
Lies, damned lies and organisational politics

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Keywords

Organizational politics, Politics, Behaviour, Influence

Abstract

Compares the concepts of lies and organisational politics in order to unpick the similarities and differences between the two terms. Similarities involve the advantages of deception and organisational politics, which maintain relationships within the organisation in the short term through the use of measures such as diplomacy and tact. The disadvantages are that trust and co-operation are adversely affected when the deception is discovered. The difference between the concepts is that, whilst deception is a vital ingredient in organisational politics, organisational politics is a wider concept and involves a greater variety of behaviours. A politically charged organisation faces reduced job satisfaction, increased anxiety and stress, increased turnover and reduced performance. An organisation suffering from a politically charged climate requires managers who need socialised power and are prepared to lead with integrity.

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The inevitability of organisational politics

Organisational politics, “those actions not officially approved by an organisation taken to influence others to meet one’s personal goals” (Greenberg and Baron, 1997), would appear to be inevitable in organisational life. Some individuals and groups will naturally take advantage of circumstances at work, which will benefit them personally. Many organisations do not have a highly political culture due to the nature of the work, the management style and availability of resources. Some individuals tend to be more political than others due to personality characteristics such as Machiavellianism and locus of control (the belief that you can control your environment), but more important is the expectation of success. If the organisation is not suited to political activities being successful in influencing others to attain one’s personal goals, then it is pointless to engage in them. Poon (2003) found that employees will perceive their work environment to be politically charged if they believe that:

- they lack information about job objectives, job responsibilities, and outcomes of job performance;
- resources are limited in their workplace (e.g. pay rises and promotion opportunities); and
- trust levels are low among organisational members (organisational members are suspicious of the motives, intentions and prospective actions of other members).

Political tactics

Political behaviour in organisations is mostly covert and subject to differences in perception. One person’s view on attaching blame for a failed project may be that it is not blame as such, but merely assigning responsibility fairly. Another person may see their friendliness and helpfulness to their boss as “developing a working relationship”, whilst others view it less charitably as excessive behaviour. Tactics used to gain influence and attain one’s objectives in organisations include:

- Controlling access to information.
- Cultivating a favourable impression.
- Developing a base of support.
- Blaming and attacking others.



- Aligning oneself with more powerful others.
- Playing political games.

These activities take place all the time in many organisations and organisations continue to be successful and profitable. Within the covert nature of organisational politics, it may be that deception and lies are important factors in gaining influence and power. We next examine the nature of lies in order to determine whether there is a link between lies and organisational politics, and if there is, does it matter?

The nature of lies

Lying involves behaviour that intentionally misleads another person and is a device for dealing with social situations in a manner the actors defines as efficacious. Lies are an essential part of social life and in fact maintain social bonds. If a person were to be totally honest at all times, they would quickly be rendered an isolate due to their unwise, tedious and rude statements. Lies are often altruistic, compassionate and polite, whereby others are saved from assaults upon their sense of self. Lies also provide support for the status quo and are therefore an inevitable part of everyday life.

Meltzer (2003) lists five types of lies which are intended to advantage the liar and/or disadvantage others:

- (1) *Self enhancement fabrications.* These include boasting about attributes or achievements to an insincere degree.
- (2) *Ingratiation of those with more power.* Activities include false smiles, insincere compliments and the deliberate loss of contests.
- (3) *Fraudulent achievement.* This involves plagiarism, counterfeiting and using faked data.
- (4) *The noble lie.* In Plato's Republic, he asserts that God composes leaders of gold, their auxiliaries of silver, and craftsmen of brass and iron. This is a lie told to support class distinction, or other hierarchical social arrangements.
- (5) *Permissible exploitive lies.* These involve distortion, concealment or manufacture of information-disinformation to mislead enemies and may be deemed excusable and acceptable.

The use of lies and deception in organisational politics

The above list indicates that there do appear to be links between lies and politics. The list of political tactics will now be linked to the instances where lying may play a part:

- *Controlling access to information.* This political tactic may well involve secrecy, which is a deception of omission rather than commission. It lends itself to manipulation of others of the "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" variety, in the giving of information in return for favours. It also gives power to the information holder as it confers on them the choice of when and how to use the information they hold. Permanently withholding information about current and future events from certain colleagues can cause them to be marginalised in the organisation which may result in them feeling demotivated and may increase their intention to leave. Colleagues worth treating in this way include those that the politician considers a nuisance and more competent colleagues who pose a career threat to the politician;
- *Cultivating a favourable impression.* Self-enhancement fabrications and fraudulent achievement can be used here. Impression management entails the manipulation of social situations to promote the achievement of certain goals of the actor. Deceptions here may be small – dressing smartly, adherence to group norms, associating oneself with successful ventures and disassociating oneself from unsuccessful projects or colleagues. Deceptions could also be greater in such situations as the attack on others, a more favourable impression is created if the politician uses other people to "fire the bullets" so that they are not associated with any unpleasantness. Some politicians spend their lives in organisations planning and getting others to carry out these attacks in order to reduce the credibility of the opposition;
- *Developing a base of support.* This involves networking and coalition building, any enhancement of relationships with others that will result in increased support for the politician. A more formal alliance involves agreeing actions with key people and creating a coalition strong enough to

enforce its will. A team of people with strong personal friendships determined on gaining power in an organisation can be a formidable force. They can use social pressure and make it look fun to be included in their activities; they can undermine the expertise of others; undermine opponents through malicious gossip tactics; and use subversives to plant ideas with other managers. Over time, they can build a power base through their support of one another and non-co-operation with colleagues outside of their group;

- *Blaming and attacking others.* This involves ensuring that someone else is blamed and avoiding personal blame. Scapegoats can include a predecessor, a colleague who was close to the action who is of no use to the politician or a more competent colleague who the politician feels in competition with. The effective politician will pick their timing carefully when discrediting others to attain maximum bad press for the culprit. Permissible exploitive lies come under this heading, as politicians often see their own colleagues as the enemy and politically charged organisations are often like battlefields. Huczynski and Buckanan (2001) also recommend “keeping a dirt file” on colleagues, “do it to them before they do it to you”, undermine opponents through whispers in the corridors, “trash the deal in the details – nit-picking can be an effective blocking tactic”, and playing one person or group off against another (p. 817). There has also been publicity recently on the increasing use of bullying and harassment in organisations (Higginbottom, 2003). Bullying is the intent to frighten an individual or group, whilst harassment involves any behaviour which is unwanted by the recipient. Both these methods of gaining power involve coercion, which although is often seen as an unwise tactic to increase power, it does appear to be used successfully to cause stress and increase the likelihood of resignation of the politician’s opponents within the organisation;
- *Aligning oneself with more powerful others.* Plato’s noble lie comes under this section, attempting to be seen close to the leaders of gold and to promote oneself to be an auxiliary of silver is the aim here.

Rising from the ranks to be part of the upper class within the organisation takes a lot of hard work and determination.

Doing favours for the boss, insincere compliments and smiles, working late if needed, becoming indispensable to the boss by always being there ready to assist, are ways of aligning oneself with more powerful others. Giving the boss gossip and information about events in the politician’s own department as well as in other departments will make the politician a very useful person to have around. Representing the boss on a variety of occasions will cause others to start approaching the politician for information and advice instead of their boss. The politician becomes associated with the role of their boss if they are able to speak as his or her representative. Also, all the tactics of impression management will encourage senior management and other managers on a level with the politician’s own boss to view the politician as a highly capable person. The support and affiliation of those in power is very valuable in achieving personal aims; and

- *Playing political games.* Mintzberg (1983) has suggested that political behaviour is a collection of games. Therefore there are overlaps between Mintzberg’s games and the tactics already discussed. He identified four main categories of games:
 - (1) *Authority games.* “Insurgency games” are played to resist authority, whilst “counterinsurgency games” are played to counter such resistance. Insurgency games include such activities as not doing as you are asked, a group of people all phoning in sick on the same day, and sabotaging the workplace. Counterinsurgency games usually involve management attempting to increase control over their subordinates.
 - (2) *Power base games.* These games are played to enhance the degree and breadth of one’s organisational power. The “sponsorship game” involves attaching oneself to a rising or established star. The “alliance game” is played with peers and involves an agreement to support each other. “Empire building” involves an attempt to increase power through taking on more responsibility for organisational decisions.

- (3) *Rivalry games*. These are designed to weaken the opposition and may involve such tactics as ignoring advice from a specialist in order to render him less powerful. “Rival camps game” involves groups or individuals with different points of view attempting to reduce one another’s power. If one department comes into conflict with another, for example, they both may try to cultivate the favour of allies who can support them, possibly reducing organisational effectiveness in the long run.
- (4) *Change games*. These are games designed to create organisational change. In the “whistle-blowing game” an organisational member reports some wrongdoing to a higher authority in the hope of righting the wrong and bringing about change. In the “Young Turks game”, a group of rebel workers seek to overthrow the existing leadership of an organisation – an extreme form of insurgency.
- *Decreased job satisfaction*. If competent people feel that their performance at work is based on the ability to be political rather than produce good work, they will feel less satisfied and committed in their work. They will also reduce the amount of organisational citizenship behaviours they might otherwise have played a part in, such as helping new recruits and voluntarily staying late or taking on the work of others in crisis situations;
 - *Increased anxiety and stress*. Psychological stress arises when people face situations that they appraise as taxing or exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being. A politically-charged workplace is one of these situations. When a workplace is politically-charged, employees cannot be certain that their efforts will be rewarded or confident that they will not be put at risk by the actions of others. This unpredictable, risky and threatening workplace context increases the level of job stress experienced;
 - *Increased turnover*. In situations where politicians successfully gain access to scarce resources such as pay rises, promotions, budgets and project responsibilities over more competent people, the good people will leave the organisation. They will seek an environment in which their hard work and talents are recognised, so that they can work with integrity and openness; and
 - *Reduced performance*. Those people experiencing negative consequences of political behaviour over a sustained period of time may experience burnout. Also, the organisation itself may experience reduced performance from political behaviour. Politicking takes up a considerable amount of time, it restricts information sharing between colleagues and creates communication barriers. Political behaviour has the potential to disrupt organisational efficiency and effectiveness.

Games, like other political tactics, can sometimes involve the use of lies and deception.

Disadvantages of lying and organisational politics

Although lying, like organisational politics, can bring advantages and is necessary in many circumstances, it can have negative effects. Discovered lies are likely to adversely affect trust and co-operation, especially when lies relate to important matters. The resulting resentment, suspicion, disappointment and sense of betrayal may subvert previously cohesive relationships. Liars may suffer consequences of their deceit through feeling a fraud and experience misgivings about their personal worth; they may also be ostracised if discovered.

People who are very successful at organisational politics will not allow themselves to be discovered to be overtly telling lies. The adverse effects of successful political behaviour will largely be on others. Those not able to play political games or those who refuse to use political tactics will largely be the people who feel the negative effects of political behaviour. These include:

Conclusion

Although telling lies and political tactics have similarities, they are not the same thing. Lies, deception and secrecy play a part in many political tactics, but organisational politics is a wider concept and involves more behaviours than deception alone. They both have good

effects and can be beneficial to an organisation. It would be hurtful and even destructive to continually tell the truth to everyone, people would be unable to work together and could not be trusted to deal with customers. Politics benefits an organisation in that people arrive smartly dressed to deal with customers and are professional in their approach to their work. Political people are often friendly and helpful, cheerful and confident and can often influence people to act on their behalf without the influencee realising it, as they are happy to do so and feel that the action is in their own interests.

However, the negative effects of intense political activity can result in most of the better people leaving and reducing the performance and job satisfaction of those who feel unable to find alternative employment. Not all organisations suffering from political behaviour will suffer in terms of profitability, as many are in the public sector. Often, the tax payer is funding a devastating amount of political game playing without realising it. Politicians who are successful have no motivation to stop their activities. According to McClelland and Burnham (1995), managers are needed who want socialised power rather than personalised power. Self-seeking managers need personalised power, and they:

- Exercise power impulsively.
- Are not good institution builders.
- Seek to dominate those around them.
- Seek advancement at the expense of others.
- Want their subordinates to be loyal to them, not to the organisation.

Managers who want socialised power:

- Believe in the importance of centralised authority.
- Have a keen sense of justice, rewarding hard work.
- Enjoy the discipline of work and getting things done in an orderly way.
- Feel responsible for developing the organisations to which they belong.
- Seek to use their power for the common good, on behalf of the organisation as a whole.
- Exercise their power to create a good working climate for those around them.
- Help others to understand and perform their tasks, and commit them towards organisational goals.

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