Politics and Organizational Change: The Lived Experience

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This paper explores the "lived experience" of organizational politics from the standpoint of the change agent. While political behavior appears inevitably to accompany organizational change, the literature of change management seems to adopt an ambivalent approach to this area. The literature of organizational politics, on the other hand, identifies power bases, and offers prescriptive lists of "power tactics" without explaining how these are deployed in the context of driving, shaping, influencing, or implementing change. How do change agents become engaged in political activity, what forms does this take, and can these actions withstand public scrutiny? This paper is based on qualitative, idiographic accounts drawn from five interviews from a pilot study designed to develop a research methodology for advancing understanding of the shaping role of political behavior in organizational change. The case illustrations presented suggest that political behavior is an accepted rather than an objectionable dimension of the change agency role; that change agents are drawn into political behavior by a combination of organizational and interpersonal factors; that political behavior can serve organizational goals (such as protection of a change agenda) as well as personal career objectives; and that while specific actions may appear unacceptable when considered in isolation, political behavior is potentially defensible in context. The definition of "political" here is the one used by respondents. This constructivist perspective reveals interpretations inconsistent with negative definitions, emphasizing the illegitimate and self-serving character of political behavior, which tend to dominate the literature.

KEY WORDS: change agents; organization development; organization politics; managing change.

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INTRODUCTION

Interviewer: But many managers argue that organizational politics are a distraction, it's not what they're paid for, not part of the job?

Manager: I would say bollocks to that. I would say that people who get to those jobs only get to that level because, first, they are reasonably good at playing these games, and second, actually enjoy playing them. The people who fail at that level are, by-and-large, people who aren't particularly good at playing and don't understand.

Conflict and resistance are pervasive features of organizational life. Markus (1983) identifies the triggers of what she describes as "the political variant" in disputes over goals, values, and appropriate solutions to organizational problems, and in the competition for scarce resources and valued power bases. However, it may be assumed that, in most organizations, the prevalence of political behavior is the norm rather than a variant. Organizational politics is often equated with the devious, the underhand, the cunning, and the manipulative. Political activity has thus been viewed by some as a field of "dirty tricks," to be avoided and eradicated, and not as an aspect of organizational behavior to be incorporated systematically into theoretical perspectives. Where politics is recognized as critical, commentators typically restrict their remarks to generalized theoretical overviews, and to lists of "power tactics."

The focus of this paper lies with the political dimension of change agency. The change agent is here defined as any individual seeking to reconfigure an organization's roles, responsibilities, structures, outputs, processes, systems, technology, or other resources. Significant reconfigurations invariably trigger conflict and resistance, both overt and covert, motivated by a blend of organizational concern and self-interest. Recognizing the politically motivated contributions of a plurality of individuals and groups moves discussion into the sphere of stakeholder analysis. Egan (1994) offers an entertaining list of the various stakeholder groups—fencesitters, allies, bedfellows, loose cannons, the voiceless, opponents, adversaries—who, he argues, should be treated or managed differently. Those who seek to block or subvert change can be expected to resort on occasion to political tactics, potentially triggering a parallel response from those promoting change. To paraphrase Ashby's (1964) cybernetic law of requisite variety, the behavior repertoire of the change agent may need to be as rich and diverse as the behavior repertoires of those resisting change.

This paper seeks to explore the "lived experience" of organizational politics from the standpoint of the change agent. How do change agents become engaged in political activity, what forms does this engagement take, and can these behaviors withstand public scrutiny? The paper argues that approaches which emphasize the negative and self-serving dimensions of

political behavior are not faithful to the understanding of change agents. There are clear difficulties in bringing empirical data to such questions, given the sensitivities of disclosure. Attempts to disguise organizations and actors can separate accounts from their history and context, making adequate interpretation problematic. The most appropriate research designs are perhaps qualitative and idiographic, thereby impeding the development of generalizable propositions. In considering a limited sample of case material, the aim here, therefore, concerns analytical generalization to relevant theory and not statistical generalization to a wider population of change agents (Mitchell, 1983; Bryman, 1988; Yin, 1994; Stake, 1994).

Power is conventionally defined as the capacity of individuals to exert their will over others. Politics, therefore, is the practical domain of power in action, worked out through the use of techniques of influence and other (more or less extreme) tactics. Mintzberg (1983, p. 172) argues that, "Politics refers to individual or group behavior that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in the technical sense, illegitimate—sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise (though it may exploit any of these)." Mayes and Allen (1977) offer a definition of political behavior based on the lack of organizational sanction for both the means used and the ends being pursued. Drory and Romm (1990) identify three "definition elements" which characterize political behavior. These include a *situation* conditioned by conflict and uncertainty, the use of covert nonjob-related *means* to pursue concealed motives, and self-serving *outcomes* acting against organizational goals. Political behavior is thus typically regarded in negative terms. Zaleznik (1989) scathingly contrasts "psychopolitics" with "real work." Stone (1997) offers a similarly one-sided account of the need to eradicate politics from organizational life.

Other commentators, such as Burns (1966), Mangham (1979), and Kakabadse and Parker (1984) argue that organizational politics are central to a theoretical understanding of change and to practical intervention in the change process. Pfeffer (1992) points to the costs involved in addressing politics, and argues also that attempts to marginalize key decisions and to encourage a "strong" culture of shared objectives stifles debate and creativity. Change and uncertainty can heighten the intensity of political behavior. Schon (1963) argues that "champions of change" can expect to encounter resistance to new ideas, and that political behavior is by implication desirable. Tushman (1977) observes that diversity of opinion, values, beliefs, interpretations, and goals in the context of organizational change inevitably triggers political behavior. Frost and Egri (1991) similar argue that political behavior is not only inevitable in the context of organizational

change but also necessary, in stimulating creativity and debate, and that such behavior should thus be viewed positively.

THE REPRESSION OF POLITICS

The literature of organizational change is fragmented, and deals with political behavior from a range of stances. The contextual/processual approach to change (Pettigrew, 1973, 1985, 1987, 1988; Pettigrew, Ferlie, & McKee, 1992) explicitly recognizes the significance of political factors in implementing strategic organizational change. Dunphy and Stace (1988, 1990) similar endorse the need for political action in particular change contexts. However, commentators in this perspective (including Wilson, 1992) offer little guidance on the nature and consequences of political interventions, and have instead sought to distance their theoretical position from mundane practical concerns (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991). One exception is Dawson (1994, 1996), whose practical guidelines from detailed processual analyses of change do extend to political issues, but are confined to the generalities of obtaining support and commitment of key individuals and groups, and to maintaining good communications. The contextual/processual perspective, however, in drawing attention to the nonlinear dynamic of change, to the political arenas in which decisions are made, and to the enabling and constraining characteristics of the substance and context of change, may provide a useful platform for further detailed research into political agendas.

Practitioners and researchers in the field of organization development (OD), in contrast, have sought to distinguish their perspective from political behavior, but in a manner that is not wholly convincing. In one "mainstream" OD text, French and Bell (1995) devote over 20 pages to power and political issues. The OD practitioner is "encouraged to learn as much as possible about bargaining, negotiations, the nature of power and politics, the strategy and tactics of influence, and the characteristics and behaviours of powerholders" (French & Bell, 1995, p. 318). However, these authors also emphasize the "normative-re-educative" and "empirical-rational" bases of OD, and deny the relevance of "power-coercive" strategies. They note that: "The role of the OD practitioner is that of a facilitator, catalyst, problem solver, and educator. The practitioner is not a political activist or power broker" (French & Bell, 1995, p. 313).

Greiner and Schein (1988) appear to offer a contrasting OD perspective, emphasizing the effective deployment of power. However, their argument rests on the distinction between positive and negative uses of power. They contrast "the high road," in which power brokers are led to deploy their resources and tactics in ways that are "open and above board," with "the low

road" where deceit, manipulation, and "political games" are used to further self-interest. Greiner and Schein thus reproduce the traditional distinction made by McClelland and Burnham (1976, 1995), between "socialized" and "unsocialized" uses of power in organizations, arguing that successful managers deploy the former. Egan (1994) bases his prescriptions for "working the shadow side" of organizational life on a distinction between institution-building and empire-building politics, once again arguing for the benefits of the former and the damaging consequences of the latter. This crude dichotomy can be seen as an attempt to bracket a legitimate domain of political activity, allowing commentators to claim that their perspective confronts organizational realities, while discounting the legitimacy of "dirty tricks," "wheeler-dealing," "backstaging," and other dubious tactics.

Early Tavistock Institute works in sociotechnical systems thinking appear not to recognize organizational politics in their model building, or prescriptions (Rice, 1958, 1963; Emery, 1963; Trist et al., 1963; Davis, 1966). This genre has maintained a focus on the joint-optimization of the social and technical subsystems of the organization, deploying the technique of variance analysis to highlight the sources and resolution of problems, applying an enriched work design model that relies on the humanist psychology of Maslow (1943). The sociotechnical model of "responsible autonomy" (de Sitter, 1993) still lies at the heart of much contemporary prescription, including Lawler's (1986) advocacy of "high involvement management," and Peters' (1987) advocacy of self-managing teams.

In sociotechnical systems thinking, it has been axiomatic that participative organization design should be implemented in a participative manner. Cherns (1976, 1987) calls this the "principle of compatibility," claiming that participation cannot be developed autocratically. The dominant roles of the change driver are thus the "therapist-facilitator" (Klein, 1976) and the "non-authoritarian social engineer" (van Eijnatten, 1993). The therapist has a restricted and instrumental role, in providing the knowledge and expertise necessary to "ensure free and informed choice" and to "ensure internal commitment," rather than to prescribe solutions (Argyris, 1970). The role of the social engineer is to help with the "technical" dimensions of problem definition, the collection and analysis of information, and the use of tools such as variance analysis, "search conferences" and "deep slice workshops" to help an organization's members identify and implement their own chosen solutions.

These observations seem to be confirmed by van Eijnatten (1993) in a comprehensive review of sociotechnical systems thinking. The "problems of power" in this perspective are to be dealt with through "self-design by knowledge transfer." The concept of the change agent utilizing political tactics is anathema as it "will attack the main values of the socio-technical system de-

sign paradigm," because it involves "undemocratic processes," "because the learning process cannot take place properly," and it "produces the wrong values and re-establishes an old culture" (van Eijnatten, 1995, personal communication). The "right culture," from a managerial humanist perspective, is one where individuals are treated as ends and not means, are offered meaningful work, can develop their abilities, are treated with dignity and respect, and are able to exercise substantial control over events affecting them (Nord, 1978). Managerial humanism, which sociotechnical systems thinking shares with other strands of management thought (OD, "soft HRM," "excellence," "high performance systems," "self-managing teams"), variously denies, represses or neglects the political dimension of organizational functioning in general, and of organizational change in particular.

The failure to confront openly the political dimensions of change within the sociotechnical framework has attracted criticism from those with a practical appreciation of change agency. Klein (1976, p. 5) argues that the therapist–facilitator function fails to address the realities of industrial problem solving. She highlights the political agenda of the social scientist working in a context where power relationships influence key decisions, where commitment hinges on career interests, and where the supply and exchange of resources is a continuing feature of change implementation. Exploring trends in sociotechnical systems thinking, den Hertog (1995, p. 16) notes that, "Although the involvement of a great deal of people is needed to arrive at a sound alternative, involvement and goodwill alone do not take us far. That is what we have learned from the experiences with numerous work consultation and work restructuring experiments in the 1970s. Power plays an important role."

Much of the now extensive literature on planned organizational change cannot be classified within the contextual/processual, organization development or sociotechnical systems genres, although there is much borrowing and intermingling of terminology and technique between these areas. This domain includes, for example, the work of Waterman (1988) who offers eight "renewal factors" for successful change; Kotter (1995) who also offers eight reasons why organizational transformations fail; Burnes (1992) who presents a nine-element approach to implementing strategic change; Eccles (1994) who identifies eight preconditions for effective change, and a 14-point implementation checklist (including a "hierarchy" of techniques for dealing with resistance, leading ultimately to "neutralization" and "exit"); and Woodcock and Francis (1992) who present a 15-point checklist for the effective management of change. These various "recipes" invariably recognize the significance of identifying "power brokers," and of obtaining where possible the support of influential individuals and groups. However, these factors are typically treated in a relatively superficial manner. The relation-

ship between the political and other ingredients in the recipe is usually explored through a stakeholder analysis that fails to capture the complex and controversial dynamics of political activity (Mintzberg, 1994). Within this genre, Ward (1994, p. 143) argues with an air of finality that, "To ignore organizational politics when managing change is to fail. What then is the alternative? Should one be political? The short answer is no. You should not be political. If you do become political, then professional integrity is sacrificed. You are just another silver-tongued hustler parading your wares while seeking to manipulate. This is the road to disaster. Politics does not add value."

Hardy (1996), in sharp contrast, notes that political behavior provides a critical dynamic for organizational reconfiguration. Kumar and Thibodeaux (1990) similarly acknowledge and advocate the use of political strategies in planned organizational change. They identify three levels of change. First level change involves improving unit or department effectiveness. Second level change involves the introduction of new perspectives to organizational subsystems. Third level change concerns organizationwide shifts in values and ways of working. They argue that, while first and second level changes respectively require political awareness and political facilitation, third level change entails political intervention. In other words, the more widespread the implications of organizational change, the greater the political involvement required by the change agent. Intervention at this level involves stimulating debate, gaining support from key people, and covert manipulation. Kumar and Thibodeaux admit that what they advocate may be regarded as "ethically objectionable," pointing to the "distasteful" reality of organizational politics in their defense (p. 364).

This last comment offers one reason for the relative neglect of political themes in relation to change. Most organizations, and their members, perhaps do not regard disclosure of these topics as valuable corporate or personal publicity. Decisions are legitimated by visible evidence and rational argument, not by intrigue and wheeler-dealing. The scheming and manipulative dimension of organizational politics may concern maintaining an appearance of not "playing politics" in the first place. Burns (1961) and March and Olsen (1983) point to the demarcated public and private languages of organizational decision making. In addition, the managerial humanism which pervades management commentary precludes critique of the politically constituted nature of the goals and behavior of organizational actors.

The premise underlying this paper, therefore, is that the change agent becomes engaged of necessity in the exercise of power, politics, and interpersonal influence. This potentially moves the change agent beyond traditional notions of the role—in what Bennis (1969) calls the "truth, trust, love and collaboration" approach to change—into the murky domain of

the political operator, or of "power-assisted steering." This is not a novel argument. It has long been recognized that the rational rules and proce-dures of Weberian bureaucracy are regularly bent, broken, ignored, and applied selectively in the interests of "getting things done" and in the pur-suit of interdepartmental rivalry (Merton, 1957; Blau, 1963; Gouldner, 1964; Selznick, 1966; Perrow, 1970). Dalton (1959) revealed managers working on two levels, one for the records and appearances, and one sub-merged. Dalton (1959, p. 31) argued that managers are implicitly coached in the "fitnesses of workable illegalities," such as losing records when ad-vantageous, manipulating accounts to fund secret operations, organizing in-formal favors, giving advance warning of inspections, nonrecording of accidents to improve the safety record, and guards on the gates colluding in the removal of company goods.

The contemporary nature and implications of political intervention in organizational change, however, has attracted less attention and commen-tary. Little seems to be known about the motives, conduct, maneuvering, tactics, "power plays," perceptions, and self-justifications of change agents at the level of lived experience.

POWER PLAYS

How do change agents deal with what Bacharach and Lawler (1981, p. 7) describe as "competitive tactical encounters?" There is a rich organi-zation research and management consultancy literature on power and po-litical tactics. Martin and Sims (1964) point to the "instinctive revulsion against the term power among managers in America," but advocate a series of managerial "power tactics." McMurry (1973) offers advice to "the am-bitious executive" on how "to gain and retain power by tactics that are in a large measure political and means that are, in part at least, Machiavel-lian." McClelland and Burnham (1976, 1995) argue that the need for power is a predictor of managerial career success. Keen (1981) offers a discussion of the "counter implementation" and "counter-counter implementation" tactics deployed in organizational settings involving information systems ap-plications. Kanter (1983) discusses the "power skills" required by the "change architect," for establishing supportive coalitions and for blocking interference. Buchanan and Boddy (1992) and Buchanan (1993a) similarly advise the change agent to support the rational-linear "public performance" of the implementation process with "backstage behaviors" that involve the covert manipulation of language, relationships, and organization structures. Scott-Morgan (1995) develops an approach by which managers can discover "the unwritten rules of the game" in their organization, to uncover dys-functional rules affecting behavior and performance, and thus to attempt

to redefine those rules. Von Zugbach (1995) identifies 13 "winner's commandments" for managerial success, including "say one thing and do another," "get your retaliation in first," and "other people's ideas of right and wrong do not apply to you." Rieple and Vyakarnam (1996) develop a model linking managerial ruthlessness to organizational performance. A number of commentators reinforce the role of (overt and covert) interpersonal influence tactics, including Kipnis et al. (1984), Rosenfeld, Giacalone, and Riordan (1995), Huczynski (1996), and Lambert (1996).

However, the literatures of change management have tended to neglect the use of political tactics in both theory construction and in prescription. While the skills and contributions of the social engineer and therapist-facilitator have been explored at length, the role of change agent as political operator is less well defined and understood. Failures in organizational change programs have been attributed to a range of factors, such as inadequate attention to human and organizational issues (Long, 1987; McLoughlin & Clark, 1994; Preece, 1995), a misplaced focus on culture rather than results (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Schaffer & Thomson, 1992), and to the political weakness of organizational coalitions supporting change (Perrow, 1983; Clegg, 1993). Failure to address political issues, particularly in radical strategic change, may provide a further source of explanation here.

The following accounts are drawn from a pilot study designed to develop a research methodology for advancing understanding of the shaping role of political behavior in organizational change. Five senior managers with current major change implementation responsibilities (four male, one female) were recruited in their personal capacity to this study (Buchanan, 1993b). The organizational bases of these managers at the time of interview included a hospital, two local authorities, management consultancy, and a computer manufacturer. Interviews were schedule-unstructured, based on 15 question which interviewees could address in their own preferred sequence. Questions covered the use and illustrations of the term "political behavior," the value of political skill to the individual, the contribution of politics to organizational change, and requests for specific examples in the respondent's experience. Interviews lasted one and a half hours and were tape-recorded, producing transcripts each around 10,000 words long. Both authors of this paper have senior management experience involving change implementation, and generated their own accounts of political behavior in such settings. Individuals and organizations are not identified; more adequate accounts would have to offer significantly detailed background and context information. Each account is produced form the standpoint of the individual change agent. Obtaining accounts from related actors would, clearly, be problematic, if fascinating.

These accounts are limited in perspective, detail, and representativeness, but serve to illustrate something of the phenomenological texture of the lived experience of organizational politics. The reporting across these accounts is uneven, as respondents were invited to disclose only what they felt comfortable to disclose in the circumstances. The first account comes from a freelance management consultant. The second is drawn from the experience of one of the authors in a university management context. The third account is from an interview with a senior, female, hospital manager. The final account comes from a senior manager with a computer manufacturing company.

Case 1: Management Consultant—What the Chief Executive Wants

The annoying thing was, we got the assignment against stiff competition, because we didn't want to sell any one particular solution. They were impressed by our flexibility. Borough council, wanted a review of their twenty year old officer and member organization structures. In fact they wanted us to present options, maybe simple, maybe radical, from which they could choose, within the constraint of a no redundancy policy. We won the assignment in a presentation to [a policy and resources] sub-committee, mainly councillors, with a couple of senior officers present. The leader of our consulting team was an ex-colleague and friend of the council's new chief executive.

The following week, we were invited to a meeting with the chief executive, to launch the project, agree our liaison mechanisms, find a room to work in, and so on. We spent a couple of hours discussing the logistics, then he asked us if we would have some lunch, and sandwiches and stuff were trayed in. However, as we were hoovering this lot up, he produced a seven page document, and gave the four of us copies. He worked through this, line by line for about an hour. This set out what he wanted to see in our final report. Some of this had been in the original brief for the assignment, set out in general terms, and here it was again with some specific recommendations and markers for action, concerning parts of the organization structure and named individuals in specific posts, which were not expected to survive the review. We didn't have such flexibility with our recommendations as we had thought.

The project rolled out over that year, and our recommendations got firmed up as we collected more information. Basically, this was an autocratically managed, hierarchical, rigid, bureaucratic organization, with lots of time and money wasted on unnecessary procedures and rule-following, and with poor staff morale. So our recommendations were going to be about cutting hierarchy, empowering people, changing the management

style, making procedures more flexible, getting decisions taken more quickly, and the chief executive was behind all this. The main client was the subcommittee to which we reported, about every quarter. But not before the chief executive had at his request seen an advance copy of the report, commented on it and suggested changes. Quite reasonable, as he would be directly affected by any recommendations about the structure, and also saw himself as a client for our services. This put us in an awkward position. We knew his thinking, and other managers would ask us about that, and we had to fudge answers like, "that's one of the issues still under consideration." This also meant we had to build his ideas into our reports, finding some rationale for supporting them, which was important because if questions came up in committee, we would have to explain and defend the point, although he might chip in and voice some agreement with and sympathy for our view from time to time.

Then we started getting bother from one of the councillors, saw himself as an expert in organization theory. He came up with a proposal for a matrix structure with multidisciplinary team working. The team working was our idea too, partly to address some communications problems. But the matrix wasn't going to fit their business. We got nowhere with the guy in the full committee meeting, so two of us asked him if we could meet him the next day, maybe over lunch, to kick this around. Turned out his concern was not with a matrix at all, but with the way the new director roles would be specified, that they would be like the previous management group (which he didn't trust), just with new titles. So we built the team-working ("great idea, thanks for that") and a revised role spec into the report, and he bought that.

The chief executive even subedited our final report, making changes to the recommendations which we then had to justify. What if we hadn't been able to roll with these pressures? We would have upset the chief executive, who saw our ability to incorporate his thinking as a reflection of our consulting expertise, and we would probably get no more work with this client. If we hadn't handled these individuals, and others, in this sort of way, the whole project could have been at risk, and the time and contributions of a lot of other staff would have been wasted.

Case 1: Commentary

The "political" here concerns allowing a senior manager covertly to determine the recommendations of a consulting assignment independently of, and prior to, information gathering and analysis, and misleading an elected council member about his personal contribution to those recommendations. The triggers for this political behavior include an ostensibly

desirable and beneficial series of organization culture and structure changes, and the actions and perceptions of the senior manager and the council member. Justification for these behaviors can potentially be offered in the desire of the consultant to maintain professional credibility and obtain further work, and also to sustain the change agenda.

Case 2: Head of School—Quality Tactics

As part of a "traditional" university, our school had never had to face any kind of systematic audit of our teaching quality. So mounting a response to this in 1994-95 meant putting in place a lot of new procedures and documentation that we never had before, and also tidying up processes that had decayed somewhat. It also meant changing staff behavior, with regard to teaching preparation and keeping records and files, and standardizing student handout material on courses, and also with lecture theatre—and tutorial room—behavior. But we were also facing a research assessment exercise in 1996-97. Putting so much effort and resource into teaching quality inevitably meant reducing the time and energy available for research.

Well, the senior staff, mostly the professors, looked at the options. We could do nothing, concentrate on improving our research rating, we were one of the top ten in the UK, and accept a lousy teaching rating. Or we could concentrate on research while doing just enough to get a "satisfactory" rating on teaching, not too damaging. Or we could push the boat out and go for teaching excellence. I reached my conclusion on these options pretty quickly, and most of the rest of the top team agreed. It would reflect badly on the university as a whole if we got a lousy rating. No other department had at that time been rated excellent on teaching. It would reflect badly on the school within the university if we went down. People could use that to block and snipe at all sorts of initiatives we wanted to put in place. How would it affect staff morale, retention and recruitment if we got a poor rating? And I didn't want to be known as the school director that botched this one, on the campus or off.

However, there were a couple of voices, one in particular, in the senior group who disagreed with this, felt we should do little or nothing to change our teaching activity, and concentrate on research output instead. A reasonable view, which we did consider, but which the majority decided was unrealistic. We reasoned with these guys, at length and they saw they were outnumbered at an early stage. I thought, naively, they would accept the decision and pull along with it. Not a chance. One guy in particular wouldn't let it go, kept bringing the issue to committee meetings, kept getting the junior staff agitated about this—were they doing the right thing, should they be thinking of promotion and publishing instead? At first this

was just annoying and time wasting. But it soon became damaging, in terms of the arguments other staff were getting into, in terms of the credibility of the top team and the approach we had decided on collectively. The rest of the team wanted something done about this.

So I kept up a pattern of spoiling tactics to keep this voice down. We had premeetings without him, to decide how decisions would go so that he would have less opportunity to argue an opposing case. My secretary put any issue that he wanted added to a meeting agenda at the end of the list, so we would have no time to discuss it properly. We just made some decisions in his absence, didn't tell him about a meeting. I spent a bit of time with a small number of the "opinion leaders" among the junior staff, making sure they knew what was happening and why, that they accepted we needed to go for this teaching quality rating at this time, and hoping they would spread the message along to the others. We also had full school briefings about the exercise, which were led mainly from the front. And I hate to admit that it wasn't difficult to spread a little innuendo here and there, with colleagues generally, to damage the guy's credibility, make him look less than competent on certain issues. Colleagues helped with this without prompting from me.

I don't see how I could have acted much differently in the circumstances, without accepting damage to my own reputation, as well as that of my school and perhaps the institution. And I think he knew that a lot of this was going on anyway. I don't regard any of this as unethical. On the contrary, to have ignored the issue, or to have just walked away from it, would have been difficult for me to defend. We got the "excellent" rating.

Case 2: Commentary

The "political" here concerns the systematic marginalization of a dissident senior colleague, through a range of tactics, including attempts to damage his credibility. The triggers for this political behavior include an ostensibly advantageous series of strategic changes to organizational procedures, and the dissident's unwillingness to accept the majority decision by the senior management group. Justification for these behaviors can potentially be found in the top team consensus, in the school head's desire to maintain personal credibility and to preserve the reputation of his school, the need to achieve the strategic change effectively, and in the continuing disruptive behavior of the dissident.

Case 3: Hospital Manager—Your Assignment, My Change Project

I was working for an organization, not this one, and the person I was working for was doing a management course. There was a change approach

I really wanted this person to take, and I was trying to persuade them. So they had to do a piece of work, and because it was a practical management course, they had to relate to their situation. So, I wrote it for this person. Basically, a piece of work which was the change strategy I wanted this person to follow. So, I wrote it in their name. It was about why doing this change process was the best thing they could possibly do in the circumstances. And they handed it in. I would call this devious because I wanted . . .it was highly manipulative, because I wanted that person to listen and do this thing I wanted them to do. So the way I persuaded them to do it was, for them, to write a piece of work which set out the thing which I wanted them to do. I wrote it in their name—and they did it.

The assignment got a very, very good grade. And he did all of it. It was very successful. That worked. I had built up the case for doing this thing I wanted him to do, but by bit, step by step. He bought into it in a way that he wouldn't have if I had just tried to persuade him in other ways. But he owned this piece of work, which is what I wanted him to do.

Case 3: Commentary

The "political" here concerns writing a university course assignment for another manager to persuade him to implement an organizational change. The triggers for this political behavior include the initiator's belief in the desirability of the change, and the target's initial indifference. Justification for this behavior can potentially be found in the effective implementation of the desired change.

Case 4: Project Manager—Fraud and Retribution

I had a situation, I was working as a project manager in Sheffield, and I got the impression that the team that I was working with, the two senior people in that team, were doing something dishonest. In fact I was convinced of it. They'd brought on a new contractor. I recognized the pricing that we were putting out was becoming higher and higher. I knew the sorts of margin that we were making, and I could see that something was wrong. You then match that up with, Bob gets a new color television and a holiday in Majorca with his three children, and I had a fair idea of where his salary was and I knew it wasn't that high. And Steve whose wife has just left him manages to sell the house, pay £12,000, get himself a new washing machine, dishwasher and microwave, new girlfriend with dresses and all the rest of it. And I'm thinking that there's something wrong with the finances here. I made that, in an implicit way fairly clear, that I believed something was going on and I knew what it was.

Bob was a sharp man, a sharp political mover, he obviously realized what was going on as well. The next thing I saw was, I came in one day and there was a couple of cards on my desk from recruitment agencies. I'd never called a recruitment agency, and there were the cards sitting there. I then had a phone call from a recruitment agency, and then another one. I thought, headhunter, looking for senior people, you think that's good, I like the sound of that. So you go along with it. You realize that it's not a senior position at all, it's just someone who's been given your name. You don't need to be a genius to put the two together here. So what I could have done was challenge them about it, said why are you doing this, what is in it for you, if you want to get rid of me why don't you just say so, why don't you be a man about it? So I thought, OK, stick to the job, get the job done. I can't afford to fail on the job or else that will follow me along.

I contacted on the of the Directors of the company, and suggested to him that I may be looking for a move within the company. I met him in a hotel and gave him a brief outline of why I was not happy and why I wanted to move on. I didn't tell him that I thought something untoward was going on. I didn't tell him that I'd had cards on my desk. I just said that the relationship was not working, that we had professional differences, and that I felt it was time for me to use my skills elsewhere. I was offered a more senior position in our head office at that time, which was outside London, and I moved away from that situation. Now, the reason I'm saying this is, there are ways that you can use it to your best advantage. I felt that I could use this situation.

More importantly, I felt that if I'm . . .retribution . . .I felt that if I stayed within the company, a company I know quite well, then I would get my chance later on. This is going to sound very bad, I know it is, but if I'd have gotten the position that I applied for, I would actually have been their boss. And if I return in eleven months time to the position which could be open to me, I will be their boss. And you harbor these thoughts for many, many years. I still harbor it now. I know which one of them is the brighter of the two. I know which one of them leads it. I know who plays the political games, and I know that I'll keep him and sack the other because it breaks up their team.

Case 4: Commentary

The "political" here concerns the initial spurious reference of the narrator to a "headhunting" agency to encourage him to leave, the narrator's subsequent covert exploitation of this action to leverage a move to another part of the company, and the anticipated return in the near future to a pro-

moted position from which to exact retribution on the perpetrators of the fraud. The trigger for the initial political act lay in the discovery of fraud by a management colleague. The triggers for the narrator's response include the potentially illegal behavior, and the perceived need to avoid confrontation and to "get the job done." Justification for the narrator's behaviors can potentially be offered in his desire to maintain personal credibility, to advance his career prospects, to achieve current job objectives, and to close down the discovered fraud at some point in the near future.

CONCLUSIONS

What do these accounts reveal about the lived experience of organizational politics? This evidence has a number of limitations. These case incidents have been selected for their revelatory properties. They each rely on an individual standpoint. There are no "parallel" accounts from other actors. Context information is lacking. However, from such a qualitative, idiographic base, *analytical* generalization to theoretical positions in the literature is more appropriate than statistical generalization to a change agency population.

First, it seems that political behavior is an accepted and pervasive dimension of the change agent's role. The interviewer in each case experienced no difficulty in eliciting such accounts. These four illustrative examples are drawn from a larger series of similar incidents. This contrasts with the portrayal of political behavior in some of the literature as "distasteful" and "objectionable" (e.g., Kumar & Thibodeaux, 1990).

Second, the narrator's approach in each case, albeit presented with reflection, implies a considered and creative approach to the prevailing circumstances. These accounts are inadequate for exposing the detailed nature of the tacit political skills involved, an issue which perhaps merits further detailed research. What is clear, however, is the limited value of checklists of "power tactics" found in some of the politics literature (e.g., McMurry, 1973; Kanter, 1983; von Zugbach, 1995) in informing such political behavior.

Third, some at least of the specific behaviors reported here clearly can be considered objectionable: deceit surrounding the source of consulting recommendations; manipulation of communications and meeting agendas, and covert damage to the credibility of a colleague; deceit concerning authorship of a university assignment; a "forced" transfer application leading to a promoted post as a platform for revenge on colleagues. However, these behaviors can potentially be represented, and justified, as reasonable in context.

Fourth, the narrator in each case appears to become engaged in political behavior through a combination of organizational circumstances (job

responsibilities, a critical organizational change agenda), personal motives (career prospects, perceived credibility), and the behavior of others (requests from authority figures, deceit, fraud, threat to a change agenda). None of the interviewees discussed seriously the option of not engaging in such behavior in those circumstances. The potentially damaging consequences of an avoidance strategy can instead be cited in defense of political behavior.

Finally, the interpretation of "political" implied in these accounts contrasts with definitions of political behavior in much of the literature, and in particular Mayes and Allen (1977), Mintzberg (1984), Greiner and Schein (1988), and Drory and Romm (1990). Here we see political behavior deployed simultaneously in the pursuit and defense of organizational goals as well as for personal and career objectives. Straightforward dichotomies between "legitimate" and "illegitimate," say, or between "sanctioned" and "unsanctioned," or between "altruistic" and "self-serving" behavior do not seem to be appropriate.

Organizational political behavior thus presents both positive and negative, "nice and nasty" faces to the observer—and to recipients or victims. Not all "tricks" are "dirty tricks," although clearly some ploys in some contexts should be labeled as such. An adequate treatment must explore both dimensions. A reluctance to address this topic can be seen as naive, in not recognizing positive aspects of political behavior, and can also be regarded as deceptive and manipulative by suggesting that our attention would be better focused elsewhere. Those whose interests are served by political behavior benefit from the argument that such actions do not deserve critical scrutiny. From such reasoning Hardy (1996) presents a compelling case for increasing the visibility of political dynamics. A wider understanding of political behavior may advantage those who would deploy such tactics, and also support those who would seek to challenge and counter such behaviors. This is not an argument for abandoning collaborative and participative organizational change strategies, or conventional "therapist" and "social engineering" roles. However, reappraisal and further investigation of the multifaceted political dimension of change agency, and the complex and tacit nature of the skills involved, seem appropriate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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