

## Organizations as Politics

Wednesday February 20, 2013

### Announcements

- If you still haven't picked up your mid-term, please make an appointment
- If you had a note about a picture, please email me something that lets me see your face

## Politics

Dirty word or essential part  
of organizational life?

## Forms of “rule”

- Autocracy
- Bureaucracy
- Technocracy
- Codetermination
- Representative democracy
- Direct democracy

## Politics within the Organization

- Occurs on an ongoing basis
  - Often in a fairly invisible way
- Clearest in the conflicts and power plays

## How to Understand Organizational Politics

- Interests
  - Task
  - Career
  - Extramural
- Conflict
  
- Power

## Why look at organizations politically?

- Are loose networks of people
  - Stakeholders have divergent interests
- Are coalitions of coalitions
- Have multiple goals

## How do coalitions form?

- Low power actors seeking the support of others
- Higher power actors looking to consolidate
- Both formally and informally

## Conflict

- Between workers and managers
  - Resources
  - Reviews
- Between units at the same level
  - Production v. marketing
  - Accountants v. purchasers

## How to resolve conflict?

- |                    |                        |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| • Autocratically   | • “We will...”         |
| • Bureaucratically | • “We’re supposed ...” |
| • Technocratically | • “It’s best to...”    |
| • Democratically   | • “How shall we?”      |

## Sources of Power

1. Formal authority
2. Control of scarce resources
3. Use of organizational structure, rules, and regulations
4. Control of decision processes
5. Control of knowledge and information
6. Control of boundaries
7. Ability to cope with uncertainty
8. Control of technology
9. Interpersonal alliances, networks, and control of "informal organization"
10. Control of counterorganizations
11. Symbolism and the management of meaning
12. Gender and the management of gender relations
13. Structural factors that define the stage of action
14. The power one already has

## Formal Authority

- Legitimate power
- Historically underpinned by
  - Charisma
  - Tradition
  - Rule of law
- Most obvious type is typically bureaucratic and comes with the position

## Control of Scarce Resources

- Keys are scarcity and dependence
- Not just money!
- What does it mean to control the tech or information resources in an organization?

## Use of Organizational Structure, Rules, Regulations, and Procedures

- Products and reflections of a struggle for political control
  - Justified in technical terms
  - Motivated by political considerations
- “Working to rule”
- Rules exist to:
  - Protect employees, customers, or the public at large (formal reason)
  - Protect their creators (more common real reason)

## Control of Decision Processes

- Premises
- Processes
- Issues and Objectives

## Control of Knowledge and Information

- Influence the definition of organizational situations
- Create patterns of dependency
- Often linked to organizational structure
- Can be strongly influenced by technologies
- Can include notions of an “expert”



## Control of Boundaries

- Boundaries are the interface between different elements of an organization
- Can be used to integrate or to isolate
- Involve competing strategies for control and counter-control

## Ability to Cope with Uncertainty

- Unpredictable situations in one part of an organization have consequences for other parts
- Two kinds:
  - Environmental
  - Operational
- Impact of uncertainty shows us the power relations

## Control of Technology

- More than just *information* technology
- Level of sequencing v. parallel processes has huge impacts on power relations
- Most visible during times of organizational change
- Also exists subtly in everyday actions

## Interpersonal Alliances, Networks, and Control of “Informal Organization”

- Informal networks provide substantial power
- Coalition building based on
  - Chance encounters
  - Informal lunches and receptions
  - Connections in personal life
- Can also include “power behind the throne”

## Control of Counterorganizations

- Forces that oppose the dominant bloc
- A way of influencing organizations when not in the power structure
  - Internal
  - External
- Can be played at a higher level by large conglomerates

## Symbolism and the Management of Meaning

- Ability to persuade others to enact realities that further one's own interests
- Often used by democratic and charismatic leaders
- Three strategies
  - Imagery
  - Theater
  - Gamesmanship

## Gender

- Biases and the “glass ceiling”
- Found in the language, rituals, myths, stories, and symbols of the organization
- Can result in conscious “gender management”
- In a state of flux

## The Stage of Action

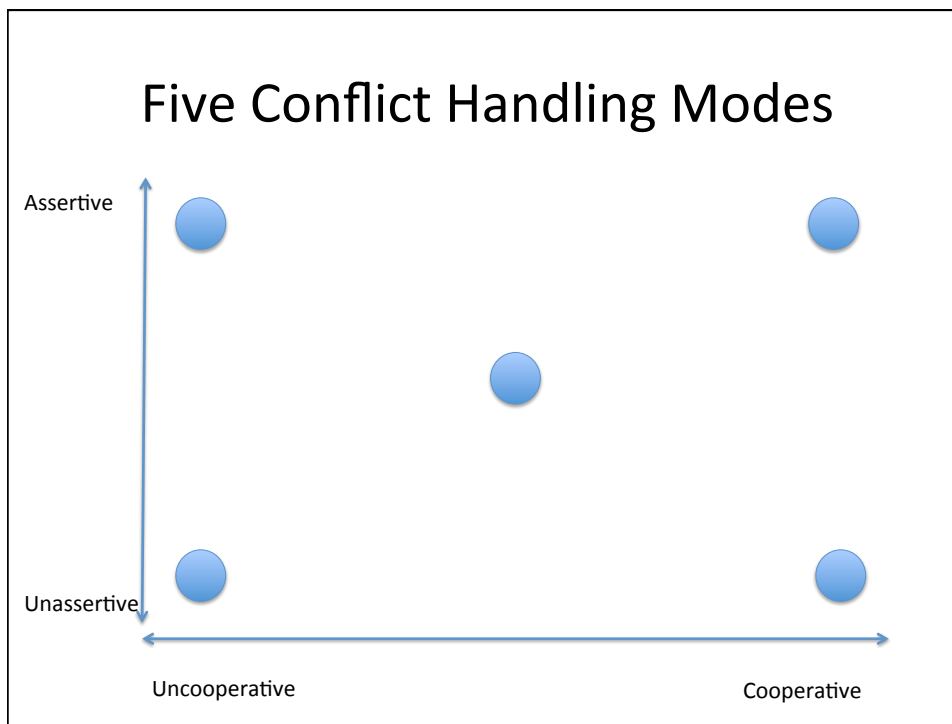
- Organizations must be understood from a historical perspective
- People are agents or carriers of power relations embedded in the wider structure of society

## The Power One Already Has

- Power begets power
  - Quid pro quo
  - Empowerment from having power
- Emphasizes the importance of developing proactive mind-sets

## But... power can be diffuse and ambiguous in practice

- Pluralist
- Unitary
- Radical



## Strengths

- Provides a practical and systematic means of understanding the relationship between politics and organization
- Emphasizes the key role of power in determining outcomes
- Explodes the myth of organizational rationality
- Helps us find a way of overcoming the limitations of the idea that organizations are functionally integrated systems
- Politicizes our understanding of human behavior
- Encourages us to recognize the sociopolitical implications of types of orgs and roles within them

## Limitations

- Increased politicization of organizations (sometimes accidentally)
- Can be reduced to a tool to advance one's own interests
- Pluralism requires us to presume there really are a plurality of interests and power holders

## Upcoming

- Friday discussion: Critique of Progress Reports; more detail on research papers
- No class Monday
  - Work on your projects
  - Review your writings so far.
  - Go back and collect any data you need to fill out parts that you aren't sure about.
  - Be sure to look for data that conflict with your hypotheses/early ideas as much as you look for data that confirm them.
- The Dark Side of Orgs next Wednesday