

Working with Organisational Politics

The questions and answers below are an edited version of an interview with Greg Cook that was published in the Local Government Magazine in 2006

1. Are most organisations really 'alive and screaming' political arenas?

All organisations have conflict that arises over the allocation and especially the scarcity of resources. Consequently, many goals, strategies and other decisions emerge from bargaining. This is usual and will lead to internal politics. Hopefully it will lead to positive politics or at least to principled bargaining rather than negative politics. If the organisation is also in the habit of having enduring and competitive coalitions of stakeholders; of selectively managing or censoring information; and of having lots of 'undiscussable' issues, then the politics is more likely to be problematic

2. Is the public sector worse than the private or vice versa? Why?

I suspect that the public sector is more 'political', but I don't see this a criticism, just a reflection of their differences. The public sector, unlike the private sector is continually engaged in rationing of service demand and must do this to effectively manage in largely non-commercial markets. The public sector also has a central concern with issues of public good and public benefit – requiring very difficult, value driven decisions and choices. Finally the community and politicians at all levels are very interested in what is done, how and why. This greater scrutiny also encourages political ways of operating

3. What are the characteristics and essential skills HR professionals need for working with internal politics

I think HR professionals need to exercise high order leadership skills, including a capacity for positive politics – that is politics in the service of the task. This requires a clear understanding of the underlying issues; strong, diverse, organisational relationships and a personal capacity to not get side-tracked into narrow positions, personalities or petty negative politics. Negative politics, in contrast, is all about winning, sometimes by any means. Ongoing negative politics is very destructive of effective working relationships. HR professionals are often well placed to help their organisations towards a more collaborative, problem solving approach because they are often unaligned to operational matters. In effect they are internal consultants and this slightly removed role can be used to help their colleagues reflect on their management of political issues.

4. What are some tools HR professionals can use for analysing politics and handling stakeholders?

I think the fundamental skills are a capacity for genuine, working relationships – based on clear values and a shared understanding of organisational purpose. These are sometimes described as 'soft' skills, but of course they are, in a different sense of the word, very hard – and still grossly underemphasised in many organisations. Relationship skills are of course a subset of a wider tool kit of leadership, negotiation, influencing and communication skills.

Political situations however do require an ability to identify the key stakeholders, their view of the issue, their authority and usual style and tactics. It is enormously helpful if the HR professional has enough organisational intelligence to also be able to map the networks and alliances of stakeholders. This may seem somewhat Machiavellian but it is essential.



I also think that we need to develop our own understanding of the issues behind any one political conflict. This issue analysis needs to be able to discriminate between the underlying structural, cultural, value-based, policy, procedural, operational, team work and personality issues that may be contributing to the difficulty. And sometimes, or often there are more than one issue at stake. For example, it is not unusual for fundamental cultural or policy tensions to be exploited by particular personalities for their own purposes that have little if anything to do with the organisations tasks. In this situation the overt issue is not really the problem, or at least one that can easily be fixed, but some of the people involved are keeping it hot because it satisfies their need for drama, power or keeping others unsettled. These circumstances will often lead to very messy negative politics.

5. How can HR secure executive support for promoting positive politics management and what benefits does it offer?

I think it is an executive leadership role to promote positive politics. But HR professionals can provide their own leadership by raising awareness of existing coalitions and tactfully questioning the underlying values and purposes – advocating for shared understandings of the issue at hand. This approach is central to what Bolman and Deal described as ‘positive politics’. The benefits to the organisation are not just in resolution of the immediate issue, but in development of the capacity to deal with future issues.

6. Do you have any other comments on the difficult behaviour of the ‘political players’ such as how they should be handled, what the underlying causes are?

Some difficult players have been inducted or indoctrinated into excessively competitive behaviour by their host organisations. In these circumstances, I think it is preferable to draw attention to the style of operating and appeal to or promote a more collaborative approach. Most people hate negative politics and if they see other more positive ways of operating being encouraged, especially by executives, they will try it too.

Some other people; the very difficult political players, really can’t help themselves. They expect to be attacked or deceived and constantly operate from that position. They habitually make other people unhappy and are largely unaware of their part in it. In fact they usually think others are to blame. Handling these people is much more difficult and exhausting, but attacking them usually doesn’t help much either. In the end we can only try to remain compassionate while holding firmly to our own boundaries; remaining unemotional and sticking to the task. It won’t change their style of operating, but it will help in containing the negative politics.

