

# THE POLITIZATION OF ORGANIZATIONS

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This paper analyzes organizations as political systems in modern economies and presents the proposition of a politization of organizations in the highly dynamic and changing environments that modern economies represent. Taking on a political approach, it describes the growing significance of political behavior in the organizational decision making and discusses implications of this politization for the management of human resources as a key variable for organizational prosperity.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the proposition of a politization of organizations in modern economies and discusses its consequences for the managing of human resources as a key variable for long-term organizational success. The paper will proceed as follows: First, a political metaphor of organizations is put forth that allows the

description, analysis, and evaluation of political phenomena in organizations. The second part presents the understanding of the politization of organizations and describes conditions influencing and determining political processes in modern organizations. Third, the paper discusses the management of human resources from a politicized perspective and shows implications of a political approach for organizational activities.

## ORGANIZATIONS AS POLITICAL SYSTEMS

The study of organizations as political systems reflects one of the multiple perspectives in organization theory, all of which contribute to a better understanding of organizations by providing abstract images of what an organization is, how it functions, and how its members and other interested parties interact with and within it. In the belief that organizations are generally complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical, and thus difficult to know in a holistic or total way, organization theorists promote a multiple-perspective approach to organization studies by developing different methods for recognizing and understanding the essence of a given phenomenon (Hatch, 1997). The complexity and multiplicity of organizations also means that the perspective used affects the perception of organizational reality and necessarily means focusing attention on particular aspects of organizations while ignoring other points of view. One of these approaches to organizational analysis is the use of different metaphors communicating different perspectives of reality. As Hatch states:

*Metaphor allows you to understand one kind of experience in terms of another by suggesting an identity between two things that you would not normally consider to be equivalent, such as life and a long and winding road; man and a lion. So long as you understand one element of the metaphor, you can learn something about the other. Thus, metaphor encourages you to explore the parallels between an object of interest and something that is better known to you, or at least known in a different way (1997: 51).*

Although a variety of metaphors have served organization theorists as a means of understanding and analyzing organizational phenomena (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Hatch, 1997; Morgan, 1986), the orthodox view in organization theory has been based predominantly on two metaphors, both of which offer a distinctive and fundamentally different way of seeing, thinking, and talking: the mechanistic/organic dichotomy. Framing organizations as tools of management, the mechanistic metaphor characterizes the organization as a machine designed and constructed by management to achieve predefined goals, and presents organizations as forces or constraints on human behavior. Framing organizations as organisms adapting to different environments, the organic metaphor characterizes the organization as a living system that performs the functions necessary to cope with the demands of different environments and presents organizations as support or facilitation for human behavior.

Both of these major metaphors have dominated organization studies for a long time and both approach their subject from a frame of reference based upon very restrictive, idealistic, and non-integratable assumptions, all of which are taken for granted thereby leading research away from considering the legitimacy of control and political relations in organizations (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). By creating means of seeing organizations and their functioning in ways that elude the traditional mechanistic and organic frames, the metaphor of a political system focuses attention on conflicts of interest as well as on the role of power in organizations (Crozier, 1964; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974) and is described by Bolman and Deal as follows:

*The political frame, invented and developed by political scientists, views organizations as arenas in which different interest groups compete for power and scarce resources. Conflict is everywhere because of the differences in needs, perspectives, and lifestyles among various individuals and groups. Bargaining, negotiation, coercion, and compromise are all part of everyday organizational life. Coalitions form around specific interests and change as issues come and go. Problems arise because power is concentrated in the wrong*

*places or because it is so broadly dispersed that nothing gets done. Solutions are developed through political skill and acumen – as Machiavelli suggested they should be centuries ago in "The Prince" (1991: 15).*

In the study of organizations as political orders, organizations are explored as systems of government drawing on various political principles to legitimize different kinds of rule as well as the detailed factors shaping the politics of organizational life (Morgan, 1986; Pettigrew, 1977; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974). One basic issue of political processes concerns the authoritative allocation of scarce resources (versus the allocation by consensus), caused by the divergent interests of the actors involved. Because of the existence of non-interchangeable resources, the goal of political decisionmaking is collective action in terms of pooling resources and making collective arrangements with regard to their disposal. Within both governmental and organizational systems, this specific type of resource allocation is a necessity resulting in two main complications in political processes (Scholl, 1992). On the one hand, there is the issue of dominance or the question of which individuals or groups are making the important arrangements by participating in the relevant decisions. On the other hand, there is the issue of division or the question of the distribution of the collectively generated returns.

While the mechanistic metaphor focuses on organizations as rational systems and tries to find the best structure for reaching certain goals, the organic metaphor also assumes an intentional rationality of organizational behavior, but attributes difficulty in reaching certain goals to an insufficient agreement or inadequate fit between the goals of the organization and the needs of the individuals. The political frame, however, totally breaks with this image of the ability to harmonize goals or needs of both individuals and the organization as a whole and questions the reality of setting and achieving of organizational goals in the context of the actors' diverging interests. It also assumes that conflict,

power, and coalition play a role in such processes as interrelated components, each causing the other.

By investigating the different sets of interests, conflicts, and power plays that shape organizational activities, a political theory of organizations explores how these different interests are formed, how organizational participants try assert themselves within the organization, which conflicts arise, and which bargaining strategies are selected while most of these relations, links, and maneuvers are made behind the scenes, often in a way that is invisible to all but those directly involved. To summarize the political metaphor of organization theory, the following five propositions are offered by Bolman and Deal:

1. *Organizations are coalitions composed of varied individuals and interest groups (for example, hierarchical levels, departments, professional groups, gender, and ethnic subgroups).*
2. *There are enduring differences among individuals and groups in their values, preferences, beliefs, information, and perceptions of reality. Such differences change slowly, if at all.*
3. *Most of the important decisions in organizations involve the allocation of scarce resources: they are decisions about who gets what.*
4. *Because of scarce resources and enduring differences, conflict is central to organizational dynamics, and power is the most important resource.*
5. *Organizational goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among members of different coalitions (1991: 186).*

## **THE POLITIZATION OF ORGANIZATIONS**

Recognizing the growing significance of power and politics in organizational decisionmaking, this part presents the proposition on and explanation of the politization of organizations in modern economies and places greater emphasis

on political activity in organizations than does the so-called rational view of organizational behavior.

Lasswell (1936) offered one of the earliest definitions of politics as who gets what, when, and how, in other words, politics involves the resolution of differing preferences about the allocation of scarce and valued resources. Morgan further points out that "organizational politics arise when people think differently and want to act differently. This diversity creates a tension that must be resolved through political means" (1986: 148). Politics represents one mechanism for resolving allocation problems when other mechanisms, such as the introduction of new information or the use of majority rule, fail (Daft & Steers, 1986). According Pfeffer's (1981) description of politics as those activities undertaken within organizations to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources, obtaining one's preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is uncertainty or dissent about choices, politics covers the study of power in action.

In view of the central role of power in political processes and of the growing interest in its organizational implications, many organization theorists look at power and politics in organizations mainly as similar subjects of investigation: politics is understood solely as the use of power. But the view of political processes as power in action is not an accurate reflection of political phenomena. In addition to the exertion of power, the increase in knowledge and the formation of consensus always play a dominant role within political processes. Political phenomena and their results are understandable only in terms of the interaction of these three variables and their partial substitutability (Scholl, 1992). Especially the aspect of the necessary consensus (Ortmann, 1992), or the interaction that leads to an agreement based on coalition forming, is regarded as an essential part of political processes.

In considering which variables determine political activities in organizations and which therefore increase the intensity of organizational politics in modern economies, Daft and Steers see five major classes:

1. *Scarcity of resources.* Politics typically emerge when scarce resources must be allocated. If resources are ample, there is no need to use politics to claim one's share.
2. *Nonprogrammed decisions.* With nonprogrammed decisions (those not predetermined by policy guidelines), conditions surrounding the decision problem and process are usually ambiguous, leaving room for political maneuvering. Programmed decisions, on the other hand, are typically specified in such detail that little room for maneuvering exists. Hence, political behavior commonly involves major questions, such as long-range strategic planning decisions.
3. *Ambiguous goals.* When the goals of a department or organization are ambiguous, more room is available for politics.
4. *Technology and environment.* Political behavior often increases when the internal technology is nonroutine and the external environment is dynamic and complex.
5. *Organizational change.* Periods of organizational change also present opportunities for political behavior. Efforts to restructure a particular department, open a new division, introduce a new product line, and so forth, are invitations to join the political process as different factions and coalitions fight over territory (1986: 483-484).

Given these constraints on political processes, the proposition on the growing significance of politics in modern organizations is put forth by first asking about conditions affording little opportunity for conflict, power struggles, and political dynamics. Such an organizational decisionmaking climate is found especially under conditions of low diversity and interdependence, as Kotter (1985) points out. While diversity refers to differences among people with respect to goals, values, stakes, assumptions, and perceptions, interdependence refers to a state in

which two or more parties have power over each other because they are, to some degree, dependent on each other.

The following organizational and economic variables are thought to be associated with conditions of low diversity and interdependency (Kotter, 1985): small size of firms and societies, technological simplicity, little product or service diversification, little competition, many small customers and suppliers, little - if any - government regulation, few - if any - unions as well as a homogeneous and poorly educated work force. According Kotter, "it is not by chance that the economists' traditional model of a firm, where only 'rational' economic decision making occurred, and where power struggles and politics were nonexistent, was a small and technologically simple organization that operated in an environment without large customers, suppliers, unions, or governmental regulators, and that employed a relatively homogeneous labor force in a simple organization structure" (1985: 21).

The world described above did exist in the past, especially when traditional economic theory was first developed. Today's world has, however, changed significantly and various trends have increased the diversity and interdependence of modern economies, which are no longer socially simple worlds dominated by organizations that look like the economist's traditional model of the firm. They are instead highly complex, interdependent, and dynamic realities shaped by the following powerful forces: the internationalization of business growth through diversification, continuing technological advances, the macro conflicts in societies resulting from the slowdown in the world economy in the last decade, the aging of the work force, the growth of government regulation, organized consumer groups and the business press, strategies of stressing flexibility and individualization as well as an increasingly educated and heterogeneous work force (Kotter, 1985; Neuberger, 1995b; Wächter, 1990).

These factors complement the conditions mentioned above in fostering political behavior in organizations and increasing the proportion of decision making behavior that can be classified as political versus rational. Given scarce resources, ambiguous goals, increasingly complex technologies, and more sophisticated and unstable external environments, modern economies are dominated by organizations as highly political entities, in which most of the goal-related efforts produced by organizations are directly attributable to political processes.

As power is considered as a relational phenomenon that is not an attribute possessed by someone in isolation, but is instead generated, maintained, and lost in the context of relationships with others (Pettigrew & McNulty, 1995), political processes in organizations can be understood on both a micro level – politics between individuals and groups – and on a macro level – politics in the larger organizational or transorganizational settings. Thus, political behavior in organizations can be broken down into different elements, based on the level of analysis (Bosetzky, 1992; Küpper & Ortman, 1986; Pettigrew, 1977; Sandner, 1992b; Türk, 1989): micro-level elements (individual), meso-level elements (group) and macro-level elements (organization).

The micro level of organizational politics is restricted to individual behavior in organizations and the political activities of single actors; it emphasizes the significance of political processes for the individual actor and his or her workplace in terms of his or her role as an organizational member, worker or peer. The meso level of organizational politics looks at the development of organizational structures and the way the game is played in a structural sense and emphasizes the significance of political processes for the ties between individuals and the organization as well as their significance for the effectiveness of leadership. The macro level of organizational politics investigates both the organization in the context of its environment and the politics of the organization as a whole. The macro level thus focuses both on the significance of political

processes for the ability of the organization to attain its goals within a societal context as well as the relevance of organizational behavior for the individual subsystems of the society and that behavior's influence on governmental or societal policies.

By incorporating these different levels of aggregation into a political perspective, thereby integrating theories of individual and group interests and values with theories of organizational power, processes, and conflicts, and supplementing this combination with the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of social structures, results in a view of organizations as arenas where individual, group, and societal interests are played out (Zey-Ferrell, 1981). Within this framework, each of the three levels reflects a politicization of organizational decision making by emphasizing the growing significance of politics in, of, and between organizations (Türk, 1989). While the micro level considers politics in production instead of the politics of production, the meso level questions less the organization of production than the production of organization. The macro level, finally, focuses on the politics of organization instead of on the organization of politics.

## **A POLITICIZED FRAMEWORK OF MANAGING HUMAN RESOURCES**

The strategic use of a company's human resources has never been more critical for corporate success than in the 1990s; if mishandled, human resources can become a source of corporate distress, if handled well, they can provide a competitive advantage. As power dynamics and political processes in organizations are facts of organizational life and are of central importance for organization studies in terms of the influence on both the behavior and the attitudes of employees and executives at all levels of the organization, contemporary managers of human resources must understand how power and

politics work in the organizational context and must be equipped to deal with them in order to reach their goals and achieve optimal organizational effectiveness.

Often mistaken for a soft (and therefore less relevant) area of interest, compared to the management of physical and financial resources, an effective management of personnel resources is clearly very important, especially considering the fact that the largest part of most companies' costs comes from their labor forces and that the success of every initiative undertaken in an organization totally depends on the willingness of the workforce to implement it. Thus, personnel-related business issues are becoming more and more important to a company's long-term success. The challenge today is using the human factor creatively in planning and problem solving as well as no longer viewing people as constraints to strategy and human resources merely as a cost.

Political processes set in motion by the distribution and dynamics of power throughout an organization have serious implications for many aspects of organizational life, such as work attitudes, motivation, communication, or retention - issues that are especially central to the management of human resources. Organizational decisions are made under time pressure, ambiguity, and risk, and available or created resources are used for excluding alternative purposes, while interested parties participate to different degrees in the production and appropriation of organizational assets, and multiple internal and external dependencies exist in organizational relationships (Neuberger, 1995b). Managing human resources, meaning the process of planning, organizing, staffing, leading, and controlling through the use of formal authority, is therefore a highly political phenomenon in organizations being responsible for the allocation process of people as scarce and valuable organizational assets.

While both human resource theorists and human resource managers have typically placed little emphasis on power in recent years and have in large part

continued to support the myth of human resource activities carried out from a purely factual point of view, an important part of the human resource manager's job is a political function (Wächter, 1992), namely offsetting, handling, or even neutralizing conflicts between the organization and the individuals or groups as well as between the individual actors themselves. Indeed, if human resource management wants to be effective in implementing or defending organizational changes, it must inevitably become political by threatening individual interests and properties in a world of scarcity, diversity, and conflict.

When one understands the political phenomenon more as a qualitative dimension of organizational activity and less as a structural category of decision making (Sandner, 1992a), it follows that the defining characteristic of a political approach lies in its implications for processing. Thus, a political frame of reference does not rely mainly on the management of goals and strategies as key performance procedures ensuring organizational success. Instead, it stresses the importance of the management of processes and times for organizational functioning. A process-oriented theory of political behavior therefore differentiates four main phases of political processes: interest generation, conflict creation, power exertion, and consensus forming. Brought about by the dynamics of political activity, time or timing is another important variable within political processes. In other words, the content (what?) has less to do with determining political behavior than do processes (how?) and times (when?), which means that the management of timing is an essential aspect of politicized human resource activities.

While a mechanistic framework of human resource practices is dominated by instruments such as job descriptions, systems of job evaluation, rewarding, and appraisal, as well as by sophisticated planning techniques and explicit control procedures, an organic frame of reference conceptualizes human resource activities through instruments and practices like self-organization, self-adaption,

decentralization, management by delegation, management by objectives, organizational development, and human relations (Neuberger, 1992).

A political approach to human resource activities, however, focuses on practices caused by or related to power plays and political dynamics in organizational contexts. By providing a negotiated order that creates unity out of diversity (Morgan, 1986), political activities guarantee continuing collective action because there will never be complete or explicit consensus on the assessment of the situation, the procedures, goals and values or even the parties entitled to participate. But to channel the functional effects of political processes by avoiding the dysfunctionalities, a minimal consensus or agreement is needed about what is permitted or forbidden in terms of human behavior in organizations (Neuberger, 1995a). Thus, a politicized view of human resources focuses attention upon practices like the control over information, procedures, rules, and norms, the cultivation of relationships and self-portrayal, the use of coalitions, alliances, and outside experts, the creation of pressure to act as well as upon the timing and use of opportunities (Neuberger, 1995a).

The traditional image of management tasks based on strategic and instrumentalized decision processes, coordinated by formal authorities for the purpose of keeping organizations headed in the right direction is no longer effective within the organization as a political arena because it implies top down oriented, hierarchically based, as well as statically conceptualized arrangements of organizational decisionmaking. While the traditional economics-based approach views management as formal entities for efficient decision making and problem solving, using knowledge of goals to find the best ways of attaining them, management in the political framework is thought to be subject to a subversive dynamic beyond formal regulations or authorities (Neuberger, 1995a; Ortmann, 1995; Schreyögg, 1996; Türk, 1989). Not objective, rational criteria of progress oriented toward homogeneous goals and ends determine organizational reality,

but political coalitions and leaders do so through political activities: the arrangement of the organization is not given, it is negotiated, the goals of the organization are not given, they are negotiated.

Managing human resources from a politicized perspective therefore no longer emphasizes a unidimensional monocratic view of management that works top down through subordinate corporate policies and programs by formalizing and instrumentalizing human assets. Instead, its focus is a polycentric, circular and systemic framework defined by pluralistic influences at every level of the organizational hierarchy whose intent is not to instrumentalize political activities in organizations, but to channel them by creating arenas where issues can be negotiated.

## CONCLUSION

While classical administrative theory portrays organizations as logically functioning entities operating according to neutral, objective goals, and rules of efficiency and economy, stressing the importance of rational, efficient, and effective management, organizational activity itself is predominantly political and is characterized by the agreement or disagreement of participants on purposes, goals, and methods. By focusing on interests, conflict, and power, the political metaphor investigates the relationship between politics and the organization by suggesting that when there is disagreement on a goal or on the preferred means for pursuing that goal, then organizational decision making will be open to the effects of political processes. Organizational decision making is thought of as a process for gaining or exercising power by providing opportunities for people and groups to make their interests known and to develop power by bargaining, coercing, or influencing others.

Although organizational politics are often considered to have a disruptive or even destructive impact on organizational efficiency and are thought to reflect a dysfunctional variable for long-term organizational success, political activities in

organizations do not imply chaos arising from a free for all in which everyone pursues his or her own individual interests egoistically, but do reflect a type of social order in terms of accepting the inevitability of organizational politics (Neuberger, 1995a). A political frame of reference does not support a mechanistic, bureaucratic process of imposing social order by creating formal occasions for decision processes, but instead implies a pluralistic, negotiated way of reaching decisions, mainly through informal competitive occasions for airing conflict and realigning power.

By emphasizing the fact that there are anonymous, dispersed, and independent centers of influence, a politicized management of organizational activities focuses on balancing and coordinating the interests of organizational members and recognizes that conflict and power plays can have both positive and negative effects. It encourages a negotiated, heterogeneous, and dynamic order of organizational functioning that both creates and supports organizational innovation and creativity in a quicker and more lasting manner than does the rigid formalized arrangement of organizational activities.

The management of human resources is no longer described as a formal, homogeneous system for setting objectives, coordinating resources, and realigning roles and responsibilities to fit tasks, but as an arena to air conflict and realign the power to influence others. Effecting stability through instability (Neuberger, 1995a), political processes in managing human resources make an indispensable contribution to long-term organizational success through stabilization, integration, and coordination of organizational activities in today's complex and dynamic economies.

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