Theme of the Book

Whilst organisation politics may be controversial this book offers a theoretical and practical guide to the politics of Organizational change and innovation.

The book looks at how far reaching politics in organisations is and how political behaviour manifests itself. Using case studies (many humorous examples included) it considers what responses may be used and goes on to look at this from both the perspective of men and women and the differences in the genders. Alternatives to the stereotypical political thug are then explored with ‘positive’ politicians being considered before concluding the differences between the two are often blurred.

The book offers lots of practical advice in the use of political strategies and tactics through the use of many checklists and simple advice and offers a view on why you need and how to develop your political expertise.
Key Learning Points

- Organizational politics is sometimes defined as power in action – power being a latent capability, the political tactics being how we exercise that.

- Research evidence shows that most managers will and do play politics

- Organizational politics is still a taboo subject for many people. However, opening up the subject provides a framework, it generates awareness – not only personal awareness, but also awareness of the behaviour of other people round about you.

- A political decision making framework has four criteria. Faced with a potential political situation, you need to consider:
  - Your own personal values, principles and beliefs.
  - Will it work? Will this take me to the end result that I want to achieve?
  - If I do this and it doesn’t work, what is my next option?

- What will this do to my reputation?

- There are four main sets of triggers that encourage and intensify political behaviour.

1. Personal characteristics

2. Structural characteristics

3. Organizational change

4. Decision characteristics

- Whilst to be called Machiavellian may be an insult, there is value in studying his works by comparing two styles of Machiavellian behaviour – Machiavellian thuggery and Machiavellian pragmatism.
- Machiavellian thuggery can gain its user a reputation as a schemer. Machiavellian pragmatism advocates a more flexible approach.

- The two dimensional view of Organizational politics, with Machiavellian thuggery on one side and a ‘win win’, collaborative approach on the other is limiting. A third option is the political entrepreneur, who is able to take account of the dangers of throwing aside the old way of doing things but balances it with recognition of the pressures that work intensification imposes.

- Should you wish to change something in an organisation, if you are not prepared to play the politics game you will fail sooner or later, and probably sooner.
Where Necessity Demands

Power and politics exist in all organisations with the popular view being a negative one.

“It is not possible to have a single definition but the terms below sum up the definition:

“Power – the ability to get other people to do what you want them to do
Politics – power in action, using a range of techniques and tactics”

People who are actively wanting to influence change in an organisation, irrespective of their position or job title, have become known as change agents.

The popular view that the source of organization politics is a result of self interest and personal ambition is challenged, with the authors’ research demonstrating that it can be the result of many individual and organizational factors and not just the self interest of an individual. Traditionally the playing of games and dirty tricks are seen as the behaviours associated with politics, instead they found the behaviours used to be wide ranging and varied. Lastly the view of the damaging, negative consequences of politics was shown to be a narrow, with the results of politics being both ‘functional’ and ‘dysfunctional’.

The Terminology Game

Controlling conversations, managing impressions and influencing tactics, involve the exercising of power and may be called political behaviours. The authors’ research suggests that there are a wide range of political behaviours used in organizations but they can be summarised as:
The spectrum of political behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversation controls</th>
<th>Routine</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impression management controls</td>
<td>Unexceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence tactics</td>
<td>Visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty tricks</td>
<td>Integrated with conventional methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal acts</td>
<td>Relatively harmless</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Whilst it is easy to identify behaviours at either end of the spectrum, there is a lot of political behaviour that happens in the middle area.

**Sit in Judgement**

Faced with a series of options in how to deal with a particular political situation four criteria (not listed in order of importance) can be considered to help decide the most appropriate course of action.

1. Probability of success – will what you plan to do work? Thinking about the context of the problem and rating the chances as high, medium or low.
2. Impact on reputation – how will what you plan to do affect your image? Will there be a positive or negative impact or is it put at risk.

3. How does it sit with your principles, values and beliefs.

4. If your first choice fails what is the outcome? Can you do something else or if you fail will it leave you with few alternatives, perhaps the only one being to leave the organization?

When applied to practical examples, whilst useful, the application of these simple principles is not enough to help us to make a ‘correct’ decision. We need something more.

“Does effective political action then require us to set aside ethical principles?”

Situational ethics is demanded, whereby we need to think about the situation of the issue and use both our rules and principles, along with our judgement including ‘contexts, warrants, accounts and reputations’. The figure below illustrates the ‘map of the terrain in which reasonable judgements concerning the use of political tactics can be explored’.

The context considers the Organizational structures in which the decision is being made; the person effecting change having to operate within them. The individual trying to makes changes has to work within the existing structures whilst seeking to change them. The attributes and resources of the person seeking to make the changes are also part of the context – both what the person is attempting to change (the agenda) and their reputation within the organisation. Finally, other stakeholders are also an element of the context.

Whether the action to be taken is warranted involves both the formal sanctions for change that are available and also the individual’s personal conviction.

The change agent may have to engage in political tactics (the turf game) leading to outcomes that may be either positive or negative.
Being able to justify your actions may be necessary and being good at accounting for ones actions may help enhance your reputation.

Finally maintaining your reputation is necessary to allow you to enter further change initiatives.

Contexts, warrants, accounts and reputations
Men Behaving Badly

It is necessary to be involved in the power game even if one does not want to be.

If it is necessary then what is required of someone to do it well? Whilst to be called Machiavellian may be an insult, there are many answers in studying his works by comparing two styles of Machiavellian behaviour – Machiavellian thuggery and Machiavellian pragmatism.

Machiavellian thuggery is concerned with self interest and power for oneself and leads to behaviours that are considered deceitful and coercive and not acceptable to acceptable codes of conduct. Machiavellian pragmatism is concerned with behaviours that may be politicking and power plays and thus, whilst uncomfortable and unacknowledged, they are realistic.

Machiavellian thuggery can gain its user a reputation as a schemer.

“Recognising and participating fully in the power plays are central to managerial success…”

Women Behaving Badly

There are some differences between how men and women play the politics game. Women are as likely to be exposed to Organizational politics, but do they respond differently? It seems that they are as likely to use Organizational politics but in different ways.
After looking at a range of studies that have been carried out on women in business the book concludes that, for women, there are two considerations surrounding Organizational politics.

1. Women in management roles need to become more politically skilled in order to both deal with the political skills exhibited by men and in some cases other women.

2. Women can develop a range of political skills similar in nature to those of men, but can also add to this a range of so-called ‘soft’ feminine attributes.

**Entrepreneurial Heroes**

Entrepreneurial heroes challenge norms and look into the unknown to challenge and change the way things are done. This may be at an extreme level with heroic figures (e.g. Bill Gates, Anita Roddick etc) or it may be by an entrepreneurial middle manager in an organisation. By looking at some lessons that the creative political entrepreneur can take from the traditional view of Organizational politics we can create the ‘entrepreneurial agenda’.

1. Making up the power gap
   The gap is between the authority and resources that lie with formal positions and the power needed to get support and co-operation from interested parties, leading to frustrations for the entrepreneurial hero. An awareness of the size of the gap allows for deciding the extent to which politics will be required.

2. Overcoming powerlessness

“The entrepreneurial agenda is about providing assistance (in mobilizing power to bring about innovation and change) focusing on analyses of strategic change that intertwine power, politics and innovation.”
The power gap can make people feel powerless to create change. Getting over the sense of powerlessness may mean using innovative ways to raise awareness of Organizational issues.

3. Working the bureaucracy
The entrepreneurial hero needs to be able to work the interdependent groups that exist and ensure co-operation between them. Good communication, but also the use of more subtle and forceful methods, may be required.

4. Playing positive politics
Negative politics (bad) concerned with personal interest can be compared to positive politics (good) concerned with Organizational interests. The challenge is diagnosing different situations and using appropriate politics.

5. Framebreaker/framemaker
Entrepreneurial heroes justify the use of politics claiming it helps achieve progress breaking down traditional frames of reference.

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

What does playing the political game do to the players? Is there a danger that in winning the game we lose sight of our values, beliefs and principles?

It seems that there are some aspects of Organizational conditions that encourage the use of Machiavellian behaviours that could be seen as amoral.

People showing high Machiavellian tendencies like to control and initiate situations, win, manipulate and persuade others more whilst being persuaded by others less. As reputation replaces achievement and other options become increasingly influential, mutual manipulation becomes more prevalent. This gives rise to the gamesman, who, whilst in the short term may energise an
organisation, lack the long term patience and commitment to people and principles for Organizational sustainability.

Modern, turbulent, global organisations have led to higher degrees of insecurity and anxiety for managers. New psychological contracts are likely to include less job security and fewer career paths and more low trust relationships and a focus on ‘employability’. As well as doing your job in an increased complex organisation you need to maintain the politics – which takes time.

Managers in entrepreneurial organisations are being encouraged to put their efforts into incorporating brand values into everything they do. But the consequences of this are that people are expected to work harder and longer being pulled in different direction between the demands of work and home. When are having to be different things to different people and to play differing roles in different situations does it threaten the integrity of our personality? Whilst researchers are divided on this it seems the risk arises when the necessary degree of Machiavellian pragmatism becomes the end in itself; all that matters is performance without a sense of purpose.

The two dimensional view of Organizational politics with Machiavellian thuggery on one side and a ‘win win’, collaborative approach on the other is limiting, giving rise to the possibility of a third option – the political entrepreneur. We have a tendency to divide things into good and bad, rational or irrational and then take sides. The political entrepreneur is able to take account of the dangers of throwing aside the old way of doing things but balances it with recognition of the pressures that work intensification imposes.
**The Political Entrepreneur: A Third Power Style**

- **MACHIAVELLIAN**
  - 'Thuggery'
    - Disloyal
    - Aggressive
    - Rigid Others (Oppositional)
    - Zero Sum Battlefield

- **ENTREPRENEUR**
  - 'Zealotry'
    - Inspired
    - Idealistic
    - Enlighten(ed)
    - Others
    - One Best Way

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**Key Challenges Requiring Systemic Change**

**Formal & Informal Institutional Obstacles**

which create

**A Power or Implementation ‘Gap’**

which requires

**A Political Approach to Gathering Scarce Resources & Mobilising Other People**

which results in strategies of

- 'Win/Lose'
- 'Power Over'

- 'Win'
- 'Power'

**Political Entrepreneur**

- Flexible Commitment
- Bounded Participation
- Strategic Brokering

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**Creates ambivalence, double-talk, disillusion and burn out**
Change agents have always made use of a wide range of traditional tools to assist with facilitating change projects; project management, Organizational development, communication etc. These still play a large role in change programmes and considering the political elements does not render these techniques unimportant; political behaviour complements these.

Whether there is one change agent, or a collection of individuals, different political approaches may be needed throughout the stages of the programme as outlined below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>phase</th>
<th>political strategies/tactics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>the politics of project presentation, issue-selling, justifying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Launch</td>
<td>the politics of project definition, recruiting support, coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>the politics of driving, steering, keeping momentum, blocking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion</td>
<td>the politics of termination and withdrawal, reporting back, moving on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterlife</td>
<td>the politics of representation, tales and myths of problems and success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Change can not be managed through the use of checklists and neither can the political behaviour that supports change. Much of the research identifies political behaviours that are ‘ongoing methods for building and maintaining credibility, reputation and influence in the organisation’.

Being able to tell a good story and to give a compelling plausible account of events is an important skill for the change agent; the account.
Political Expertise: Why You Need It, and How to Develop It

"The contemporary change agent appears to be faced with multiple constituencies, stakeholders, and perceptions and with change agendas which are complex, multi-layered, pressured, contested, politicised, and shaped by changing management fashion."

There are four main sets of triggers that encourage and intensify political behaviour.

1. **Personal characteristics.** People with strong convictions are more likely to use their persuasive and influencing skills. Ambition gives rise to raising issues and lobbying for the acceptance of your ideas, innovations and projects. Recruitment campaigns fuel the ambition and appraisal systems reward those with drive and fresh ideas. A range of political techniques are useful in selling ideas, recruiting supporters and marginalising opponents. Political behaviour can also be triggered by the desire for revenge and retribution.

2. **Decision characteristics.** Some decisions are reached by following a set of reasoned rules and logic; others require a less structured approach. Management decisions tend to be more unstructured and strategic decisions are normally subject to debate. This debate can lead to the use of political behaviours – not just the sharing of information but the use of tactics to recruit support and deflect opposition in order to win the debate.

3. **Structural characteristics.** Organizational structures give rise to different interest groups making competing calls on scarce resources and this can trigger political behaviours.

4. **Organizational change.** Change proposals generate disputes and those who think they will lose out are likely to put up a fight.
Combining these four characteristics gives rise to a powerful picture that Organizational politics is a naturally occurring phenomenon and there is little that management can do to change that.

Political skills are an integral part of the management role. The skills of the successful change agent are wide ranging and those required of the skilled politician build upon these.

"The term political entrepreneur suggests more than a behaviour repertoire, referring also to a perspective that integrates political strategies and tactics with an innovative, reflective, self-monitoring approach to how those behaviours should be deployed."

The skills a politician requires are best seen not as a list of competencies but as a perspective, an outlook, and a way of viewing organisation politics. The change agent who is not skilled in politics will not succeed. The manager who sees political behaviour as damaging will find it hard to develop a successful career in management. There is little to be gained by complaining about the turf game: its tactics, players, tricks and strategies, but much to be gained by engaging in it.

“Our concluding advice for change agents, therefore, is to recognise the hypocrisy, shed the innocence, abandon the guilt, play the turf game, aim to win on one's own terms, and enjoy."
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Current research includes: a study of management and clinical roles and relationships in change in multi-professional organizations; the development of innovative organization cultures; factors influencing the spread and sustainability of new working practices, a study of the links between organizational governance, incentives, and performance in healthcare and the management of change in extreme contexts.

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