Psst!
Don't tell anyone but …

organisational politics is about to go positive

What is it about the term 'organisational politics' that makes us think in negative terms? And why might we couple this with being 'victims'? **David Bancroft-Turner and Don Morley** explain how it's possible for us to approach the subject with a different mindset.

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It's one of the best days of your life; you are starting a new job – the one you really wanted. It could be your first, after university perhaps, or a job change. Whatever your situation, you are pleased to be where you are. Your life is moving on and the future looks great! You are bursting with enthusiasm as you start your first day.

Three months later the honeymoon period is over and things are not what they seem. Initially, all went well and you settled in fast. The first ideas you suggested for changing things were accepted and for

Illustration by Mike Edwards

a brief moment you enjoyed a spell in the limelight. Over the last two weeks, however, you have noticed that decisions seem to have been made without your input. Meetings were held for which you were not needed and some people have been too busy to return your calls. You are also convinced that certain people are avoiding you. From your perspective you have played with a straight bat, done things by the book and gone out of your way to be cordial to your fellow colleagues. But, seemingly, it's not been enough.

So you face the start of another day. You have promised to meet off-site for breakfast with your opposite number in finance. He says he wants a few words before the monthly update meeting you will both be attending later in the morning. Now what could that all be about?

WELCOME TO THE REAL WORLD
You are already a victim of the unspoken, the subject that exists but doesn't, the managing of the unmanageable – organisational politics! But why do so many people view it only in the negative? The answer is close at hand.

Approximately four years ago, 3D Training and Development was selected to design and deliver an influencing skills programme to 170 management high flyers in a British bank. Focus groups were run in order to ensure that the planned content would be entirely appropriate to the needs of the participants. The findings from these sessions proved to be a real turning point. The consensus was that, while building skills in influence would help, this alone would not necessarily facilitate greater effectiveness in the workplace. The reason, simply expressed, was that the 'p' word gets in the way. What the groups wanted was for the programme to include a session on how to manage organisational politics. For our part, we often hear from board members that they want more upward influence in their organisation, but do they really understand why it frequently does not happen?

A session on political awareness was duly included, and the influencing skills programme was delivered (and well received) over a number of months. However, on every occasion the message was the same. In the opinion of the managers, 45 minutes was simply not a long enough period of time to cover all the ramifications of political behaviour they were experiencing almost every day. Similar feedback was also being heard from participants from other clients who were being exposed to the same session.

The subject of organisational politics was beginning to take over the agenda of the influencing workshop. Perhaps this is not so surprising when it could be said that corporate politicians aim to influence outcomes, while those wishing to enhance their ability to influence in their corporate role just cannot simply ignore the political behaviour going on around them.

As a result of this feedback, a one-day workshop on the subject of organisational politics was created. Additional research was conducted and this reinforced the findings already gathered from participants on the influencing skills programmes. Three key conclusions were arrived at:

• there are few organisations where political behaviour is not seen on a daily basis
• political behaviour has a major impact on people's

careers, individual stress levels, motivation, productivity (and so on), and
• due to the above, it also has an adverse impact on customer satisfaction and shareholder returns.

This was already enough to justify the decision to go ahead but, from further research, another important finding was made. A literature search found that organisational politics invariably tends to be couched in the negative – in other words 'how to cope with …', 'how to avoid …', 'how to get even' or worse! In the face of this overwhelmingly negative slant it became quite clear that what was needed was a fresh approach to the subject in order to respond to the problem rather than to reinforce it. The title 'Positive organisational politics' was eventually arrived at to capture the desired positioning for this unique workshop, which went public in September 2001.

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THE WORKSHOP
The workshop is based on a structured process of self-awareness and learning activities that not only enables delegates to think about the subject from a different perspective, but also to formulate positive strategies for managing the situations they face. 'Perspective' is the key word in the previous sentence.

Lobbying for support when trying to get a major project approved can be seen by some as manipulation. Others would consider it legitimate manoeuvring that goes on all the time. Alternatively, having a breakfast meeting with the financial controller ahead of an update meeting may be construed as highly political by some yet highly sensible by others. Participants soon begin to appreciate that there is ample scope for misinterpreting the behaviour of colleagues. A short diagnostic confirms for them how thin, and confusing, the dividing line can be.

Worse than that, organisational processes often seem almost designed to bring this about. Most of us will have experienced the aggressive manoeuvring for scarce resources at budget time, bidding for the best people to form project teams and reward and bonus systems that are based on personal objectives but are somehow expected to operate in a team environment. All contribute to behaviour in the workplace that could easily be construed as political.

Learning from the workshops has confirmed that all participants can relate to these circumstances being prevalent in their own organisations and acknowledge that in this environment it becomes all too easy to misinterpret others actions. What really pulls them up short is that, after completing one of the perception diagnostics, they learn that others may be thinking exactly the same thing about them for precisely the same reasons! Even those who previously felt that it was a case of 'everyone else plays politics but not me' had to concede this subject is a potential minefield for misunderstanding colleagues. 'Politics is not what I do; it is why you think I am doing it' would seem to define the subject perfectly.

We need to understand and then to respond positively to avoid this downward spiral of mistrust and ➤

intrigue that frequently becomes so harmful to the company and individuals alike. Participants are introduced to the ladder of inference concept to develop their thinking in this area – breaking out of what can be a vicious circle of conscious and subconscious claim and counter claim in order to restore a positive interaction between parties. This is more likely to be successful if we have a framework on which to base our understanding of the political animals that surround us in the workplace.

THE POLITICAL ANIMAL WITHIN US

The political profile questionnaire used in the workshop builds upon the original work of [pyschologists??] Simon Baddeley and Kim James in the 1980s.[1] The political animals they identified were fox, owl, donkey and sheep. In order to differentiate between these 'animals', they used two axes to generate a four-quadrant model. The north–south axis had 'politically aware' and 'politically unaware' as the extremes, while the east–west axis was a contrast between 'psychological game playing' and 'acting with integrity'.

> Whether you are the HR director or the CEO, politics has to be **the next item on the agenda**

The fact that corporate culture has continued to evolve since the 1980s required that the axes be modified. The workshop diagnostic (see Figure 1, page 00) uses 'politically skilled' compared to 'politically unskilled' for the vertical axis. Then at one end of the horizontal spectrum are those individuals who, at the extreme, focus exclusively on their own goals and what is best for them. At the other end are those individuals who always align their own goals and efforts to the broader objectives of the organisation. Having everyone rowing in the same direction is increasingly one of the great corporate challenges. The focus on individual reward, policies of devolvement and ambiguous matrix structures can so often lead to disharmony, disaffection and a disabling of team cohesion.

Having established their own profiles from the diagnostic, it becomes relatively straightforward to use the four-quadrant model to begin to distinguish the actions and behaviours of the four types of political animal encountered in the workplace. The reason for this being important is that we will need to modify our approach when working with each of them. The workshop spends time exploring how this can be done positively and productively. Part of the answer also lies in the political profile courseware. Here there is a whole range of dos, don'ts and developmental suggestions for every position on the matrix. Participants can reflect on these and continue to work on them back in the workplace.

Figure 1: Political awareness and goal alignment

POLITICALLY SKILLED	
High political skill used first and foremost to achieve personal goals	Positive political skill used to achieve organisation and personal goals
CLEVER	**WISE**
Pursues own goals	Aligns organisational and own goals
INEPT	**INNOCENT**
Low political skill pursues only own goals	Low political skill pursues own and organisation's goals
POLITICALLY UNSKILLED	

THE WHEEL TURNS FULL CIRCLE

It is at this point, when considering the skills needed to generate positive interactions with colleagues, that the ability to influence effectively brings us right back to where we started. There are many common elements to the skills required both to influence and to positively manage organisational politics. What sets them apart is the way they are utilised, and this will reflect the underlying motives and behaviour captured in the political profile when indicating an orientation to self or the good of the whole organisation.

Two areas of competence in particular stand out as being essential. It would be almost impossible to influence if you lacked effective communication skills. The influencing workshop spends time on this subject incorporating a variety of practice activities. There is also a very useful personal style diagnostic, which enables participants to recognise themselves while understanding that others may have a different set of drivers. For instance, we are all familiar with the typical project report that circulates in organisations. But how many of us fully appreciate why, for some, the executive summary is sufficient while others want so much detail that appendices have to be inserted to accommodate their thirst for it. Then again, some of our colleagues will need an account of all the alternatives that were considered before they are comfortable; a single recommendation is no recommendation at all for them! There will be those who consider it a major omission if the implications for staff are not included, but try telling that to those who never get further than the executive summary.

Feedback, received from participants when they have returned to their workplace and put this skill into practice, has been staggering in the change it has brought about in their personal and organisational effectiveness. This is also due to coverage of the crucial importance of listening to better effect as well as the essential body language aspects of communication. In addition, the ability to pose meaningful, non-threatening questions is fully addressed in the context of building rapport, gaining understanding and also gathering information.

This brings us to a second key attribute of effective influencers – being well informed and well known. The workshop invests time in challenging attendees to critique their approach to networking through a diagnostic and thorough debrief. The learning distilled from running such sessions over a number of years has consistently shown that there is a clear correlation between those who have the most comprehensive network coming out as also being the most effective in their organisations. One of the reasons for this is that, while their network is a source of information to be tapped, their networking is what gives them profile.

SO WHAT?

This article is about politics and influence. You will come across the latter in almost any organisation's list of management competencies. It is used in appraisal processes, recruitment and promotion decisions, training needs analysis and so on. It trips easily off the tongue of most self-respecting training and development professionals. Can the same be said for politics? The answer is an emphatic 'No'. Indeed, when the research referred to earlier was conducted, it revealed an interesting insight into this aspect of

corporate culture. Of the senior HR people contacted, a few responded to the effect that politics did not exist in their organisation (workshop participants feedback would indicate a degree of self-delusion here). Many, however, admitted it does go on but addressing it would be a real challenge. The majority agreed it was a real issue for them and they would be only too grateful to receive assistance in tackling it.

It is abundantly clear that this is not the easiest subject to discuss or address openly. Corporate culture, even national cultures, may have something to do with it. However, one thing is certain. The harmful ramifications for the health of both individuals and organisations are enormous. If you don't believe it, just consider the dramatic decline in recent years of several blue chip companies. There is no question that inappropriate political manoeuvring at the highest levels, not technology or competition, was the reason. Do not overlook either that these leaders of organisations are the role models for those around them.

Whether you are the HR director or the CEO, it has to be the next item on the agenda. Management of change is crucial, but managing the politics is long overdue for attention. Recent research by the Roffey Park Institute says:

Company politics appear to be rife with too many people concerned more with politics than performance. Hidden agendas, internal rivals, people manoeuvring for power, blame culture and lack of trust in colleagues and in top level management add to the burdens caused by change.[2]

Feedback from workshops supports this overwhelmingly. 'Our company has a very competitive culture; unfortunately it is all focused inwards, not externally, where the real competition is.' Such statements are commonplace and indicate the gravity of closing our eyes to damaging politics and its ramifications for corporate effectiveness.

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This subject does not need to be seen in the negative. Indeed, those with the appropriate skill and a congruence of personal and organisational goals continuously demonstrate that positive organisational politics provides the real foundation for competitive advantage. A little learning can be a dangerous thing, but nowhere near as destructive as negative political behaviour! **TJ**

References
1. S Baddeley and K James, 'Owl, fox, donkey or sheep: political skills for managers', *Management Education and Development*, vol 18, part 1, Spring 1987, pp 3–19.
2. L Holbeche and C McCartney, *The Management Agenda 2002*, Roffey Park Institute.

Other sources of useful information
(website) www.emeraldinsight.com