



POWER IN ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to trace the sources of power in organizations. Common sense suggests that these are important to the operations of any organization and that the lives and behaviour of organizational members are vitally affected by their relative power positions.

The nature of the power system used in the organization has important consequences for the manner in which individuals attach themselves to the organization and for the more general issue of organizational effectiveness. If inappropriate power forms are used, the organization is likely to be less effective than it might otherwise be. For example, in an educational institution, if the power form is not knowledge-basis than the quality of education provided suffers. Similarly, in technical organizations the power form has to be technology based, otherwise the quality of output would suffer.

The interest in organizational power has been inspired by dissatisfaction with conventional approaches. The study of power in organizations can present problems, as it is a rather slippery concept, difficult to pin down and define. Power is a major concern of organizational theorists and it inevitably gets mixed up with the forms of power that occur in wider society. Within organizations politics is often regarded with great distaste as the main barrier to getting on with the job.

The paper addresses some of the most important issues relating to power in organizations and concludes that power is a reciprocal relational phenomenon between the parties involved and that each party is dependent on other. The power relationships can be rigidly specified in advance or can develop as the relationship itself develops. This brings to light the significance of organizational structure and the close connection between structure and processes, since it is the structure that sets the original limits on the relationship. Moreover, within the dynamic settings of the organizations, the power relationships tend to

play a pivotal role in testing the professional strength of the organizational fabric.

Key words : *Power, Organization, Management, decision making.*

Power in Organizations

Organizations and power are synonymous in many ways. After all, organizations are powerful tools of the powerful when we think of organizational outcomes. They are also power systems in terms of the ways in which people conform to organizational rules. They are political systems in terms of the allocation of resources. Power is distributed between the privileged and the under privileged. In Mintzberg's terms, one can think of power "in and around" organizations. In many ways, power is a puzzling phenomenon. On the one hand, power is stable and self-perpetuating, since those in powers have the resources to maintain themselves in power. On the other hand, entrenched power can be overthrown with startling quickness as history reflects. It has been rightly observed sometimes, that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. What does then power mean-or refer to?

Concept of power

Power is interesting - power play focuses attention on the differences between individuals and groups, the variety of goals and interests. Power is positive - though politicking in organizations may be resented, power is also about the creative actions of people and the possibilities for organizational change. The Machiavellian image means that power is an academic concept of great interest to management audiences. Power is realistic-it about how organizations really operate. Decision-making is never purely rational or consensual - power is often the underlying reality.

There are a number of terms similar to power; authority, control and influence, which are often used interchangeably in conversation. Weber sets out the framework for power and here it represents the potential to act in certain ways. It is viewed here as a collective phenomenon and even where an individual exercises power, its true basis often lies in some group or collectivity.

One of the most influential models of power is Lukes (1974), which is a framework within which other approaches can be located. It rests on an account of actual power behaviour. A has the power over B to the extent

that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. This raised the issue of resistance on the part of B because his wishes are being overridden and hence of conflict between A and B.

Lukes explained the need to have a fully radical view of power and this should include power that is exercised by preventing people from forming conscious preferences or choices. For example, to the way in which the social horizons of some people are narrowed and constrained by education and upbringing.

Organizational Power

There is a need to understand the different terms related to power and to focus on the types of power that are found in organizations. These appear to fall within a continuum and represent the extent of conflict between the interests of the 'in-power' group and the 'under-power' group. The concept of authority overlaps that of power and the two terms can be ambiguously related. Weber regarded authority in the sense of power, accepted as legitimate by the under-group, as being of vital importance for maintaining social order and within organizations, authority still remains the basis of formal control.

One can also look at the levels of power in organizations; processual, institutional and organizational. Processual focuses on the micro politics of organizational life and stresses power as negotiation and bargaining. The institutional perspective sees managerial power resting on external social and economic structures, so that power is explained as being mandated to the organization. The organizational level represents a kind of third way between the processual strategic level and the institutional structural level and the three levels of analysis suggest how organizational hierarchies transmit power between institutional interests and the rules and resources governing action.

In reality, POWER refers to a capacity that A has to influence the behavior of B, so that B does something he or she would not otherwise do.

This definition implies:

- (1) a potent that need not be actualized to be effective,
- (2) a dependence relationship, and
- (3) that B has some discretion over his or her own behavior.

Let's look at each of these points more closely. Power may exist but not be used. It is, therefore, a capacity or potential. One can have power

but not impose it. Probably the most important aspect of power is that it is a function of dependence. The greater B's dependence on A, the greater is A's power in the relationship. Dependence, in turn, is based on alternatives that perceives and the importance that B places on the alternatives that A controls. A person can have power over you only if he or she controls something you desire. If you want a university degree, have to pass a certain course to get that degree, and your current instructor is the only faculty member in the university who teaches that course, he or she has power over you. Your alternatives are definitely limited, and you place a high degree of importance on obtaining a passing grade.

Similarly, if you're attending university on funds provided entirely by your parents, you probably recognize the power they hold over you. You're dependent on them for financial support. But once you're out of school, have a job, and are making a solid income, your parents' power is reduced significantly. Who among us, though, has not known or heard of the rich relative who is able to control a large number of family members merely through the implicit or explicit threat of writing them out of the will?

For A to get B to do something he or she otherwise would not do, means B must have the discretion to make choices. At the extreme, if B's job behavior is so programmed that he is allowed no room to make choices, he obviously is constrained in his ability to do something other than what he is doing.

For instance, job descriptions, group norms, organizational rules and regulations, as well as community laws and standards constrain people's choices. As a nurse, you may be dependent on your supervisor for continued employment. But, in spite of this dependence, you're unlikely to comply with a request to perform heart surgery on a patient or steal several thousand dollars from petty cash. Your job description and laws against stealing constrain your ability to make those choices.

Power is the ability to exert influence. When a person is able to change the behaviour or attitudes of other individuals, it is said that he has power. Thus, a manager's power is his ability to cause subordinates to do what he wishes them to do.

It may be weighed in terms of the manager's ability to

- (i) Give rewards,
- (ii) Promise rewards,

- (iii) Withdraw current rewards,
- (iv) Threaten to withdraw current rewards,
- (v) Punish, and
- (vi) Threaten punishment.

Types of Power

John French and Bertram Raven have identified the following sources of power at all levels of the organization.

1. Coercive power:

It is the ability of the manager to punish the subordinate for not obeying orders. The coercive power base is defined by French and Raven as being dependent on fear. One reacts to this power out of fear of the negative results that might occur if one failed to comply. It rests on the application, or the threat of application, of physical sanctions such as the infliction of pain, the generation of frustration through restriction of movement, or the controlling by force of basic physiological or safety needs.

2. Reward power

It is the ability of the manager to reward the subordinate for obeying orders. E.g. Defense authorities, School Principal, Teacher (marks to be granted in Viva voice) etc. The opposite of coercive power is reward power. People comply with the wishes or directives of another because doing so produces positive benefits; therefore, one who can distribute rewards that others view as valuable will have power over them.

These rewards can be anything that another person values. In an organizational context, we think of money, favorable performance appraisals, promotions, interesting work assignments, friendly colleagues, important information, and preferred work shifts or sales territories.

Coercive and reward power are actually counterparts. If you can remove something of positive value from another or inflict something of negative value on him or her, you have coercive power over that person. If you can give someone something of positive value or remove something of negative value, you have reward power over that person. As with coercive power, you don't need to be a manager to be able to exert influence through rewards. Rewards such as friendliness, acceptance, and praise are available to everyone in an organization. To the degree that an individual seeks such rewards, your ability to give or withhold them gives you power over that individual.

3. Legitimate power

Legitimate power corresponds to the term 'authority'. It exists when a subordinate acknowledges that the manager is lawfully entitled to exercise authority. It normally arises from position and derives from our cultural system of rights, obligations, and duties. E.g. Traffic Officer can stop any one at signal and cut challan, Judge can give his judgment by hearing the problem.

In formal groups and organizations, probably the most frequent access to one or more of the power bases is one's structural position. This is called legitimate power. It represents the power a person receives as a result of his or her position in the formal hierarchy of an organization. Positions of authority include coercive and reward powers.

Legitimate power, however, is broader than the powers to coerce and reward. Specifically, it includes acceptance by members of an organization of the authority of a position. When school principals, bank presidents, or army captains speak (assuming that their directives are viewed to be within the authority of their positions), teachers, tellers, and first lieutenants listen and usually comply.

4. Expert power

This power comes from the expertness of a person or group. This is the power of knowledge. Expert power is influence wielded as a result of expertise, special skill, or knowledge. Expertise has become one of the most powerful sources of influence as the world has become more technologically oriented. As jobs become more specialized, we become increasingly dependent on "experts" to achieve goals. So, just as physicians have expertise and hence expert power-most of us follow the advice our doctor gives us - so too do computer specialists, tax accountants, solar engineers, industrial psychologists, and other specialists.

5. Referent power

Comes because public believes in them and their ideas. The last category of influence that French and Raven identified was referent power. Its base is identification with a person who has desirable resources or personal traits. If I admire and identify with you, you can exercise power over me because I want to please you. Referent power develops out of admiration of another person and a desire to be like him or her. In a sense, then, it is a lot like charisma. If you admire someone to the point of modeling your

behavior and attitudes after him or her, that person possesses referent power over you. Referent power explains why celebrities are paid millions of dollars to endorse products in commercials. Marketing research shows that Regional Guru, Astrologers, Movie stars have the power to influence your choice.

6. Professional power

Of late the emerging power is from professional excellence. Employed professionals have a degree of expert power and are differentiated from other organizational members. They are quite likely to pursue their interests via their profession rather than the organization.

Decision-making and Management

Management is not the harmonious group it is often made out to be. Persistent conflicts exist within management which is manifested in a variety of ways: in the manipulation of information, in hostility and lack of trust in inter-group relations and in unwillingness to co-operate with colleagues. If we regard organizational decision-making as a political process, various elements of this model can be defined.

Organization as a bargaining area - the image here is that of power play as a game and the organization as a site where the ritual is played out. Interest groups and stakeholders - the familiar organizational model sees overall goals being broken down into sub - goals and allocated to specific units via the division of labour.

Differentiated value systems-managerial differentiation is necessary for organizational performance but the conflict it gives rise, creates a motive force for power play. A dynamic view of decision-making shows the fact that decision-making is open-ended and proconsul in nature. Decisions are not simply 'made' or 'taken' but rather they emerge from interaction.

Conclusion

An attempt to explain power in more universal terms involves the twin concepts of uncertainty and dependency. Uncertainty for an organization stems from its systems of operations and reducing this uncertainty is vital for management and groups of employees who 'cope' with uncertainty gain power and influence.

The study of negotiation and power has some very positive things to recommend - the stress on 'real' organizational activity is refreshing when

compared with the overly formal and prescriptive approaches of the managerial theorists, while the ability to manipulate power is vital for organizational success as well as management development. The main weakness of the power in organizations lies in the bargaining emphasis. To really understand power, the groups that are excluded and the interests that never have the opportunity to form have to be taken into account. Weber's view of power contained two paradoxes - power as a potential for action rather than action itself and the idea that power is strongest where it does not have to be wielded or where the threat of power is the central resource. Reviewing different approaches to power reveals some strong lines of convergence. A common theme is the distinction between power generated in action and power devolved from wider structures. The interest in organizational power tends to limit options and though different types of power arising from different resources and bases co-exist in organizations, the competing views of wider social power do not intervene quite so much in this debate. Instead the focus is on interaction within managerial bodies and managers' power to direct and change organizations. The 'power for' perspective produced a strategic and proconsul emphasis on how managers use the power resources at their disposal and how they actively construct the interests and groups that constitute power relationships.

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