

CHAPTER 35

Unwritten Rules of Organisational Politics

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ABSTRACT

Organisations are often defined as a system of formal rules, policies and procedures. Practical exposure and internship (practical experience) experience, however, clearly demonstrate that they operate on much more than what can be found in any manual. Unwritten rules have a strong influence on the behaviour, decision making and career of employees, and they are a part of the content of organisational politics. This article explores the nature of unwritten rules of organisational politics and their operation in practice. It builds conceptual understanding and knowledge based on internship experiences and academic learning and explores the workings of organisational politics, and the importance of understanding this from a professional perspective. It defines 12 informal rules that can be found in different organisational environments, from the relationship between authority and formal designation to the rules of visibility, relations, information, timing, loyalty, adaptability and initiative. The article proposes that organisational politics is not necessarily a bad thing: politically aware professionals can be good and be able to grow within organisations. It concludes that where there is no written policy, the understanding of the unwritten rules enables professionals to make responsible and confident decisions.

Keywords: Organisational politics; Unwritten rules; Workplace influence; Informal networks; Career navigation.

1.0 Introduction

From the outside organisations seem very organized. They have established hierarchies, roles, reporting and explicit policies of behavior. Management education emphasises rational planning and formal system of workings in organisations. Through work-based experience and on-the-job relationships, a more complex reality is observed:

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Organisations are social systems in which behaviour, emotion, relationship and power all have significant roles to play. Working life experience tells us that numerous key decisions are not made with a rigid application of written policy. Their relationships are instead informal, based on trust and on accumulated experience and dynamics. Such practices are underpinned by what can be called the unofficial rules of an organisation. These rules are never put in writing, but are well known to skilled workers.

It is natural that organisational politics should emerge in such circumstances. Limited resources for promotion, recognition, authority and opportunity: people compete for them. That competition generates political action, which is often perceived as manipulation or favoritism. However, political activity is not an abnormal aspect of organisational life, and cannot be completely eradicated (Mintzberg, 1983). In implicit learning, the rules are not written, but they are learned by observing and experiencing. These are not explicitly written down and are often hard for new employees to master. As more people come to understand them, they become more adaptable and efficient over time.

The article explores this unwritten set of regulations in organisational politics and discusses its implications for today's organisations. It aims to provide a balanced picture, both the moral aspect of political action and its practical importance are to be taken into account.

2.0 The Concept of Organisational Politics

Organisational politics is the activity by individuals or groups to promote a decision that benefits them. Robbins and Judge (2022) define it as “behaviors that are not specified for formal job responsibilities but that affect the allocation of rewards and resources in an organization”. Organisations are made up of people with varying interests, objectives and expectations, hence the existence of politics. Lack of resources increases competition which means people resort to influencing and networking to achieve their goals. Political power is informal and often unseen (Pfeffer, 1992), in contrast to formal authority.

It appears from observations on the job that workers who are aware of the politics are better equipped to deal with organisational problems. Politics does not always imply less moral behaviour: often it can be a way of helping managers to negotiate, persuade and resolve conflict. It's dangerous when a political act is done for the sake of self-interest, not for the goals of the organisation. Organisational politics should then be seen as a fact of life and not something to be avoided.

2.1 The meaning of unwritten rules

It refers to the unwritten rules, mutual comprehension and tacit agreements that guide activities in an organisation. While these regulations might not be found in any

official publications, they are strongly influential in shaping the communication, interaction and decision-making of employees. They over time get ingrained into the organizational culture and influence everyday work to a significant degree (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

An intern might notice, for example, that while it's encouraged to speak openly, it's not quite the same when it comes to disagreeing openly with senior management. Likewise, while appraisal is officially done on agreed goals, often, recognition and reward rely more on visibility, relationships and perceived contribution.

These rules are acquired by the employees by watching other workers and working with senior workers, not in formal instruction. They are important because they largely shape the nature of organisational politics; they shape who has influence, how much they can exert and which forms of action are encouraged and which are discouraged.

3.0 The Unwritten Rules of Organisational Politics

3.1 Real power is not always linked to designation

One of the most significant unwritten rules is that, by itself, authority does not automatically follow by position. Many employees who have no senior designation can often have a significant influence on decisions based on their experience or their connections with management, and those who know this perform decision making processes much more effectively.

3.2 Performance requires visibility

Good performance is appreciated but often is not enough. If a worker can articulate his/her achievements, he/she will get more recognition than one who can't. Not exaggerating or misrepresenting is not what this means; it means doing work professionally. It can be observed that there is little benefit in doing work that is not seen.

3.3 Relationships matter

Relationships and trust are the foundations of organizations. The individuals with good working relationships gain greater assistance and direction, while informal communication has a significant impact, especially for new employees.

3.4 Information is a source of influence

Information gives one an edge. Well informed staff are better equipped for changes and decisions. The trust in information is built through responsibility; the loss of trust through irresponsible use of the information.

3.5 Knowing when to speak

A second rule applies in judging when to be assertive and when to be reticent. Communication timing is always important and a sign of being mature and understanding when done at the right time.

3.6 Loyalty is judged through actions

Loyalty is hard to define, and easy to see in hard times. Supporting colleagues and being professional is the best way to prove it.

3.7 Adaptability is valued more than perfection

Employers tend to look more favorably on individuals who can adjust or adapt to the situation rather than following plans. The ability to do new thing is always welcome.

3.8 Attitude often matters as much as skill

Essential, but equally important is a positive attitude, the desire to learn and respect colleagues. A receptive, professional intern is well suited to the position, while a negative one is not.

3.9 Initiative is expected though rarely stated

Organisations don't often state that workers be innovative, but those who recognise a problem and offer a solution are often listened to. Playing out of the script demands dedication and openness to development.

3.10 Trust takes time but is quickly lost

Trust is built over time via behaviors, honesty and reliability. Single incidents of rudeness and professionalism could have a significant impact. The rule that prevails, therefore, is that things be consistent.

3.11 Learning from observation is essential

The majority of organisational norms are not verbalized. Employees and interns are expected to observe, understand and act accordingly, and those who learn by watching, become part of an organisational culture much quicker.

3.12 Mistakes are accepted, repetition is not

Errors are acknowledged by organisations, especially when learning takes place. If the same mistakes are being made without clear evidence of learning, it's looked upon negatively. Another of the unwritten expectations is to learn from experience and apply the lessons learned.

4.0 Relevance in Contemporary Organisations

Organizations of today are dynamic, evolving and often very competitive. However, in this type of environment, formal rules are not enough to explain effective functioning as the behaviour of employees has a significant impact on the way the organisation works. Political awareness is a characteristic of employees that helps them respond to common organizational issues more effectively. This awareness helps with coordination, fosters better interpersonal relations and enables better response to competitive pressures and uncertainty (Ferris et al., 2002).

Political awareness is a must for managing effectively from a managerial perspective, for leadership and conflict resolution. Experience in the workplace shows that a certain amount of judgement is needed in addition to following formal rules. Political consciousness is thus an issue that is valid for the current organizational practice.

5.0 The Ethical Dimension of Organisational Politics

Organisation politics is inevitable but there are ethical boundaries that need to be set. Political behavior is detrimental when it's based on favoritism, manipulation, subterfuge, or undue influence. These practices can lead to a loss of trust, poor morale, and damage to the organisation's culture. Ethical leadership is key to mitigating these impacts. Leaders who are seen as fair, principled and accountable set the tone for acceptable political practice and deal with unethical political practice when it occurs. They help ensure equality and merit-based decision making, thereby establishing a transparent and trustworthy workplace (Brown et al., 2005).

Responsible political awareness, therefore, is a matter of employees' attitudes and behaviours which are based on the values and ethical norms of the organisation. Knowledge of politics is accorded its due place as a tool of good influence, good communication, and problem solving instead of being used illegitimately as a means of personal advancement. Organisational politics, if guided by ethical considerations, has a positive impact on the development of individuals as well as on the effectiveness of the organisation.

6.0 Conclusion

There are unwritten rules to organisational politics that are an important component of organisational behaviour. They work in parallel with formal rules and contribute to many aspects of a formal policy's non-explanation. It's important to grasp their meaning if you want to do a good job at work. Don't assume that organisation politics is always bad. It is accepted in an ethical way, so that individuals are able to deal with organisational realities

with confidence and maturity. Students of management and potential managers in particular should be aware of how organisational politics work so they are well equipped to cope with the conditions that they will face in the workplace.

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