Politicking is a Good Thing in Organizations

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Division of labor – creating divisions, departments, workgroups, etc., -- is inherent in large, complex organizations, but dividing labor tends to breed conflicts and thus politicking. Division of labor is rarely simple and clear cut: different divisions and departments can be created by product, processes, geography, or anything else, and so most managers can make a case for their own preference on how labor is to be divided. Some managers will seek to incorporate staff resources in their own group to ensure more reliable and speedy service, while other managers may seek to rid themselves of difficult and unpromising tasks while trying to acquire promising new ones.

These conflicts over tasks and goals are popularly called “turf battles,” and they are inherent in organizations that must take advantage of the specialization and accountability necessary to get large-scale, complex work done. The more organizations change, the more often work needs to be re-divided, and so the more turf battles.

In addition, dividing work creates departments and teams with different perspectives and goals, with managers often giving precedence to their own. There is evidence that even simple job specialization leads people to see management problems in different ways based on their own training and experience. For instance, strategic challenges tend to be seen as operations problems by manufacturing managers and as financial problems by finance managers.

Goal setting for accountability – improving success measurements – can lead to conflicting goals among work groups. To illustrate, the marketers at a publishing house may want to continue publishing books that rely on their established marketing channels, but the editors may want to take advantage of new markets where they believe there is more growth potential. The marketers will bear the costs of learning about these new markets and building new channels in unfamiliar areas. Both are doing the jobs they were assigned, but these jobs have led them to pursue goals that now conflict with one another, and these conflicts will need to be resolved through political processes.

These political processes are not some dysfunction that needs to be fixed. In fact, suppressing these political processes can lead to poorer organizational performance. Organizations that tried to reduce politicking by reducing division of labor – creating larger, somewhat homogenized groups – had poorer performance than those that kept their professionals highly specialized and focused, especially when the organization developed effective political processes to help integrate information and settle differences.

Political processes also help bring useful information to decision makers. If power is too
lopsided (one department is too powerful), valuable expertise and knowledge from other departments were not fully considered by executive management, leading to poor strategic decisions. In a study at start-up high-tech firms, executive teams that more effectively managed their executives’ politicking prospered, while those who could not effectively manage their inherent conflicts failed. The successful firms used the following processes:

- Focus on facts and measure as much as possible. As one chief executive said, “Everyone is entitled to a personal opinion, but not to personal facts.” In this way the executives could focus on what the facts might mean, rather than quibble about one another’s unsubstantiated guesses about the facts.

- Deliberately develop multiple alternatives. The successful start-ups considered four or five options at once, focusing executive attention on creating combinations rather than clinging to their support of, or opposition to, one proposal.

- Keep attention in executive committee meetings focused on the common organizational goal rather than on individual personal or unit goals that might be in competition with one another.

- Make the chief executive powerful, but not all powerful. When others had significant participation in decisions with relatively more influence in their own areas of expertise, and when the chief executive did not shrink from taking ultimate responsibility, the conflicts produced productive exchanges of information and less rigidity.

- Make decisions with consensus, but employ a tie-breaker. First, attempt to reach consensus (all agree on a decision), but if consensus cannot be achieved rather quickly, the responsible executive should make the decision. In this way, different perspectives are fully discussed and understood, but the organization is not paralyzed trying to achieve a complete agreement that may never come.

**References**


