Redefining managerial work: smart politics

David Butcher
Cranfield University, School of Management, Cranfield, UK
Martin Clarke
Cranfield University, School of Management, Cranfield, UK

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Abstract
Despite the abundance of practical advice for managing contemporary organisations, managers still seem to struggle with their role. Trying to manage a plethora of stakeholder interests can create a considerable array of paradoxes and double binds that often leave well-intentioned executives feeling frustrated and disillusioned. This is because too much attention has been given to understanding what managers do at the expense of why they do it. Examining the importance of personal motive is key in helping managers cope with these difficulties because it highlights the centrality of power and politics in managing. This paper builds on this perspective by developing the idea of a legitimate political mindset, showing how the adoption of this perspective enables managers fundamentally to redefine the content of their work and their managerial activity patterns for the benefit of their businesses, not just themselves.

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Politics, the missing link?

There is no shortage of advice about how to be an effective manager. A glance along the titles lining the bookstores at busy airports will confirm that there is an abundance of possibilities to choose from. And it seems that there needs to be. Management theorists and the media alike bombard the business world with the notion that nothing can be taken for granted any more. The core message is something to the effect that the complexity of organisational life is exponential – hence the corresponding explosion of best practice advice. In consequence, executives are offered a copious array of potential solutions for managing employees, customers, suppliers, strategic partners and other stakeholders, not to mention themselves.

Nonetheless, managers often seem to struggle with their role. The wisdom of current management theory and prescription would appear to be insufficient for their needs. They are confronted with organisational paradoxes and double binds, leaving them with that frustrating feeling of "damned if I do and damned if I don't" (Dopson and Neumann, 1994; Westenholz, 1993). Is it simply that the management task has become too complex, despite the wealth of available advice? The case of Dan, an executive in the publishing sector illustrates the issue:

> On the face of it Dan was doing well. In less than 12 months as UK managing director of a US owned business he had reduced the cost profile, and re-focussed the business toward its most profitable markets. In fact the business was making more money under his guidance than it had done in the previous four years. Yet despite this, he received feedback from his US boss that he needed to think more strategically. This perplexed Dan because he had made three proposals to the executive board to acquire a complementary e-business. These had all been turned down. He had also received feedback from his senior team that people were concerned about his management style, although his annual 360-degree appraisal indicated that his relationships were positive. His boss also criticised him for not working more collaboratively with the other business units, despite the fact that he and his team were working to do just that. Dan was confused as a result. If he needed any help, he thought, it would come from exposure to new ideas on strategy. But then again, he had only recently been on a leadership programme at a top business school.

This case is hardly unique. It reflects the conflicting motivations and clash of competing agendas that managers encounter every day (Pfeffer, 1992). Clashes over strategic direction, accusations of poor relationships, and contradictory feedback, are some of the more obvious indicators. What is puzzling is why managers consistently find themselves blind-sided by these situations. It is as though there is a piece of the organisational jigsaw puzzle missing, something that managers fail to take account of, an assumption they make that does not hold.

We will argue here that this "missing link" is the constructive value of organisational politics. The centrality of politics does not feature strongly in management research (Buchanan and Badham, 1999), instead it has tended to concentrate on understanding managerial work in terms of what managers do or should do, rather than why they do it (Hale, 1999). In other words, it has tended to assume motives. Frequently embedded in both management theory and prescription is the supposition that managers can be motivated to align themselves behind unitary

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organisational goals. Research has systematically sought to understand how to link individual purpose to organisations, sometimes assuming individuals to be essentially predisposed to work against corporate purpose (as, for example, in agency theory). However, it has rarely questioned organisational purpose itself. Yet, contradictory as it may seem, organisations are more than ever held together by an array of stakeholders whose motives often conflict.

Examining why managers do what they do helps us think about the influence of diverse interests in organisations, or to put it another way, the role of power and politics in managerial work. Politics are fundamentally to do with motives, and we will argue that it is the role of constructive politics that enables managers like Dan to accept and work with the pluralistic nature of organizations. In so doing they are able to thrive on the organisational complexity they are frequently told makes their task so difficult.

For the most part politics in organisational settings are associated with dysfunctional or aberrant behaviour (Stone, 2000). Negative connotations appear to far outweigh positive ones. The idea that a political perspective is central to understanding organisations is only just beginning to gain a foothold (Buchanan and Badham, 1999). For example, Ferris *et al.* (2000) have explored the notion of political skill as a necessary managerial attribute. In this paper we will build on this perspective by developing the idea of a legitimate political mindset, showing how the adoption of this perspective enables managers fundamentally to redefine the content of their work. We will show how the adoption of this perspective requires very different managerial activity patterns to those that presume unitary organisational goals. This will then allow us to offer practical guidance on how politically smart managers can use their time more efficiently, and work more effectively in the midst of competing and diverse organisational interests – for the benefit of their businesses, not just themselves.

Understanding what politics is all about

Organisation theory has repeatedly taught us that organisations are more than uniform undertakings of rational co-ordination and action (Child and McGrath, 2001). They are also arenas in which interests frequently collide and align around different issues, some important, others trivial. Whether it is bidding for resource, agreeing the budget, or positioning some change that is important to them, managers spend time and emotional energy negotiating interests. This is what we mean by politics – the reconciliation of different interests.

Managers, therefore, like it or not, are *de facto*, politicians. However, this understanding has never been allowed to develop in a way that can help them recognise its centrality to managing. Politics remains an enigmatic and confusing activity. Buchanan, one of the organisation theorists to have written extensively on politics, points out that the organisational development literature has approached politics as an "ugly duckling" (Buchanan, 1999), to be avoided as both unnecessary and unprofessional. This is certainly the view of Stone (1997), who in her book *Confronting Company Politics* describes politics as:

> Game playing, snide, them and us, aggressive, sabotaging, negative, blaming, win-lose, withholding, non-co-operative behaviour.

More recently, however, there is evidence of a different perspective. Perrewe *et al.* (2000, p. 118) describe political skill as an interpersonal style:

> People who practice this skill behave in a disarmingly charming and engaging manner that inspires confidence, trust, sincerity and genuineness.

Writers are beginning to appear as divided in their views on politics as managers.

We have come to the view that this confusion exists largely because the idea of organisational politics appears inconsistent with the values of rationality that guide management thinking. Rationality runs deep – it seems inseparable from the very idea of "organisation", that is, ordered groups of people working collaboratively together towards common goals in the mutual interest of all (Butcher and Atkinson, 2001). Of course it is not inevitable that organisations are primarily associated with rationality, not least because rational values prescribe what ought to happen rather than what actually happens (Morgan, 1986). But from a managerial perspective there appears to be a fundamental link. Rationality is a mindset – value-driven thinking, so embedded as to saturate attention and exclude other ways of seeing. It seems like common sense. Thus it seems obvious that corporate vision and values should provide an essential point of stability and a motivational framework to align all within an organisation. However, not only is this rarely the outcome of rational design alone, but there are many other effects besides.

Politics in action

These are never more evident than during planned organisational change (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992). Typically in corporate transformation programmes, direction is provided from the top and backed by value statements reflecting strong judgements about desired behaviours. In order to align these behaviours to strategy, much attention is given to helping employees understand the logic and importance of the changes they are asked to make. Furthermore, their participation is actively sought and they are encouraged to question in order to foster commitment. But the outcome may well be different. Take the following example from the IT industry:

> Cash Co. (a pseudonym) embarked on a culture change programme in an attempt to move the company towards a greater customer led strategy. In the past the company had a reputation for technical excellence, a strong product focus, and an efficient command and control structure. The new strategy involved the creation of "customer focus teams" serving specific customer groups. These were to be the cornerstone of the new approach. Organisational values were aligned around a common set of principles that promoted respect for the individual and team working. Country directors were to become "coaches", so as to support their teams rather than manage them. They were expected to empower them with greater levels of autonomy and move from "knowing all to learning continuously". Yet for the most part, whilst the structure had changed, the old behaviours prevailed. For some established country managers the re-organisation had struck hard at their motivation, and it seemed to them to diminish the value that they brought to the business. Whilst publicly accepting, they privately rejected the new structure, and within a year most elements of the new organisational model had fallen in to disrepute. Advocates of the change programme saw their tactics as disingenuous and unprincipled.

As this case demonstrates, the urge for unity of purpose can blind organisations to the inevitability of partisan interests. But more importantly, it undermines the legitimacy of alternative standpoints. This point is well demonstrated by the experience of Motorola in the 1990s. As a global company of over 100,000 employees, the compensation and benefits policy included an incentive programme that awarded Motorola stock for high performance. The scheme that had proved successful in the US business was rolled out across the company world-wide, embracing many different cultures and legal frameworks. The result was an expensive failure. Stock options were not considered as worthwhile incentives in many Motorola operations. In the Philippines, for example, employees valued benefits such as a weekly five-pound bag of rice – a simple illustration, but one that demonstrates the difficulty of factoring local interests and alternative values into a unitary corporate mindset.

In contrast, the basis for a political mindset is the recognition that organisations cannot be places of unity (Butcher and Clarke, 2002). "Unity" represents a framework of values, but always overlaid on that are the deliberate efforts of individuals and groups to use power in pursuit of their own particular interests, some of which are also value-driven. Managers who accept this rather than fight it understand that organisations are essentially driven by internal political differences. They see themselves engaged in a continuous process of dealing with these differences, sometimes mediating between them, often positioning their own interests in relation to those of others. But to adopt a political mindset is difficult precisely because rational values define plurality of interests in general, and self-interest in particular, as illegitimate. "Constructive politics" appears to be a contradiction in terms for many managers – as a principle of organisation it certainly does not enjoy equal status with rational decision making as an official or rightful means of working through differences.

It is this contradiction that causes managers, like Dan, to feel bewildered and frustrated in getting to grips with their role. On the one hand they perceive the nature of their work to be reconciling different interests, yet politics as an aberration of proper organisational functioning (see Figure 1). There is no guiding template to provide them with a legitimate conceptual basis for thinking of organisations as political systems, nor much practical wisdom about how to be an effective politician. In contrast, accumulated knowledge of managerial work is replete with conceptual frameworks and practical guidelines for rational decision making and unifying organizational effort. Put another way, rational values reinforce accepted knowledge of the managerial task, and bias the focus of research on managerial work. A brief look at the trends in the research will help make this point.

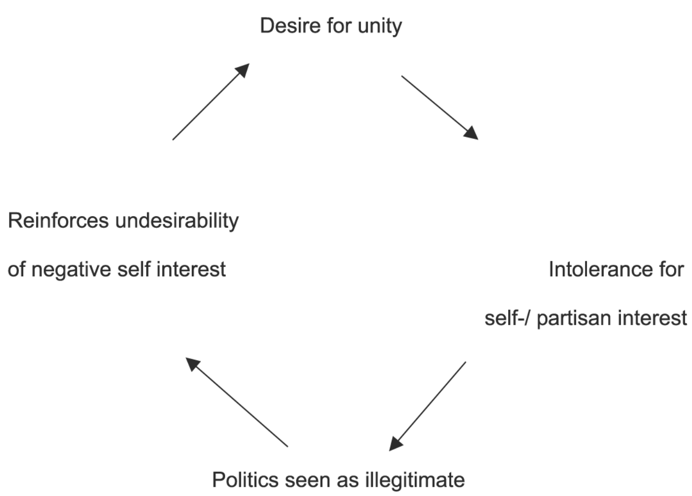
Conventional approaches to understanding managerial work

The analysis of managerial work is surely one of the richest veins of organisational research. It has a long tradition, and a review of seminal contributions in this area reads like a who's who of leading management thinkers; Fayol, Drucker, Mintzberg, Kotter, and Peters, to name but a few. Their work has given rise to many studies of what managers do, the aim of these being to describe and classify managerial activities in order to identify what today we call best practice. These studies have not always contributed to theory, nor have they been explicit regarding any theoretical assumptions made by the researchers (Hale, 1999).

One important consequence is that insufficient attention has been given to understanding how different organisational factors both generate and shape managerial work. In particular, the significance of power has often been underplayed. Instead, many researchers appear to take the rational mindset as their starting point for analysis, presupposing managers to be neutral professionals exercising their expertise with impartiality. But of course the more managers insist on the primacy of rationality, the more they describe their own activities as rational and thereby reinforce researchers' assumptions. This makes it difficult to examine activities that do not conform to the legitimate (non-political) agenda. For example, in a recent study undertaken by Mckinsey & Company, the researchers had to guarantee complete anonymity for the organisations they were investigating in order obtain the high levels of candour necessary in their interviews. This piece of research was novel because it sought to emphasise the need for executives to develop political skills in order to "manage in the whitespace" – that large but mostly unoccupied social territory in every organisation where rules are vague, authority is fuzzy, budgets are token, and strategy is unclear (Maletz and Nohria, 2001).

But we consider the greatest omission in mainstream research into managerial work is the tendency to obscure the importance of partisan and self-interest in managerial activity. This has the effect of masking the pluralistic nature of organisations and the inevitability of politics. It is not enough to ask what managers do. Just as important is the question of why they do what they do. It enables us to see how patterns of everyday activities are driven by motivations other than the desire to conform to the principles of organisational unity.

Figure 1
The circularity of the rational mindset



So why do managers do what they do?

Hale (1986, 1999) has written extensively on the nature of managerial work, and identifies its defining characteristic as one of organisational responsibility. He means by this that whilst everyone is organisationally accountable, only managers are accountable for the organisation. In other words, what they are responsible for, to who they are responsible, and why they feel that responsibility differs from those who are not managers. This distinguishing feature of managerial work therefore reveals much about why managers do what they do. As we will show, it is of particular significance in understanding the different motivational assumptions that lie behind the rational and political mindsets.

Motivation and the rational mindset

In the rational mindset, organisational *raison d'être* is economic efficiency and effectiveness. These values form the basis for setting organisational goals, which are, *de facto*, unitary. Once determined, the goals are cascaded down to managers who, as the prime agents of implementation, have specific responsibility for achieving them. This responsibility is given to them together with the authority to implement. The assumption that each goal makes an integral contribution to the success of the collective endeavour means that responsibility is predicated upon mutual destiny. Thus recasting goals so that they are no longer consistent with corporate direction is irresponsible. Rationally, then, managers are motivated to exercise their authority-based power in the corporate interest.

Because it is based on values, the rational mindset is, of course, an ideal. In practice, managers are faced with the dilemma of having responsibility for goals that are not integrated horizontally within the organisation because other managers on whom they depend have different priorities. Accountability is jeopardised. Nor are they integrated vertically because bosses are faced with the same dilemmas, one level removed. Their focus is equally compromised. The more trying these predicaments become, the greater the test of managerial motivations, since from within the rational mindset, responsibility fundamentally means working in alignment. Naturally enough, the response to these motivational challenges is to use rational thinking as a refuge. Take the example of Carlo, who works for a small furniture manufacturer:

> Carlo had been promoted to the position of operations manager. This role required him to contribute more directly to business strategy, working with senior executives outside his own functional area of manufacturing. He quickly found that their agendas differed from his, and failed to persuade them to give greater priority to addressing manufacturing issues that were beginning to make the company uncompetitive. Angered by this reaction, he turned his attention to his own direct area of responsibility. That is where his effort should be going anyway, he reasoned, and set out to drive through manufacturing improvements he could control. Immersing himself in the detail of the production process, he got closely involved with the day-to-day work of his operational staff. They in turn felt over-managed, and began to focus on Carlo's controlling behaviour rather than their own tasks. Inevitably there was a back reaction, and he was met with a new set of problems – supplier difficulties, and a sudden upsurge in unreliability of tried and tested technology. Six months into the role Carlo had failed to resolve the manufacturing issues he had inherited, and there were strong signs that the market was reacting adversely.

Carlo is faced with an unfamiliar diversity of interests. Naturally enough, he expects senior colleagues to pull together in dealing with a self-evident issue for the business – one that is high priority and affects them all. However, when they fail to give their support, his uncomprehending response is to retreat, leaving the problem unresolved. This action becomes more counter-productive still as he focuses inwards, but it at least allows him to close off the contradictions, affirm his responsibility as a manager, and so maintain purity of motive.

Motivation and the political mindset

Politically fluent managers are guided by a different set of assumptions because they understand the limitations of rational organisational principles. Like their rationally minded counterparts, they are greatly aware of their responsibility as a manager, but formally allocated responsibility is only a backdrop to assuming a responsibility beyond their remit. Just as the rational manager looks to the pursuit of corporate goals through assigned responsibility, competent politicians identify organisational goals that they consider to be worthwhile, and assume responsibility for achieving them. This of course raises a significant question as to whether politically-minded managers work in the corporate interest.

The answer depends on whether their motives promote a wider cause. The very idea of managerial responsibility assumes personal goals to be self-serving and divisive unless they advance the interests of others. Of course, in the cut and thrust of managerial work, worthy causes are often in the eye of the beholder. It is, after all, possible to produce an organisational justification for almost any kind of action. So, central to the idea of principled politics is the need for individual managers to achieve a balance between self-interest and the interests of others. In practical terms, this requires them to create a meaningful justification for their actions built on an appreciation of both well-intended and unwarranted organisational opposition. At the same time they must acknowledge, certainly privately and sometimes publicly, that their actions are also in their own interest.

Consequently, politically able managers recognise the fallacy of pursuing corporate goals without acknowledging the significance of self-interest. For example, they are quick to appraise projects and assignments that have little chance of success, avoiding them in favour of more realistic alternatives. Similarly, in order to maximise their opportunities for accomplishment, they tend to align themselves with a select group of like-minded people who share a common organisational agenda. But this self-interest is not an end in itself. Rather, it is effort on behalf of others, driven by a sense of responsibility for the organisation, even though there are times when this runs counter to corporate policy and the status quo. The example of Kate, who works in the financial services industry, helps put these key aspects of the political mindset in context:

> Kate is an organisation development director who has gained a solid understanding of the political perspective through her role. The company had been sales driven, most other functions tending to see themselves as subservient to the front line breadwinners.

The role of Kate's particular function had mainly been to provide basic training. Realizing that the organisation's culture was creating an increasingly dangerous order chasing strategy, she began to spend time and energy on process improvement initiatives that cut across the business.

Having identified those managers who she believed would support changes, she contrived to spend large amounts of her own time helping them achieve their business goals. This was a prelude to getting them working together. What then began to happen is best described in Kate's own words: "I get a real buzz working with these managers. We have some organisational development projects running that are sending out shock waves across the company. It's a small but powerful network and I think we are getting somewhere. We have had to negotiate political minefields, and because I have encouraged them down this route I feel a commitment towards them. Not so much their teams really – I don't know many of them personally. It is the leaders who I enjoy working with."

And her conclusion? As she put it: "Because we are working somewhat against the conventions of the firm I have to spend a lot of time making sure I put a positive spin on our work. It's too easy to get squeezed out here if senior management don't think your 'one of us'". Kate believes there is still much to do, but is now finding that she is seen as a key player who asks questions about important issues. She has developed visibility and credibility with a group of influential managers.

This case illustrates the motivation of politically competent managers to take responsibility rather than work with what is given. Kate is motivated to do this once she recognises that there is a realistic chance to achieve worthwhile organisational development consistent with her professional values. By convening a group of like-minded people, she seeks to impose her personal organisational development agenda, which, from her perspective, is in the interests of the organisation. Notably, not all of the senior managers appear to recognise (yet) that she has the business's interests at heart. She clearly feels a responsibility towards her small group of "co-conspirators", and this commitment appears to be to them as individuals rather than to the larger groups they represent. She was, and still is, critical of the business strategy, recognising that acceptance of it diminishes, rather than promotes her influence. Through political networking she is attracting greater levels of influence, but sees clearly that this is bounded by the extent to which she is able to establish her agenda as legitimate.

These two cases illustrate very different starting points for working through the diversity of interests inherent in organisations. Carlo, thinking from a rational frame of reference, sets out to improve business performance by creating greater organisational alignment. But faced with competing interests, he is driven to close off his frustration by focussing on those few activities where his motivations can remain true to the managerial task as he sees it. In contrast, Kate's political mindset enables her to focus on what proves to be equally worthwhile activity for the business. Her starting point, however, is far less direct, and places much greater reliance on gathering personal support. Central to this is the willingness to take responsibility beyond her remit, and it is her belief in the worth of that effort, together with the fellowship of like-minded colleagues, that becomes sustaining during inevitable setbacks and difficult periods.

What, then, are the implications for the managerial role of accepting the centrality of politics? How does a political frame of reference enable managers to be more effective in working with the diversity of organisational agendas?

Smart management – the constructive politician

The answers to these questions rely principally on the observation that politically able managers interpret their role as one of continuous change management. Because significant organisational change is strongly associated in the rational mindset with specific initiatives driven from the top, it tends to be seen as a process of moving from one organisational state to another, where the role of management is one of implementation. In other words, it is a discontinuous process, an additional activity to "business as usual". "But how am I supposed to fit this in?" is a tellingly common response from managers faced with the responsibility for implementing a new initiative.

For able politicians, "managing change" is not an activity scheduled in for half a day each week. It is synonymous with the task of management. However, it would be easy to minimise the importance of this observation, since managers may be tempted to respond:

> Of course my job is about change. I live with change everyday.

That is undeniably true, but it misses the point. For what appears to distinguish the politically minded manager's view of change is the desire to shape an organisation through his or her own agenda, and it is the demanding pursuit of this agenda that is continuous.

Establishing worthwhile causes

From a political perspective, strategy, operational activity and change are the result of negotiation of managerial interests over time. This means that some of the important progress in organisations is made only because managers like Kate are prepared to put effort into promoting worthwhile causes. Conversely, managers who wait for top-down, unambiguous direction to be provided for them effectively pass the power initiative to others. The inevitability of this means that any attempt to avoid it, by sheltering behind the principles of rational management, is like trying to immunise oneself from the effects of organisational power and influence. It cannot be done. If managers have no agenda, one will be defined for them. Able politicians therefore give priority to seeking out like-minded individuals with whom they can establish value-adding projects and causes. This has two important implications for their activity patterns:

1. *Stimulating organic change.* As organisations become more interconnected through complex structures and networks, people naturally tend to see the greatest importance and value in local issues because these affect them most. Contemporary management writers have begun to document how impromptu organisational arrangements form around local agendas to initiate change, variously labelling them as "hot groups" (Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt, 1999), "communities of practice" (Hendry, 1996) or "pockets of good practice" (Clarke and Meldrum, 1999). Sometimes these are formal components in the organisational structure, officially designated teams or business units for example; in other circumstances they consist of informal networks of like-minded people spread throughout an enterprise or even across several. These groups always appear to involve individuals committed to a self-defined common purpose, and often to adopt a defensive siege mentality in the early stages of their development. Only as their organisational influence grows do they relax this stance (Hamel, 2000).

   Able politicians like Kate seem to recognise the significance of localised, partisan agendas and the potential of self-defined interest groups in stimulating organisational change. They use their time to establish such groups, encouraging others to work on unofficial agendas, and protecting them until it is time to use their achievements in the broader organisational context. It amounts to supporting an organic process of change that stands in marked contrast with the rationality of top down transformation.
2. *Stealth and the nominal adherence to accepted procedure.* In pursuing worthwhile causes that may run counter to formal policy and procedure, managers inevitably risk being taken for maverick individualists. Maintaining credibility is therefore key, and so astute politicians appear to comply with formal procedure. It may require the use of stealth, exemplified in the way that Kate ensured senior management saw the "positive spin" in her work in order to secure their continuing support for her group of non-conformists. This type of activity requires careful boundary management by all involved, and might include such "dubious" practices as defending office space, limiting access to reports, or being selective about who attends key meetings. Such methods are of course, close to the edge of constructive political behaviour, and can only be construed as principled if those involved are able to justify their actions in the interests of the organisation (Clarke and Meldrum, 1999).

Relationship building

Once the capable politician is motivated to take personal responsibility for worthwhile organisational causes, relationship management becomes the vehicle through which these are negotiated and implemented. This requires a particular activity pattern that clearly distinguishes the work of politicians, and it is determined by the manner in which they build relationships up, across and outside the organisation:

- *Managing upwards.* Conventional wisdom emphasises the importance of boss and subordinate establishing common expectations, a free flow of information, compatible work styles, and honesty. From a subordinate perspective, gaining senior management buy-in for change is central to the hierarchical values embedded in rational model. However, from a political perspective this can be problematic. True, bosses are normally stakeholders for subordinates, but there is no guarantee that they have the best interests of their direct reports at heart. Furthermore, as organisations have become configured according to processes, projects, networks, and matrices, boss-subordinate relations tend to be a constellation of "dotted lines" where "bosses" may have very different agendas to their "subordinates". These are organisational conditions in which revealing intentions to bosses may be neither necessary nor prudent, and if bosses have interests that cannot be reconciled with either each others' or those of subordinates, stealth may be inevitable unless or until the dotted lines become relationships.

Within a political mindset, managing upwards is an activity aimed at creating the space necessary for independence and self-determination. Equally it can be used to great effect in getting support and sponsorship from senior executive stakeholders, and so who to target is a critical decision. Seen this way, the boss is potentially an ally, but may be no more than one of several hierarchical relationships to be managed.

- *Internal networking*. With increasing organisational complexity, managers have been encouraged to form extensive organisational relationships. In the rational model, motivations for networking centre on enhancing the co-ordination of effective operations. In activity terms this means building close relationships, flexibly sharing resources, and tackling projects collaboratively. Not surprisingly, networking is often used as a justification for executive development events. Seminars and workshops supposedly help managers from different parts of a business "to get to know each other better", but what this often hides is the fact that networking is pursued as much for reasons of self-interest as it is for organisational co-ordination.

  Networking is the motor of political fluency. It enables managers to generate support, identify key issues and locate resistance. For the capable politician, the network provides access to power up and down the organisation, and being established as the informal link between different networks offers great scope for influencing. Building a network demands an activity pattern that defies the conventions of executive time management. Dead time becomes prime time – travelling, for instance, can be an activity in its own right if it is with the right people. So can corridor conversations, attending "boring" formal functions and ceremonies, or doing favours – in other words, any situation that can be used to good effect in the effort to understand the agendas of others, and begin to reveal one's own.
- *External networking*. Building relationships across external boundaries is coming to assume an entirely new significance as organisations are increasingly bound to each other through supply chains, joint ventures, strategic alliances, shared processes and resources, and other "mutual destiny" mechanisms. In these arrangements stakeholders in other organisations may be powerful allies; they can support an initiative if it has a business implication for them. Indeed, we would speculate that the greater the mutual organisational destiny, the more the ambitious politician may be inclined towards a personal position that transcends the boundaries of the single entity organisation.

  The implications for managerial activity patterns are clear. The able politician devotes time to networking with customers, suppliers, competitors, industry groups, professional and academic bodies, consultants, and other institutions and agencies in the external environment. There is a practical question of where to draw the line, for these are all potential sources of political support, information, knowledge, and if all else fails, employment. Rational managers will draw it tightly round the organisation, dealing only with those in the environment they are "supposed" to, whilst politicians will choose on the basis of relevance to their agendas.

Constructing a personal managerial agenda

Making the transition to smart management activities may seem daunting because it means both unlearning the official model of management and developing demanding new capabilities. An outline executive development agenda is offered below.

Constructive politics: an overview of key capabilities

Conceptual understanding

- Power and politics – evaluating the complexity of the influence process and the role of motives.
- Relationships – evaluating the different barriers to organisational relationships.
- Political mechanisms – recognising the value of lobbying, stealth and apparent adherence to formal procedure.

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- Pockets of good practice – appreciating the value of establishing worthwhile causes to stimulate organisational change.

Self understanding

- Balanced motives – clarity about personal and organisational motivations.
- Managerial irreverence – a healthy scepticism about the limits to what is possible through formal organisation.

Awareness

- Stakeholder knowledge – knowing the agendas and motivations of key players.
- Organisational knowledge – knowing who makes key decisions and how they are made.
- Knowledge of the business environment – knowing the issues critical for the organisation.

Interpersonal skills

- Persuasive presentation – developing collaborative outcomes through personal enthusiasm, suggestion, logical connections and the disclosure of motives.
- Productive challenge – causing others to analyse their assumptions.
- Reading others – a continual observation and evaluation of the motives and actions of others.

For this reason, an executive development process focused on nurturing political capability needs to emphasise personal challenge as the key ingredient. In particular, it would need to encourage managers to take a more irreverent and critical perspective of their organisation in order to accept the limitations of the rational mindset. This in turn requires executive development professionals with vision and tenacity to reach beyond the rational mindset – clearly a potential limitation in its own right.

This does not mean that transforming a business's executive development processes is the only starting point for legitimising political action. Senior executives can play a key role. Their challenge is to harness the pluralism inherent in their businesses so as to realise the true value of competing political agendas. It requires that they foster organisational democracy, not just talk about it. However, as many commentators have suggested, democratic principles have been slow to emerge in business, despite the strong imperative of empowerment and corporate decentralisation. But as a starting point, senior executives could contemplate some of the following:

- Coaching those who work for them to question assumptions about corporate unity. Doing the same with colleagues at executive level, but calling it "scenario painting" or "brain storming", not coaching.
- Recruiting and nurturing organisational "misfits" so that they blossom into leaders of pockets of good practice. Protecting the pockets once they begin to take shape, and until they can stand on their own success.
- Suggesting to their HRM people that political skills should be included in their competency framework, and that they should re-consider the value of team development for the organisation.
- Leading a special project to evaluate the benefits of radical approaches to employee ownership and rewards.
- Tasking business school academics and consultants working with the business to show how their models challenge managers, not merely support their assumptions.

If senior executives cannot embrace a political perspective on their business it leaves no choice but for individuals to think and act as smart managers for themselves. As we have tried to show in this article, to do so they must see political action as constructive, and understand that personal gain must be in the service of others, not just self-seeking. Worthy causes are the key.

Many managers appear to have the beginnings of such a cause. They hold high ambitions for their team, or their business remit. They wish their professional values to guide their actions and those of others. They can feel deeply about mistaken strategic decisions, or the neglect of huge opportunities in their markets. Or again, what of the frustrations they sometimes feel because obvious organisational improvements never happen? Each such fledgling agenda on its own may appear insignificant. But in the context of any one organisation they provide a point of departure in legitimising politics, and individual action is axiomatic in this process. Progress is made by exploiting the loopholes and contradictions of the rational model from within that model, and whatever the worthwhile cause, the power and benefit of constructive political behavior can only really be appreciated when experienced in practice.

In conclusion . . .

We contend that the defining characteristics of the politically fluent manager we have described here are very much a reflection of the capabilities required to operate successfully in today's pluralistic organisational environment. Research has increasingly confirmed this empirically. For example, in a substantial longitudinal study into the dynamics of strategic change in the pluralistic setting of public sector hospitals in Canada (Denis *et al.*, 2001), many of these types of managerial behaviour were identified. The leadership role was distributed across different constellations of managers and the composition of these constellations continually ebbed and flowed over time. In part, like Kate, this was dependent on the degree to which managers were able to align their agendas to organisational and environmental issues, and on the extent to which they could faithfully represent the interests of different constituencies. Galunic and Eisenhardt (2002) have characterised this type of continually co-evolving organisation as a "dynamic community" in which the logic of self-organisation is a dominant feature. These kinds of change are leading, indeed, have already led, towards the growing recognition that organisations can be managed only by accepting the inevitability of organic, bottom up change. In that respect, the conditions in which constructive politics become the natural means of managing have long been with us. Indeed, authors such as Coopey and Burgoyne (2000) view the establishment of legitimate political activity as being so central to future organisations that they advocate statutory rights that guarantee participation in debate, freedom of speech and protection from coercion. The recent EU legislation requiring employers with over 50 staff to consult its employees about significant organisation change may well reflect this type of agenda.

There is clearly a need for further research into the various dimensions of constructive political activity. House and Aditya (1997, p. 455) note:

> It is rather amazing that there is no theory of political leadership in complex organisations, given the fact that social psychologists have long studied power and influence in organisations.

In particular, the effect of political activity on organisation performance is an area ripe for further enquiry. We consider there is a need for more research that investigates the motives for managerial activity, especially for studies that take plurality of interest as their starting point. Further work is also required to understand the conditions in which managers are most likely to embrace constructive political behaviour, and that considers the implications for executive development activity. Given the changes in organisational context we have discussed here, this may well be an increasingly pressing need.

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Further reading

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