Organizational Politics and Impression Management

Some contestants on the reality TV show *The Apprentice* respond to the looming threat of Donald Trump saying “you’re fired” by resorting to political antics—blaming, scapegoating, finger pointing, etc. Sure enough, they’re fired! On the other hand, organizational politics can be a positive force in modern work organizations. Skilled and well-timed politics can help you get your point across, neutralize resistance to a key project, or get a choice job assignment.

Roberta Bhasin, a telephone company district manager, put organizational politics into perspective by observing the following:

Most of us would like to believe that organizations are rationally structured, based on reasonable divisions of labor, a clear hierarchical communication flow, and well-defined lines of authority aimed at meeting universally understood goals and objectives.

But organizations are made up of people with personal agendas designed to win power and influence. The agenda—the game—is called corporate politics. It is played by avoiding the rational structure, manipulating the communications hierarchy, and ignoring established lines of authority. The rules are never written down and seldom discussed.

For some, corporate politics are second nature. They instinctively know the unspoken rules of the game. Others must learn. Managers who don’t understand the politics of their organizations are at a disadvantage, not only in winning raises and promotions, but even in getting things done.

We explore this important and interesting area by (1) defining the term *organizational politics*, (2) identifying three levels of political action, (3) discussing eight specific political tactics, (4) considering a related area called *impression management*, and (5) examining relevant research and practical implications.

**Organizational politics**
Intentional enhancement of self-interest.

**Definition and Domain of Organizational Politics**

*Organizational politics* involves intentional acts of influence to enhance or protect the self-interest of individuals or groups. An emphasis on *self-interest* distinguishes this form of social influence. Managers are constantly challenged to achieve a workable balance between...
employees' self-interests and organizational interests, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. When a proper balance exists, the pursuit of self-interest may serve the organization's interests. Political behavior becomes a negative force when self-interests erode or defeat organizational interests. For example, researchers have documented the political tactic of filtering and distorting information flowing up to the boss. This self-serving practice put the reporting employees in the best possible light.69

**Uncertainty Triggers Political Behavior**

Political maneuvering is triggered primarily by uncertainty. Five common sources of uncertainty within organizations are:

1. Unclear objectives.
2. Vague performance measures.
3. Ill-defined decision processes.
4. Strong individual or group competition.70
5. Any type of change.

Regarding this last source of uncertainty, organization development specialist Anthony Raia noted, "Whatever we attempt to change, the political subsystem becomes active. Vested interests are almost always at stake and the distribution of power is challenged."71

Thus, we would expect a field sales representative, striving to achieve an assigned quota, to be less political than a management trainee working on a variety of projects. While some management trainees stake their career success on hard work, competence, and a bit of luck, many do not. These people attempt to gain a competitive edge through some combination of the political tactics discussed below. Meanwhile, the salesperson's performance is measured in actual sales, not in terms of being friends with the boss or taking credit for others' work. Thus, the management trainee would tend to be more political than the field salesperson because of greater uncertainty about management's expectations.

Because employees generally experience greater uncertainty during the earlier stages of their careers, are junior employees more political than more senior ones? The answer is yes, according to a survey of 243 employed adults in upstate New York. In fact, one senior employee nearing retirement told the researcher: "I used to play political games when I was younger. Now I just do my job."72

**Three Levels of Political Action** Although much political maneuvering occurs at the individual level, it also can involve group or collective action. Figure 15-5 illustrates three different levels of political action: the individual level, the coalition level, and the network level.73 Each level has its distinguishing characteristics. At the individual level, personal self-interests are pursued by the individual. The political aspects of coalitions and networks are not so obvious, however.

People with a common interest can become a political coalition by fitting the following definition. In an organizational context, a coalition is an informal group bound together by the active pursuit of a single issue. Coalitions may or may not coincide with formal group membership. When the target issue is resolved (a sexual-harassing supervisor is fired, for example), the coalition disbands. Experts note that political coalitions have "fuzzy boundaries," meaning they are fluid in membership, flexible in structure, and temporary in duration.74

**Coalition**
Temporary groupings of people who actively pursue a single issue.
Coalitions are a potent political force in organizations. Consider the situation Charles J. Bradshaw faced in a finance committee meeting at Transworld Corporation. Bradshaw, president of the company, opposed the chairman’s plan to acquire a $93 million nursing home company:

[The senior vice president for finance] kicked off the meeting with a battery of facts and figures in support of the deal. “Within two or three minutes, I knew I had lost,” Bradshaw concedes. “No one was talking directly to me, but all statements addressed my opposition. I could tell there was a general agreement around the board table.” …

Then the vote was taken. Five hands went up. Only Bradshaw voted no. 75

After the meeting, Bradshaw resigned his $530,000-a-year position, without as much as a handshake or good-bye from the chairman. In Bradshaw’s case, the finance committee was a formal group that temporarily became a political coalition aimed at sealing his fate at Transworld. In recent years, coalitions on the corporate boards of Ford, Computer Associates, and Hewlett-Packard ousted the heads of those giant companies.

A third level of political action involves networks. 76 Unlike coalitions, which pivot on specific issues, networks are loose associations of individuals seeking social support for their general self-interests. Politically, networks are people oriented, while coalitions are issue oriented. Networks have broader and longer term agendas than do coalitions. For instance, Avon’s Hispanic employees have built a network to enhance the members’ career opportunities.

**Political Tactics**

Anyone who has worked in an organization has firsthand knowledge of blatant politicking. Blaming someone else for your mistake is an obvious political ploy. But other political tactics are more subtle. Researchers have identified a range of political behavior.

One landmark study, involving in-depth interviews with 87 managers from 30 electronics companies in southern California, identified eight political tactics. Top-, middle-, and low-level managers were represented about equally in the sample. According to the researchers: “Respondents were asked to describe organizational political tactics and personal characteristics of effective political actors based upon their accumulated experience in all organizations in which they had worked.” 77 Listed in descending order of occurrence, the eight political tactics that emerged were

1. Attacking or blaming others.
2. Using information as a political tool.
3. Creating a favorable image. (Also known as impression management.)
4. Developing a base of support.
5. Praising others (ingratiation).
6. Forming power coalitions with strong allies.
7. Associating with influential people.
8. Creating obligations (reciprocity).

Table 15–1 describes these political tactics and indicates how often each reportedly was used by the interviewed managers.

The researchers distinguished between reactive and proactive political tactics. Some of the tactics, such as scapegoating, were reactive because the intent was to defend one's self-interest. Other tactics, such as developing a base of support, were proactive because they sought to promote the individual's self-interest.

What is your attitude toward organizational politics? How often do you rely on the various tactics in Table 15–1? You can get a general indication of your political tendencies by comparing your behavior with the characteristics in Table 15–2. Would you characterize yourself as politically naïve, politically sensible, or a political shark? How do you think others view your political actions? What are the career, friendship, and ethical implications of your political tendencies? (For a more detailed analysis of your political tendencies, see the Personal Awareness and Growth Exercise at the end of this chapter.)

### Table 15–1 Eight Common Political Tactics in Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Tactic</th>
<th>Percentage of Managers Mentioning Tactic</th>
<th>Brief Description of Tactic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attacking or blaming others</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>Used to avoid or minimize association with failure. Reactive when scapegoating is involved. Proactive when goal is to reduce competition for limited resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Using information as a political tool</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Involves the purposeful withholding or distortion of information. Obscuring an unfavorable situation by overwhelming superiors with information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Creating a favorable image (impression management)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Dressing/grooming for success. Adhering to organizational norms and drawing attention to one's successes and influence. Taking credit for others' accomplishments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Developing a base of support</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Getting prior support for a decision. Building others' commitment to a decision through participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Praising others (ingratiation)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Making influential people feel good (&quot;apple polishing&quot;).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Forming power coalitions with strong allies</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Teaming up with powerful people who can get results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Associating with influential people</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Building a support network both inside and outside the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Creating obligations (reciprocity)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Creating social debts (&quot;I did you a favor, so you owe me a favor&quot;).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Impression Management

**Impression management** is defined as "the process by which people attempt to control or manipulate the reactions of others to images of themselves or their ideas." This encompasses how one talks, behaves, and looks. Most impression management attempts are directed at making a **good** impression on relevant others. But, as we will see, some employees strive to make a **bad** impression. For purposes of conceptual clarity, we will focus on **upward** impression management (trying to impress one’s immediate supervisor) because it is most relevant for managers. Still, it is good to remember that **anyone** can be the intended target of impression management. Parents, teachers, peers, employees, and customers are all fair game when it comes to managing the impressions of others.

**A Conceptual Crossroads** Impression management is an interesting conceptual crossroads involving self-monitoring, attribution theory, and organizational politics. Perhaps this explains why impression management has gotten active research attention in recent years. High self-monitoring employees ("chameleons" who adjust to their surroundings) are likely to be more inclined to engage in impression management than would low self-monitors. Impression management also involves the systematic manipulation of attributions. For example, a bank president will look good if the board of directors is encouraged to attribute organizational successes to her efforts and attribute problems and failures to factors beyond her control. Impression management definitely fits into the realm of organizational politics because of an overriding focus on furthering one’s self-interests.

**Making a Good Impression** If you "dress for success," project an upbeat attitude at all times, and have polished a 15-second elevator speech for top executives, you are engaging in favorable impression management—particularly so if your motive is to improve your chances of getting what you want in life. There are questionable ways to create a good impression, as well. For instance, Stewart Friedman, director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Leadership Program, offered this gem:

Last year, I was doing some work with a large bank. The people there told me a story that astounded me: After 7 PM, people would open the door to their office, drape a spare jacket on the back of their chair, lay a set of glasses down on some reading material on their
desk—and then go home for the night. The point of this elaborate gesture was to create the illusion that they were just out grabbing dinner and would be returning to burn the midnight oil.82

Impression management often strays into unethical territory.

A statistical factor analysis of the influence attempts reported by a sample of 84 bank employees (including 74 women) identified three categories of favorable upward impression management tactics.83 As labeled in the OB Exercise on page 498, favorable upward impression management tactics can be job-focused (manipulating information about one’s job performance), supervisor-focused (praising and doing favors for one’s supervisor), and self-focused (presenting oneself as a polite and nice person). Take a short break from your studying to complete the OB Exercise. How did you do? A moderate amount of upward impression management is a necessity for the average employee today. Too little, and busy managers are liable to overlook some of your valuable contributions when they make job assignment, pay, and promotion decisions. Too much, and you run the risk of being branded a “schmoozer,” a “phony,” and other unflattering things by your co-workers.84 Excessive flattery and ingratiating can backfire by embarrassing the target person and damaging one’s credibility. Also, the risk of unintended insult is very high when impression management tactics cross gender, racial, ethnic, and cultural lines.85 International management experts warn

The impression management tactic is only as effective as its correlation to accepted norms about behavioral presentation. In other words, slapping a Japanese subordinate on the back with a rousing “Good work, Hiro!” will not create the desired impression in Hiro’s mind that the expatriate intended. In fact, the behavior will likely create the opposite impression.86

Making a Poor Impression At first glance, the idea of consciously trying to make a bad impression in the workplace seems absurd. But an interesting new line of impression management research has uncovered both motives and tactics for making oneself look bad. In a survey of the work experiences of business students at a large northwestern US university, more than half “reported witnessing a case of someone intentionally looking bad at work.”87 Why? Four motives came out of the study:

1. Avoidance: Employee seeks to avoid additional work, stress, burnout, or an unwanted transfer or promotion.
2. Obtain concrete rewards: Employee seeks to obtain a pay raise or a desired transfer/promotion, or demotion.
3. Exit: Employee seeks to get laid off, fired, or suspended, and perhaps also to collect unemployment or workers’ compensation.
4. Power: Employee seeks to control, manipulate, or intimidate others, get revenge, or make someone else look bad.

Within the context of these motives, unfavorable upward impression management makes sense.

Five unfavorable upward impression management tactics identified by the researchers are as follows:

- Decreasing performance—restricting productivity, making more mistakes than usual, lowering quality, neglecting tasks.
- Not working to potential—pretending ignorance, having unused capabilities.
- Withdrawing—being tardy, taking excessive breaks, faking illness.
- Displaying a bad attitude—complaining, getting upset and angry, acting strangely, not getting along with co-workers.
- Broadcasting limitations—letting co-workers know about one’s physical problems and mistakes, both verbally and nonverbally.
How Much Do You Rely on Upward Impression Management Tactics?

Instructions
Rate yourself on each item according to how you behave on your current (or most recent) job. Add your circled responses to calculate a total score. Compare your score with our arbitrary norms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job-Focused Tactics</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I play up the value of my positive work results and make my supervisor aware of them.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I try to make my work appear better than it is.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I try to take responsibility for positive results, even when I'm not solely responsible for achieving them.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I try to make my negative results not as severe as they initially appear to my supervisor.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I arrive at work early and/or work late to show my supervisor I am a hard worker.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisor-Focused Tactics</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. I show an interest in my supervisor's personal life.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I praise my supervisor on his/her accomplishments.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I do personal favors for my supervisor that I'm not required to do.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I compliment my supervisor on her/his dress or appearance.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I agree with my supervisor's major suggestions and ideas.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Focused Tactics</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. I am very friendly and polite around my supervisor.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I try to act as a model employee around my supervisor.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I work harder when I know my supervisor will see the results.</td>
<td>1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total score = __________

Arbitrary Norms
13–26 = free agent
27–51 = better safe than sorry
52–65 = hello, Hollywood


Recommended ways to manage employees who try to make a bad impression can be found throughout this book. They include more challenging work, greater autonomy, better feedback, supportive leadership, clear and reasonable goals, and a less stressful work setting.

Research Evidence on Organizational Politics and Impression Management

Field research involving employees in real organizations rather than students in contrived laboratory settings has yielded these useful insights:

- In a study of 514 nonacademic university employees in the southwestern United States, white men had a greater understanding of organizational politics than did racial and ethnic minorities and white women. The researchers endorsed the practice of using mentors to help women and minorities develop their political skills.
• Another study of 68 women and 84 men employed by five different service and
industrial companies in the United States uncovered significant gender-based insights
about organizational politics. In what might be termed the battle of the sexes,
it was found that political behavior was perceived more favorably when it was per-
formed against a target of the opposite gender. . . Thus subjects of both sexes tend
to relate to gender as a meaningful affiliation group. This finding presents a different
picture from the one suggesting that women tend to accept male superiority at
work and generally agree with sex stereotypes which are commonly discriminatory
in nature.91

• In a more recent survey of 172 team members in a large company’s research and
development unit, perceived higher levels of team politics were associated with
lower organizational commitment, lower job satisfaction, poorer job performance,
and lower unit effectiveness.92

The results of a cross-cultural laboratory study are noteworthy. A unique study of 38
Japanese Americans and 39 European Americans at the University of Utah showed how im-
pression management can cause problems across cultures. Consistent with Japanese tradi-
tion, the Japanese Americans tended to publicly report their job performance in a
self-effacing (or modest) way, despite confiding in private that they had performed as well
as the European Americans. This Japanese cultural tendency toward understatement cre-
ated a false impression for third-party European American evaluators (who were kept un-
aware of any cultural distinctions). According to the researchers, “Japanese American
participants were seen as less competent and less likeable than their European American
counterparts because of their tendency to downplay their performance.”93 The old Ameri-
can expression “It pays to toot your own horn” appears to be as true as ever. Too much toot-
ing, however, can brand one as arrogant, self-centered, and overbearing. This sort of
delicate cultural balancing act makes cross-cultural dealings very challenging.

Managing Organizational Politics

Organizational politics cannot be eliminated. A manager would be naive to expect such an
outcome. But political maneuvering can and should be managed to keep it constructive and
within reasonable bounds (see Real World/Real People). Harvard’s Abraham Zaleznik put
the issue this way: “People can focus their attention on only so many things. The more it
lands on politics, the less energy—emotional and intellectual—is available to attend to the
problems that fall under the heading of real work.”94

An individual’s degree of politicalness is a matter of personal values, ethics, and tem-
perament. People who are either strictly nonpolitical or highly political generally pay a
price for their behavior. The former may experience slow promotions and feel left out,
while the latter may run the risk of being called self-serving and lose their credibility. Peo-
ple at both ends of the political spectrum may be considered poor team players. A moder-
ate amount of prudent political behavior generally is considered a survival tool in complex
organizations. Experts remind us that

political behavior has earned a bad name only because of its association with politicians.
On its own, the use of power and other resources to obtain your objectives is not inher-
ently unethical. It all depends on what the preferred objectives are.95

With this perspective in mind, the practical steps in Table 15–3 are recommended. How
many of the Enron- and WorldCom-type scandals could have been prevented with this ap-
proach? Remember: Measurable objectives are management’s first line of defense against
negative expressions of organizational politics.96
Jorma Ollila, CEO of Finland’s Nokia, Hangs Up on Organizational Politics

Ollila has a reputation for being animated and funny—not traditional Finnish traits, say Nokia’s Finnish employees. But like many Finns, he is blunt and direct. He gives executives tough assignments, then gives them leeway to get them done or risk his ire. He particularly hates corporate politics.

“It is a plague that has to be weeded out at the first signs,” he says. Ollila and his top managers “will tell you what’s on their minds—it’s very black and white,” says Susan Macke, an American who joined Nokia as a vice president earlier this year. “Everybody has an opinion, and they’re not afraid to voice it. But at the end of the day, the leader makes a decision and everybody buys in. There’s no posturing.”

---

Table 15-3: How to Keep Organizational Politics within Reasonable Bounds

- Screen out overly political individuals at hiring time.
- Create an open-book management system.
- Make sure every employee knows how the business works and has a personal line of sight to key results with corresponding measurable objectives for individual accountability.
- Have nonfinancial people interpret periodic financial and accounting statements for all employees.
- Establish formal conflict resolution and grievance processes.
- As an ethics filter, do only what you would feel comfortable doing on national television.
- Publicly recognize and reward people who get real results without political games.


Summary of Key Concepts

1. Explain the concept of mutuality of interest. Managers are constantly challenged to foster mutuality of interest (a win-win situation) between individual and organizational interests. Organization members need to actively cooperate with actual and potential adversaries for the common good.

2. Name at least three “soft” and two “hard” influence tactics, and summarize the practical lessons from influence research. Five soft influence tactics are rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, consultation, ingratiation, and personal appeals. They are more friendly and less coercive than the four hard influence tactics: exchange, coalition tactics, pressure, and legitimating tactics. According to research, soft tactics are better for generating commitment and are perceived as more fair than hard tactics. Ingratiation—making the boss feel good through compliments and being helpful—can slightly improve performance appraisal results and make the boss like you a lot more. Influence through domination is a poor strategy for both men and women. Influence is a complicated and situational process that needs to be undertaken with care, especially across cultures.

3. Identify and briefly explain Cialdini’s six principles of influence and persuasion. They are liking (people tend to like those who like them), reciprocity (belief that good