2006) served as a primary basis for practical research design. Following this method, empirical data collection starts with minimal theoretical assumptions. Hence insights and theoretical concepts concerning the political game were developed in first instance from respondent observations and interpretations, literature data were used in the course of the research and only if necessary.

The research design was used to match the social constructionist reality approach in which symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) was used as a framework for understanding the reported political processes and reality construction. Furthermore Goffman's metaphor of theatrical performances (Goffman, 1959) was helpful as a framework for understanding respondent's self and the corresponding social interaction in different social realities.

The consequence of this approach is that experiences and observations of individual respondents in this study are considered primary data and are valued as true interpretations of reality.

To collect direct and extensive behavior detail, an actor perspective was chosen and qualitative data collection techniques were used. A selected group of middle managers was asked to act as participant observers during one year. In this year - 2009 - observations were collected and interpreted by means of diary notes, group and individual interviews. An iterative cyclic research procedure then followed. Notes on respondent's political game and that of others were analysed by the researcher (a total amount of more than 100,000 words). In these notes, relevant words and passages were marked. In this way various aspects of the political game developed and were categorized into themes such as ethics. Every three months these themes and aspects were verified, validated, interpreted and explored by the respondents and the researcher in group and individual interviews. In this research process constant comparison and categorization took place. Gradually data saturation per category occurred and insights and theoretical concepts concerning organization politics emerged.

At the end of the research process, in the beginning of 2012, a focus group of top managers was formed. Results of the study amongst middle managers were presented and discussed on management and leadership relevance.

Results of the study

1 The political phenomenon

The findings show that the political game is executed in a calculated as well as in a more automatic mode. In this respect a distinction can be made between individual *political behavior and political action*. Political behavior can be explained from the existence of a certain level of practical consciousness which more or less automatically generates political behavior. On the other hand, political action is more calculated and derived from a discursive consciousness, in which experience and reflection on one's own behavior play a stimulating role.

It was found that if an individual is capable of activating behavior from a discursive consciousness, he is able to develop more calculating and sophisticated forms of political game. Indications for this were discovered in the course of the study that included elements of action research.

Furthermore the research shows that organization politics is *an ordinary and everyday social phenomenon*. From the perspective of middle managers it can even be considered *an instrumental and necessary pattern of social action*. This necessity of using politics can be explained by the hierarchical in between position and the complex task and responsibility package middle managers have to deal with. Consequently, they have to balance permanently between the interests of bosses and employees. To do this in an effective way all influence power available has to be used.

Political skills can help middle managers to build up an effective power position. In this way they are able to fulfil the complex organizational tasks and at the same time look after self-interests. The study shows that political competent managers are better able to deal with stressful day-to-day situations; this competence has a positive effect on the desired level of personal wellbeing.

2 Self interest

One of the assumptions of this study is that political behavior is grounded in a social context in which individuals pursue self-interests. The concept self-interest can evoke negative connotations, as it can be interpreted as an attitude driven by values such as self-centeredness and greed. In this study however the concept is used in a broader sense, it includes all individual interests in a work situation, from strictly personal career concerns, to task related work interests that may coincide as well as conflict with the organization's interests.

The findings of this study show that *self-interest is a two-sided concept*. It stands for what managers want to achieve for their personal wellbeing, but also for what they want to realize with regard to their functional responsibility and the interests of the organization. The ranges of self-interests of middle managers were found to be widely varied. On the one hand they want to develop themselves as a manager, make career moves, earn more money and act in a pleasant work situation. On the other hand the study shows that it is also in their interest to deliver productive work for the organization. Some of the functional interests therefore stem from the need to execute daily management work in the best possible way. The respondents expressed a desire to perform adequately, to take responsibility, and most of them also want to play a significant role in policymaking and leadership.

But this need to work for the organization as well as possible also has a downside. Many of the managers reported that they want to escape the complex and often frustrating middle management role. Self-interests like organizing a less busy personal work schedule or arrange activities outside the organization were widely reported. Also making a career step, with more formal power and salary was thought of as a good step to neutralize the negative effects of the complex and often frustrating middle managers role. For the respondents in this study personal well-being and a certain degree of individual autonomy proved to be the most important of self-interests.

3 Social network power bases

The study shows that a productive personal social network is a *powerful weapon and condition for the effective informal promotion of self-interests*. However, building, maintaining and extending such a network, did not prove to be a rational calculating activity. Personal social networks seem to arise naturally and relationships develop more or less automatically under the influence of emotional, affective and cultural processes.

This study explored relevant aspects of social networks in respect to organization politics. Regarding the *foundations on which relationships in networks are based*, data analysis showed that when defining a relationship base, two categories of social identification - that is to say the sharing of experiences and opinions - seem decisive:

1. a *shared cultural past*,
2. a *shared rational present*.

Furthermore a certain degree of *personal affection and trust* seemed crucial in building strong and politically productive relations.

Data analysis also showed that the actual political value of a network relationship is determined by three aspects within a relation:

1. the *information potential* - the timely supply of relevant information,
2. the *organize potential* - the ability to neutralize formal organization rules,
3. the *decision potential* - the possibility to present oneself effectively in relation to decision makers.

Besides this, network relationships also seem to possess values with regard to personal wellbeing. To middle managers a social network also proved of importance as a *learning and development platform* and as a *platform for social identification and bonding*.

Network relationships are latent social connections that can be activated for political purposes. From research data three working principles were identified in an activated network: *reciprocity, solidarity and persuasiveness*. The principles of reciprocity and persuasiveness often seem to apply in a politically activated relationship between two individuals (dyadic). The principles of solidarity and persuasiveness often are applicable in a multiple political relationship based on shared interests (coalition).

Research data also revealed that the working principles of reciprocity and solidarity are mainly *cultural concepts*. They can be qualified as unspoken agreements in which the desired operation and result of the political action is tacitly expressed; the actual reciprocal or solidarity results however are uncertain in form and time. Research data also show that the necessity of reciprocity probably decreases in cases where the social bond is a stronger relationship motive.

This study has yielded indications that lead to the conclusion that a personal social network is the most important power resource for the political game. Identification bases for network relationships were detected as well as the operating principles of reciprocity, persuasion and solidarity. Nevertheless, further research into network and relationship characteristics related to the productiveness of specific relations is needed.

4 Political skills

Analysis of the empirical data in this study generated several personal skills and attributes that may generate effective politics. The three most relevant skills are *the competence of building, managing and activating a personal social network, social acuteness and persuasion qualities in interpersonal communication*. In addition, the personal attributes *knowledge* and *gender* were identified as

political power sources. The importance of the first attribute seems particularly strong in knowledge intensive organizations. Also detailed knowledge about the organization, gathered over the length of the employment, grants political power dominance to the knowledge possessor.

These findings on aspects of political skill confirm the accuracy of the political skill definition that Ferris et al (2005, p. 127) introduced: "*the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and / or organizational objectives*". The findings in this study confirm results of recent studies carried out on the basis of the Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al, 2005).

5 Political tactics and techniques

In the course of the study an endless row of political tactics and techniques used by middle managers was identified. It is impossible to present a complete list of game modes, since activity behind the scenes is an on-going process of new combinations of tactics and techniques that depend on differences in personality, interests and changing contexts of time and place. It is therefore not surprising that many studies of the political dimension in organizations do not result in uniform and definite results on tactics and techniques in the political action spectrum. Nevertheless, the results of these studies and the empirical data collected in this research contain sufficient indications to develop a three-category-format of political tactics and techniques.

1. *Conducting personal impression management*

Impression management can be defined as all attempts of an individual to build, manage or change a self-image in the eyes of others. An individual will use all of his available personal skills and attributes in order to convince the other or others verbally or non-verbally.

2. *Exchanging sources of power*

An individual request for a service is exchanged for a payback service later. Applicable to this political behavior is a tacit but not guaranteed principle of reciprocity.

3. *Operating in coalition*

A joint political behavior based on the principle of solidarity. While identifying shared interests informal group power is developed.

Although these clusters of political behavior are distinct there is much overlap, personal impression management for instance is a decisive factor when acting in coalition.

A specific and common political tactic was established from research data. This so called *informal consultation* proved to be the most used political tactic. This consultation can be divided into two types, both of which have a different purpose and operating principle.

1. *Informal consultation on shared interests (coalition)*

In the context of a joint membership of a management team or similar agreement, middle managers with relatively equal responsibilities and hierarchical position and role, share functional interests. For a successful advocacy of these interests informal coalition consultations in different constellations are very common among middle managers.

2. *Informal consultation on self-interests (individual)*

Consulting others for one's own interests is also a popular tactic. Without the constraints of structural rules, talking and dealing with others in corridors, at coffee machines and lunch walks, is a common tactic to get support or convince others.

Besides these tactics, research data show different *political techniques*. Some of these techniques - for instance delaying or blocking formal agreements or bypassing or changing formally agreed rules - seek to lift the limitations of the formal system. Because these actions obstruct the oiled functioning of the formal system they are essentially illegitimate. In a formal sense this behaviour is therefore fraudulent, but results in this study show that politics of minor obstruction behind the scenes is culturally often accepted.

6 Ethical aspects

Research data show that the political game is morally standardized. Some organizations in the research group have established formal rules about how employees should behave (integrity policy), but more important, research data indicate that in every organization *cultural rules define and maintain levels of decency* regarding political action.

This study shows that within these cultural rules a distinction can be made between *generally accepted and not accepted types of politicians*. The ideal-typical characterisation of these politicians can be placed on a continuous line. One end of the line is marked by a so called *slick guy* at the other end of the line a so called *rat* is a not accepted type of political player.

1. *A slick guy*
is accepted and treated with a certain level of respect, because his political behavior meets with general standards of morality.
2. *A rat*
is the type of player that is not accepted, his back-stabbing-behavior does not meet the general standards of decency.

Analysis of respondent observations and experiences resulted in the following elements of a general standard of not-accepted political behavior.

- *Deliberately hurting and blaming others in public.*
- *Not being honest about one's own failure.*
- *Taking advantage of one's own formal dominance.*
- *Self-interest is the only thing that counts.*

Besides these indications for a general morality standard, data analysis also shows that in this respect there are *no fixed ethical boundaries* for political action. The boundaries seem to slide depending on conditions of actual context and scope. It proved that middle managers use different ethical considerations depending on the situation they are in.

Research data also produced indications that the social system in organizations is capable of taking informal, cultural measures to sanction unacceptable political behavior. One of the tacit rules in this respect is *to isolate organization members* who cross certain ethical lines.

This study made clear that playing the political game involves acting in two roles, a formal role and an informal political role of influencing and bypassing, delaying or blocking formal rules. This means that middle managers always show two faces, the true one and the mask. Research data show that this situation can lead to moral dilemmas of *internal value conflicts*.

7 Politics in its context

Studies in organizational science indicate that internal and external conditions influence goals and activities within an organization. This means that probably also the political game is influenced. Regarding internal structural conditions, this study provides strong indications that, in contrast to operational managers, *middle managers with development and implementation responsibility* are more inclined to use the political game for their functional interests. Also the *geographical structure of an organization* proved to have a certain influence on the game. Finally research results indicate that managers, who take part in *organization governance*, cannot do without a high degree of political skill and activity.

In this study politics proved to be a social activity in the cultural contexts of *all organizations* participating in the research group. Besides possible differences in ethical boundaries, distinctive cultural aspects influencing the political game were not found.

Regarding possible external influences, the study produced some indications that for profit organizations *market aspects like profit, revenue and shareholder value* might influence the political game in those organizations. These aspects are the primary interests of top management and are therefore relevant to the political strategies and tactics of middle management representatives.

8 Organization, leadership and politics

Considered from the perspective of leaders of profit and not for profit organizations in this study, the existence of a *dual internal reality concept* - that of an indivisible formal and informal social world - was confirmed. It was also recognized that the political game is a *legitimized phenomenon* of social interaction that adds value to decision-making processes and functions as a catalyst for innovation and organizational performance.

Besides this, leadership is responsible for conflict and power regulation within a workforce. Related research has shown that interpersonal conflict and role conflicts within organizations, cause stress to employees and by consequence it has a negative effect on labor. From the perspective of middle managers this study yielded strong indications that the disposition of a certain degree of political skill, can contribute to managing these conflicts, decreasing stress and increasing labor productivity. Furthermore the study shows that political competence helps to develop informal power, thereby contributing to a balance of power.

Thus considered, the political dimension in organizations can not only be seen as a *catalyst for innovation and organizational performances* but also as a *conflict regulation* and a *power regulation* mechanism.

Relevance of the study

This research contributes to the understanding of the complex world of middle managers in day-to-day organizational dynamics. The study shows that the different tactics, techniques and power bases in the political game enable these managers to deal with the complexities and uncertainties of their management task and position. It helps them not only to realize personal goals; using politics also contributes to the functional work interests of these managers and to collective organizational goals.

Furthermore the study provides insights into the workings of the indivisible formal and informal social realities in organizations. For a manager to be effective in his formal role, knowledge of the rules of the informal game can help him substantially. The results in this study indicate that besides this knowledge, a productive personal social network and a certain level of political skill are necessary conditions for the success of managers. This means that in the selection and training of these managers, the political skill competence should be valued as relevant leadership and management aspect.

On a system level this research underlines the value of considering an organization as a social construction in which two realities of social interaction, are both separated and connected. This dual organization concept explains the dynamics between rational aspects in an organization, such as power distribution and the formulated goals, tasks and schedules on the one hand, and the irrational cultural aspects of everyday interaction, interests, conflict and informal exercise of power on the

other hand. The results of this study indicate that valuing both dimensions proves to be crucial for organizational renewal and continuity. Recognizing and acknowledging this concept can also help organizational change programs to be more effective. This steered organizational development can better be approached from the concept of a dual reality, instead of using single unitary change guidance.

Limitations

Choosing a research paradigm, a social reality approach, specific research methods, a defined social phenomenon (organization politics) and research group (middle managers), implicates that the results of the study are limited in their interpretation and generalized application.

Given the qualitative method, the explorative study focus and the research group limitation, only indications can be given regarding the understanding and explanation of the political dimension. Although theoretical concepts of organization politics are developed, no generally applicable statements can be made about the political game.

On the other hand, the explored aspects and concepts of organization politics provide sufficient clues for further research.

Furthermore, although proven effective, the method of indirect participant observation by respondents developed for this study may also be qualified as a research limitation. It is possible that direct participant observation by the researcher in a limited number of organizational contexts could have generated more detailed and more reliable information about the complexity of the social reality and political action perspectives of middle managers.

Suggestions for further research

Although this study was limited in some ways, the explorative and qualitative focus delivered relevant indications for understanding the political dimension. It also yielded equally relevant management and leadership insights. These results provide scholars sufficient starting points for further research.

A productive next step in the research of organizational politics would be to undertake a more detailed and profound study of the development and productiveness of personal social networks, being a key construct in the political game. In doing so a structural as well as a relational perspective of network analysis - the latter focusing on content and context of network relations - is recommended. Especially network analysis a longitudinal research perspective could be an important step towards a further understanding of political processes in organizations.

Other promising lines of research concern a further exploration of relevant management and employee interests, a further review and refinement of the political skill construct and corresponding standards of morality regarding this behavior.

Finally, the results of this study also indicate the relevance of a dual organization concept in which two indivisible realities of social interaction exist, a structural as well as cultural. It is argued that recognition and acknowledgment of this dual concept can lead to more effective change management. Further empirical research regarding this relationship could help elaborate existing theoretical concepts of organizational change and development.