DEALING WITH OFFICE POLITICS

A new survey shows bosses should consider training to take advantage of those organisational manoeuvres

By John Dawson, Dawson McDonald & Associates Pty Ltd

In September 2007 my company conducted a national survey to test perceptions of "organisational politics" – perhaps better known as "office politics" – in the workplace. We received 221 valid responses from executives in the public and private sectors across Australia.

In the survey, we defined organisational politics as "informal efforts – sometimes behind the scenes – to influence the attitudes of people towards particular individuals or issues, influence decisions; and/or gain power or status".

A strong majority of Australian executives consider organisational politics to be damaging in their own organisations, while also causing stress in their working lives.

Almost half of them spend more than one day in 10 managing organisational politics, but only 6% consider themselves to be very good at this.

As one put it: "Senior people's time that would otherwise be spent on client engagement or on management is spent on managing differing parties and uncovering their politics."

Almost all (87%) think "organisational savvy" should be a required competency for all managers.

One said: "Due to being naive about office politics I have not always got the decision-makers on my side, as I thought that my performance would speak for itself."

Office politics exists in every organisation. This is a very human activity, and it's impossible to eliminate.

Managed ethically, it can be a driving force for securing commitment and focusing energy on organisational objectives. In different hands it can be a corrosive or toxic element diverting effort to achieve personal agendas and destroying cohesion.

More respondents saw organisational politics in a negative rather than positive light.

Some 69% of the respondents said organisational politics made them think of manipulation and self-interest, while only 20% associated the term with the constructive use of influence to achieve business results.

As one respondent said: "It's all about power – who has it and who sucks up to it!"

Despite the prevalence of organisational politics and its potential for harm or benefit, there appears to have been very little research on the topic. Even less has been done to equip managers to handle organisational politics.

The call by Australian managers in the Dawson McDonald survey for "organisational savvy" to become a required competency echoes the findings of a study by Cranfield Management College in the United Kingdom.

Researchers there tracked real-life

change management interventions by 50 executives and concluded that resistance to implementing change was almost all attributable to negative organisational politics.

They also suggested that competency in managing organisational politics should be a requirement for all managers.

Many executives are "under-political", and just want to let the results speak for themselves. Others are "over-political" and can be destructive influences.

Managing organisational politics is therefore a vital skill. As one Australian chief executive commented, "If you are senior in an organisation – and not absolutely plugged into the politics – you should regard your position as temporary".

The division of views on organisational politics between respondents is illustrated by these comments:

"Creates division and initiates suspicion and mistrust."

"If used well, it keeps people moving towards a goal."

People said that to overhear themselves described as "politically astute" would evoke the following reactions:

"It would mean you were surviving."

"I would regard it as a compliment, with the caveat that I can maintain my own ethics and principles."

"I would see it as a compliment but know that it may well be meant as an insult!"

Other points indicative of the impact of organisational politics are shown in these figures:

• 74% said they have seen careers damaged by negative rumours and politics.

• 92% said they have seen careers helped by positive politics.

• 78% said they frequently come across people whose actions are clearly driven more by personal agendas and self-interests than the good of the team or organisation.

• 36% said that in their organisation credit is usually given to those who work hardest/have the best ideas.

• 59% said at times they have been sabotaged at work.

All mainland states were represented in the survey, with the majority of respondents being from New South Wales and Victoria. Distribution across SME to large corporates was fairly even. There were no significant differences in experiences between the various sizes of organisation.

Of those who identified their sector, 66% were working in the private, 27% in the public sector and 7% in not-for-profits.

In the public sector office politics was seen to play a part in promotions more often than in the private sector and developing an image of importance, and power was regarded as more important to being taken seriously in the public than the private sector.

Both factors were important to private

sector respondents but less so than in the public sector.

Some 53% of respondents were in senior management roles, 28% in middle management and 19% had no significant management responsibilities.

Senior executives were more likely to regard organisational politics as a constructive use of influence to achieve business results than the other two groups, who tended to see it more in terms of manipulation or pursuing self-interest.

Gender breakdown was 47% female and 53% male. Most males believe that the majority of people they deal with understand the importance of power trends, political and cultural norms to success. Most females believe that no more than 25% of their contacts understand this.

Males scored themselves more highly than females in being tapped into office politics in their own organisations.

There were no strong differences across age bands, except that those who were 36 or over scored themselves more highly than younger groups in terms of being tapped into politics in their organisations and in their ability to manage this.

The results of this survey clearly show that office politics is widely regarded as damaging in organisations as well as causing stress for executives – many of whom don't know how to manage it.

What is needed is to help executives gain the skills to occupy the middle ground, where they can have strong impact and influence, with integrity and ethics.

If half of Australia's executives spend more than one day in 10 managing issues they describe as damaging to their organisations, shouldn't they be properly trained to do this?

They are trained in how to manage finance, human resources, marketing and other issues, but they learn how to manage organisational politics by trial and error. A couple of telling comments:

"The old saying, life would be so easy without other human beings!"

"People's self-interest comes to the fore in all walks of life, even when it is so obvious that this self-interest is not for the benefit of an organisation."

International research has concluded that a cluster of 13 skills is needed to be "organisationally savvy". Personal integrity is the foundation, followed by awareness strategies such as knowing the "corporate buzz", then proactive strategies like ethical lobbying, balanced self-promotion, managing perceptions and handling sabotage.

Our survey showed that all age groups and seniority levels believe all managers should have "organisational savvy" – the skills to manage organisational politics in a constructive and ethical way.

Structured learning and development is needed to move the management of organisational politics from a black art to a management competency. ■

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