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# **Power, Politics, and Organizational Change**

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# **Power, Politics, and Organizational Change**

**Winning the Turf Game**

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Second Edition

**David A. Buchanan and Richard J. Badham**

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Macquarie University Graduate School of Management*

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We hope that you will find this book useful, interesting, and enjoyable. However, we welcome your feedback. We are particularly interested to hear from readers whose experiences of organizational politics are consistent with the argument set out here – and also from those who feel that we have misrepresented these issues. Our email addresses are:

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## Preface to the second edition

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Organization politics are a reality in most organizations, and while game-playing might outwardly appear to be wasted time, it is necessary in order to secure resources, progress ideas, achieve personal goals, and often to enhance one's standing. It is naive to realistically expect to be able to stand aloof from organizational politics. You may be respected for doing so, but your progress will be limited and you will be seen as an easy target.

*middle manager, private sector manufacturing company, male.*

Welcome to the second edition of this text. Since the first edition (1999), further evidence and commentary have been published, and the subject of organization politics is now covered on a number of masters degrees and executive development courses. We have therefore developed this edition so that it can be used as a core teaching text for specialist courses on organization politics, as well as support reading for courses in organizational behaviour, change management, leadership, and innovation. We hope that the availability of this text will encourage more instructors to offer courses in organization politics, rather than confine the topic to a session or two in their organizational behaviour courses. Research suggests that most managers view organization politics as a routine part of their experience, and a key factor in career success. However, the evidence also reveals that most managers have had no training in how to deal with this dimension of their role. We hope that practising managers will also find useful the evidence, arguments, case materials, diagnostics, assessments, practical advice, and other material that we have incorporated in this new edition.

The aims of this new edition are to incorporate:

- 1 fresh and up-to-date evidence, argument, and examples
- 2 teaching materials for self-study, and for instructors to use and adapt as appropriate.

Organization politics is a controversial subject. Advising managers on how to become better organization politicians may not be widely regarded as a legitimate activity. This book adopts a different stance, however, arguing that political behaviour is inevitable and desirable, as political exchanges generate the dynamic and drive the debate behind organization development and change initiatives. Most managers are likely to find the implementation of innovation and change challenging unless they possess political skill.

Current organizational trends have reinforced the significance of political skill. The stable, ordered, bounded, predictable, rule-based hierarchical organization today seems to be an anachronism. The so-called 'postmodern' organization is characterized by fluidity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and discontinuity. Organization boundaries are blurred with the development of partnerships and joint ventures, subcontracting and outsourcing, peripheral workforces and virtual teams, and social and technology-based collaborative networks. Hierarchy is replaced, in part, by reliance on expert power; in this context, those with the best understanding of the issues take the decisions. Many managers, and especially those with roles that include responsibility for innovation and change, have no direct line authority over those on whose cooperation they must rely. In this context, those with the best political skills attract more resources and support. In this (stereotyped) 'postmodern' organization, individuals are stripped of the luxury of a stable position, and are deprived of a predictable vision of their future. This fluid context implies an increased dependence on personal and interpersonal resources, and thus on political skills to advance personal and corporate agendas. There is clearly enhanced scope for political manoeuvring in a less well ordered and less disciplined organizational world, and hence the need for a critical understanding of the nature, shaping role, and consequences of political behaviour.

### ***What's new?***

Readers will find the following new material in this edition:

- New *research data* concerning the management experience and perceptions of organization politics. This shows that most managers regard political games as ethical, and identifies common and rare tactics.
- A further introduction to *research perspectives* in a field which is dominated by a positivist approach that struggles with the problem of finding a single undisputed definition of politics. That problem dissolves with a perspective that regards politics as a socially constructed phenomenon. What matters is not how researchers define politics, but how organizational members understand and define political behaviour.
- Additional discussion and illustration of *critical perspectives* on power and organization politics. These views bring into question common sense understandings of the nature of power and politics, and also what it means to be innovative and entrepreneurial. They address the personal (emotional) and social costs as well as benefits of Machiavellian management and political entrepreneurship.

- A new *antecedents – behaviours – consequences model* of organization politics, based on how practising managers understand these 'A–B–C' linkages. This model exposes the multiple triggers of political behaviour (which is not exclusively self-serving), the extraordinarily rich behaviour repertoire of the organization politician, and the 'dual effects' of politics concerning the range of individual and organizational benefits and costs flowing from the use of these tactics.
- Exploration of political skill, or rather *political expertise*. What is political skill? What does it mean to be an expert organization politician? How can political expertise be developed?
- An assessment of *women behaving badly*, exploring gender differences and gender effects in the understanding of, approaches to, and the use and consequences of political behaviour. Are women's attitudes to politics different from those of men? Are women affected differently? Do women play 'a different game'? What is the impact of making the distinction between 'men' and 'women' in this regard?
- A variety of *teaching materials*, which can be adapted for personal and instructional use, including incident reports, self-assessments, organization diagnostics, and analytical frameworks. Each chapter recommends a feature film (or DVD) which portrays aspects of organization politics. Dramatized fictional accounts offer valuable insights into the nature, practice, and implications of organization politics, for both skilled and unskilled players – issues that are difficult to demonstrate through other teaching vehicles. Film suggestions are intended mainly for home viewing. For classroom use, an appropriate licence is normally required. Before using film in the classroom, confirm with your local copyright administrator that you are operating within the law. In Britain, check the terms and conditions of two organizations which supply licenses: Educational Recording Agency ([www.era.org.uk](http://www.era.org.uk)) and Filmbank Distributors who provide Public Video Screening Licenses ([www.pvsl.co.uk](http://www.pvsl.co.uk)).

### ***What's the point?***

My view is that organization politics are almost inevitable, but they can be constructive or destructive. The best management skills would seek to ensure that constructive uses, such as attraction of resources, or changed working practices, are delivered through using supportive political skills. The worst skills are tantamount to bullying and dishonesty, which should not be condoned.

*middle manager, public sector hospital, female.*

The purpose and argument of this book remain the same. Our purpose is to offer a theoretical and practical guide to the politics of organizational change and innovation. The exercise of organization politics can be conceived as a game in which players

compete for different kinds of territory – for turf. What kind of game is this? What are the rules? How is it played? What ethical issues – if any – are raised? Should one play this game to win, and how? The underpinning argument is that the change agent who is not able and willing to engage with the organization politics will fail in that role, sooner or later, and probably sooner.

Our focus lies primarily with the *internal* change agent. A lot of commentary focuses on external agents and consultants (Ginzberg and Abrahamson, 1991; Hartley et al., 1997). But change is often a significant element of the roles and responsibilities of most functional and general managers, as well as many other staff, at all levels.

### **Age and treachery**

The American police chief, Bill Bratton, became known for his ability to ‘turn around’ problem police forces. In 1980, when he was a young lieutenant (age 34) in Boston’s police department, he put up this sign in his office: ‘*Youth and skill will win out every time over age and treachery*’.

However, within a few months, he was shunted into a dead end position, through a combination of office politics and his own brashness. Bratton took down the sign, having learned the significance of the plots, intrigues, and politics driving organizational change.

*Source:* based on an anecdote reported by Kim and Mauborgne (2003).

Our purpose is based on four underpinning beliefs.

## **1 The reality of politics**

Political behaviour plays a more significant role in organizational life than is often recognized, or openly admitted. We like to think of our social and organizational cultures as characterized by order, rationality, openness, collaboration and trust. The reality, however, is often different. Competition sits alongside cooperation. Informal ‘backstaging’ supports public action. We see self-interest, deceit, subterfuge, and cunning, as well as the pursuit of moral ideals and high aspirations. It is uncommon to hear decisions defended in terms of political motives and behaviours. Reason and logic must be seen and heard to prevail, and to suggest otherwise is to risk censure and ostracism. But initiatives are pursued, decisions are taken, and changes are introduced to preserve and extend the power bases and influence of individuals and groups, as well as to deliver corporate benefits. Major decisions and significant changes are particularly liable to heighten political activity. When observing outbreaks of either consensus or conflict, organizational behaviour cannot be understood fully without a knowledge of the role of political motives, agendas, and behaviour.

## 2 The repression of politics

he research literature does not adequately explore the shaping role of political behaviour in organizational change, but focuses instead on potentially damaging consequences such as stress, low job satisfaction, loss of commitment, and withdrawal. Three academic positions are evident.

*Denial* Some commentators refuse to accept that organization development and change, on the one hand, and political motives and behaviour, on the other, have any connection. Conflict is the result of poor communications, to be resolved with openness and mutual trust. *Acceptance without engagement* Other commentators accept the reality of politics, note that the change agent must understand this domain, but argue that personal involvement is ethically unacceptable.

*Recognition without advice* There are others still who accept both the reality of political behaviour, and the need for the change agent to address this domain, but remain theoretically remote and offer little guidance.

## 3 The two faces of politics

Political behaviour presents both positive and negative, 'nice and nasty' faces to the observer – and to recipients or victims. As with most management behaviour, organization politics can have dual effects – benefits and costs. We will argue, however, that not all 'tricks' are 'dirty tricks', although clearly some ploys in some contexts can be labelled as such. An adequate assessment must explore both dimensions. A reluctance to address this topic can therefore be regarded as naive, in not recognizing positive aspects of political behaviour, and can also be regarded as deceptive and manipulative by suggesting that our attention would be better focused elsewhere, thereby marginalizing this domain. Indeed, those whose interests are served by political behaviour benefit from the argument that their actions do not deserve critical scrutiny. A wider understanding of political behaviour may thus advantage both those who would deploy such strategies and tactics, and also support those who seek to challenge and counter such behaviours.

## 4 Confronting the challenges

Management development should help managers in general, and change agents in particular, to deal with the realities, the complexities, the challenges, the satisfactions and the dilemmas of political behaviour. Such advice applies to anyone seeking to influence change, regardless of job title or status. Denial is unrealistic. Acceptance without engagement is naive. Recognition without advice is unhelpful.

Does this lead to a prescription in which all change agents are politicians, all politics is about self-interest and manipulation, and the resulting management stereotype is a self-consciously devious Machiavellian? No. Organizations have social, technical, economic and cultural aspects as well as a political dimension. In a text such as this,

political behaviour is taken aside or bracketed for a focused examination because the topic is omitted or misrepresented elsewhere. The conventional toolkits of change, in project management, in socio-technical system analysis and design, in organization development, and in planned change methods remain valuable, and are adequately dealt with elsewhere. Political behaviour must be set firmly in context. We can use a crude motoring metaphor to illustrate this point. The vehicle requires a traditional engine, wheels, seats, a shell and a chassis, but the driver will find the journey easier with *power assisted steering*.

What does the phrase 'political behaviour' mean? We offer working definitions of power and politics in Chapter 1. We explore in more detail in Chapter 2 the ways in which these terms have been used, unpacking what are commonly regarded as the defining characteristics or dimensions of political behaviour. Chapter 3 offers a series of illustrations of political behaviour from practising managers. In the meantime, can we ask you to consider what you mean by political behaviour? How would you define and understand this term? What illustrations would you bring from your experience to describe the nature of political behaviour? Thus armed with your own experience-based understanding, you will be in a better position to evaluate the approaches and examples discussed here.

The readership for whom this text is primarily intended is a practising management one, probably following a post-experience masters degree programme in change management, human resources, and organizational behaviour. Our experience suggests that the nature and tactics of organization politics are broadly familiar to this audience. An understanding of political behaviour in organizations seems to be part of the tacit, taken-for-granted 'recipe knowledge' of most practising managers. The value proposition of this book, therefore, lies with a conceptual, theoretical, and empirical overview of the field, focusing on the shaping role of political behaviour in organizational change and innovation, advocating a creative, reflective, and self-critical approach to the use of political strategies and tactics.

Given this readership, the selection of materials raises problems. There is now an extensive literature on the management of change and innovation. There is also a rich tradition exploring power and politics dating back, for example, to Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli (Clegg, 1989), much of it written for audiences far removed from the day-to-day realities of contemporary management. Some conceptualizations and analyses of power and politics are more concerned with global, social, national, and community affairs than with the problems of public or private sector organization management. And some of the power and politics literature is couched in an arcane and abstract language, creating problems of access and interpretation for the uninitiated.

Our selection of material is based on a view of the field of organization politics as seen by the internal change agent. The term 'change agent' is used here broadly to refer to anyone involved in facilitating, initiating, influencing, or implementing change, whether or not they have an official title recognizing that responsibility. (While concentrating on

internal agents, much of the argument here applies to external change agents as well.) The simple notion of 'relevance' is not much help. Some of the more esoteric analyses of power shed useful light on the shaping role of politics. Some of the more readily accessible conceptualizations of power and politics tend to oversimplify the issues. We have therefore sought to survey the field from the standpoint of the change agent, exercising the authors' privileged politics of inclusion and exclusion. Academic readers familiar with the wider literature of this field will doubtless note major gaps.

This begs the question: who is this 'change agent' whose perspective is being adopted? We will first address this question in Chapter 1, but two comments may be helpful. First, the concept of *change agency* is of more value than the notion of the singular change agent (Buchanan and Storey, 1997; Denis et al., 2001). Change is typically driven by what Hutton (1994) describes as a 'cast of characters'. Our change agent is any member of that cast, formally appointed, or self-appointed, seeking to drive or subvert a change agenda. Second, the change agent is viewed here as a *political entrepreneur* (Laver, 1997), deploying political tactics when necessary to advance combinations of personal and organizational agendas, potentially in the face of opposition. This does not imply that change agency is an exclusively political activity, but political skill is a key element in the behaviour repertoire of the change agent.

The term *political entrepreneur* is chosen with care. The label 'political activist' is drawn from the domain of national party politics, implying a highly visible, ruthless and self-serving approach. The term 'political operator' is in more widespread use to describe the politically aware, astute and skilled manager. However, the term *political entrepreneur* has the advantage of emphasizing the risk-taking and creative dimensions of the role of the change agent, and also the personal commitment, extending on occasion to passion, toward the change agenda. The term political entrepreneur thus implies a behaviour repertoire, of political strategies and tactics, and a reflective, self-critical perspective on how those political behaviours should be deployed. As we see in Chapter 6, this extends to critical reflection on the personal costs as well as benefits of such an entrepreneurial approach.

We will also argue that the change agent who strives to be politically neutral or 'squeaky clean' faces double jeopardy.

### ***Squeaky clean and outmanoeuvred***

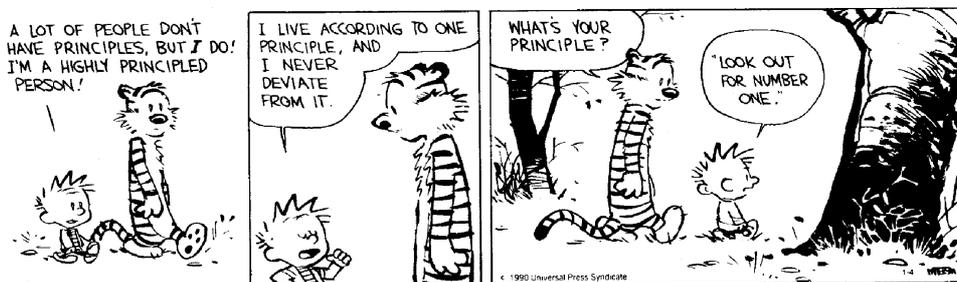
First, the 'squeaky clean' approach is likely to be ineffective in the face of self-interested and sophisticated resistance tactics, or 'counter-implementation' measures. The change agent who is not equipped, or not willing, to deal with political issues and power plays is thus likely to be outmanoeuvred. This argument is based on the presumption that organization politics are pervasive, and cannot be 'wished away' or managed away. It is necessary to confront circumstances as they are, and not as one would wish them to be. In colloquial terms, management in general, and change management in particular, is a 'contact sport'. Those who do not wish to get bruised should not play.

***Squeaky clean and unprofessional***

Second, the 'squeaky clean' approach which ignores, avoids, or otherwise denies the political realities of organizational life can be viewed as unskilled, incompetent, unprofessional and unethical. As we shall argue later, advocates of 'squeaky clean' management obscure the political dimensions and implications of that position. It may be more ethical and professional to deal effectively with the political aspects of change than simply to observe the political realities from a remote moral high ground. Change often stimulates both support and resistance. Some resistance may be self-serving, while some may be based on a sincere belief that change is misguided. A committed change agent inevitably becomes a 'guardian' of the change agenda. This can warrant a politically entrepreneurial approach to conducting that protective function in the face of public challenge and 'backstage' tactics. Again in colloquial terms, if you confront a 'bodyguard', you presumably know what to expect.

There is no simple contrast between a politically neutral or ethical stance on the one hand, and on the other an unprincipled approach in which 'anything goes' in the pursuit of change, although this is how the field of organization politics is often portrayed. The judgements that one may need to bring to this domain must be contingent and situational. The popular notion that 'power corrupts' must be balanced against the observation that power also helps in the pursuit and achievement of valuable social and organizational objectives. The politically entrepreneurial actions of the change agent will invariably be defensible, on some criteria and for some constituencies, while being wholly unacceptable on other grounds and for other players. We hope to demonstrate the integrity (personal, and organizational) of consciously undertaking political behaviour in an organizational change context.

The text is constructed in an accessible, if sometimes demanding, writing style, assuming a readership with practical organizational and managerial experience. Our aim is to make the text entertaining and engaging, and also to reflect the non-linear, untidy character of change, and the sometimes devious character of much of the subject matter.

**Calvin and Hobbes**

Calvin and Hobbes: 'A lot of people don't have principles.' © Universal Press Syndicate, reproduced with permission [review this credit line].

The structure of the book is as follows.

Chapter 1, **When necessity commands**, explores the nature of power and politics, the significance of political behaviour in organizational change, and the problems of finding and defining 'the change agent' (change driver, or change leader). New research offers insights into the management experience of organization politics, exposing the range of popular and rare tactics, and linking the antecedents of political behaviour to a range of individual and organizational consequences through a varied behaviour repertoire of political tactics.

Chapter 2, **The terminology game**, examines the literature of power and politics in search of competing definitions of these terms. Power can be conceived as a property of individuals, a property of interpersonal relationships, or as a property of social and organizational structures and procedures, although those three perspectives are intertwined rather than distinct. The problems of defining political behaviour are also examined. The ways in which we use conversation controls, influence tactics, and impression management methods are explored, illustrating that it is possible to conceive of every social interaction in political terms. This definition problem can be resolved by adopting a constructivist perspective; the ability to define behaviour as political, or to reject such a definition, is itself a political act.

Chapter 3, **Sit in judgement**, presents a series of incident reports from managers describing examples of political behaviour in their own experience. How should someone faced with political tactics respond? One answer to this question relies on an 'ethics test'. However, the problems of determining whether political behaviours are ethical or not are discussed, and an alternative, more practical approach is presented. This chapter introduces three central concepts concerning *warrant*, for political actions, *accounting* for those actions, and *reputation*, concerning how a change agent is perceived by other members of the organization. Case material at the end of the chapter illustrates this argument in practice, using actual instances of political exchanges.

Chapter 4, **Men behaving badly**, draws on historical and contemporary views of negative politics, contrasting 'thugs' and 'pragmatists'. These are not personality types, but rather loosely drawn perspectives on the use of power and politics in organizational settings. The politically incorrect chapter title reflects the fact that early writers in this genre (in the 1960s and 1970s) were mostly male, and were writing about men, for men. The stereotype of the Machiavellian thug has been well established, but this chapter argues that such a simplified view is unsustainable, and the alternative perspective of the Machiavellian pragmatist is presented. Deceit, manipulation, and coercion may be part of the pragmatist's behaviour repertoire, without being the sole or preferred approach to dealing with political issues. In contrast to the thug, the pragmatist uses such tactics with care and restraint, when they are warranted by the context (as argued in Chapter 3). This pragmatic, situational approach contributes to the profile of the *political entrepreneur*, explored in Chapters 7 and 9.

Chapter 5, **Women behaving badly**, considers evidence regarding gender differences and effects concerning organization power, politics, and influence. It was pointed out

to us that this was also a politically incorrect (perhaps insulting) title, but one of our (female) reviewers commented sharply, 'So, only men get to behave badly, but not women?' Consequently, we have retained this heading, and hope that this does not cause offence. Do women approach organization politics differently from men? Do they play the same game? Is political skill equally central to the careers and reputations of male and female managers? While some research evidence tends to support the stereotypes of 'tough males' and 'tender females', other evidence and experience argues that women in management and change agency roles recognize the need for a broad repertoire of political skills, and act accordingly.

Chapter 6, **The entrepreneurial hero**, explores the contemporary stereotype of the creative, innovative, bureaucracy-busting entrepreneurial visionary, or what Kanter (1989) calls the 'post-entrepreneurial hero'. This stereotype now informs pervasive and dominant images of the goals, tactics, and ethics of organizational innovators. This chapter thus explores contemporary prescriptive models of risk-taking 'champions of innovation' and their distinctive approach to 'positive' politics, in contrast with the 'negative' thuggery described in Chapter 4. In so doing, the chapter considers the insights that such models provide for managing the politics of innovation. The chapter also opens up for critical discussion the sharp contrast often drawn between the 'positive' power tactics of innovative 'entrepreneurial heroes' and the 'negative' politics found in traditional bureaucracies.

Chapter 7, **The good, the bad, and the ugly**, subjects the image of the entrepreneurial hero and the Machiavellian manager to more critical analysis, exploring the 'ugly' dimension of 'good' entrepreneurial and 'bad' Machiavellian strategies. In particular, this chapter details how contemporary organizations encourage both entrepreneurial and Machiavellian behaviours, while imposing personal costs on those adopting such perspectives. At the risk of creating fresh labels and dichotomies, but in order to characterize more clearly the practical options in these conditions, a fresh contrast is drawn. The differences between Machiavellian 'thuggery' and 'pragmatism' are supplemented by a distinction between the dangerous and self-defeating attributes of 'entrepreneurial zealots', and more constructive and viable 'entrepreneurial creatives'. This chapter reinforces and develops the argument that a sharp distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' politics is far from clear, either in theory, or in practice.

Chapters 4 through 7 present the caricatures and stereotypes outlined in Table P.1. The 'thuggery' of the traditional Machiavellian stereotype (or 'street fighter') and the entrepreneurial heroism of contemporary 'zealots' is unsustainable. The pragmatic, situational use of Machiavellian tactics and the constructive aspects of entrepreneurial creatives belong to the profile of the political entrepreneur, as explained in Chapter 9.

Chapter 8, **Power assisted steering**, considers the array of practical advice available to change agents in the use of political strategies and tactics. Much of that advice is couched in 'simple recipe' terms, offering checklists in the style of 'do this', and 'don't do that'. Missing from this advice is any notion of the frame of reference, or perspective, required to translate such guidance into appropriate and effective action.

**Table P.1** Caricatures and stereotypes

Machiavellian thuggery	traditional stereotype	not sustainable
Machiavellian pragmatism	part of traditional stereotype	component of political entrepreneurship
Entrepreneurial heroes	zealots creatives	not sustainable component of political entrepreneurship

Practice in this domain cannot follow a recipe, but is creative, judgement-based and improvisatory. The change agent will thus typically deploy ‘complicating strategies’ which are multi-dimensional, multi-faceted, complex and evolving through time, based on the opportunities and resources available in a given context. This improvisational approach, based on ‘intuitive artistry’ involves *bricolage*; the change agent is a *bricoleur*.

Chapter 9, **Political expertise**, explores how organizational trends may have heightened the significance of political skill, and identifies the triggers and intensifiers of organization politics, concluding that political behaviour is a naturally occurring phenomenon. An overview of Michel Foucault’s perspective on power is provided, emphasizing the pervasive and productive aspects of power. The concept of political skill and its dimensions is then considered. Skill and competence are narrow and fragmented concepts, and an argument is developed for the value of the alternative concept of *political expertise*, which also involves informed judgement, creative improvisation, and critical self-monitoring. Drawing together the discussion of thugs and street fighters, pragmatists, entrepreneurial heroes, zealots, and creatives, a profile of the political entrepreneur is drawn. It is important to recognize that this is not a personality type but a perspective, a way of approaching, a lens through which organizational issues and their political dimensions can be analysed to inform effective and sustainable action.