

Political Tactics

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The problem of control is important in all organizations including schools, and the essence of organizational control is power. Further, power begets politics, which is a fact of organizational life. Regardless of level or position, virtually everyone in the organization is a player in the game of politics. Thus, we turn to a set of political tactics that employees at all levels can use to enhance their influence and power (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Vecchio, 1988).

Ingratiating is a tactic used to gain the goodwill of another by doing favors, being attentive, and showing deference. The tactic is based the universal “norm of reciprocity,” which is a pervasive norm in American society. Help someone and that person feels obliged to return the favor. Teachers, for example, sometimes attempt to gain the goodwill and obligation of their principal by going beyond their duty to help others. In a study of teacher mobility in New York City, Daniel Griffiths and his colleagues (1965), described how teachers used this tactic to gain the support of superiors and as a path to becoming an administrator. Ambitious teachers volunteered for jobs that others perceived as irritants such as teacher in charge of the lunchroom, administrator of the annual field day, school coordinator for student teachers, or trainer of the school track team. None of these jobs was paid, but these teachers earned the goodwill and attention of superiors, and frequently such teachers were promoted to important positions such as assistant principal or acting chair.

Networking is the process of forming relationships with influential people. Such people may or may not be in important positions themselves, but they often have access to those who are or to those who have useful information. Teachers who have close, friendly relations with the teachers' union representative or the principal or to the principal's secretary usually have access to important information. Likewise, teachers who have contacts with the spouse of the board president or who have an indirect link to the superintendent are also likely to gain valuable inside information. Such inside information gives these teacher power and an edge in the game of school politics.

Managing Information is a tactic that individuals use to control others and build their own status. Although having critical information is useful in itself, the techniques used to spread the information can enhance one's position in both the formal and informal organizations. Releasing information when it has significant impact can promote self-interest and defeat the ambitions of others. The key to information management is first to get crucial information (networking) and then to use it skillfully, making things known to others in ways that increase one's own importance and that build a reputation as an insider who “knows the score.” Careful nurturing and managing such knowledge usually enhance the role as an important player in the political games of the school.

Managing Impressions is a simple tactic that almost everyone uses from time to time to create a favorable image. The tactic includes dressing (dress for success) and behaving appropriately, underscoring one's accomplishments, claiming credit whenever possible, and creating the appearance of being important, if not indispensable. The key is to get valuable information and build an image such that others see you as knowledgeable, powerful, articulate, sensible, sensitive, and socially adept.

Building Coalitions is the process of individuals uniting to achieve common goals. Teachers often join forces to oppose a proposed policy, to resist a proposed change, or to initiate change. A change in the

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curriculum is successful depending on which teacher coalitions support or oppose it. Individuals alone are much less effective at influencing than groups; and relatively powerless groups become stronger if they can act together in concert. Those teachers who are effective at organizing internal coalitions are often the political power players in a school.

Scapegoating is blaming and attacking others when things go wrong or badly. Principals often try to blame teachers when their statewide proficiency test scores are not high, and teachers seek to find someone to blame too: the administration, the school board, the parents, or another teacher. Blaming others for shortcomings is common in all organizations and schools are no exception. Finding a scapegoat can allow politically astute individuals an opportunity to shift attention and “get off the hook” by finding someone else to take the fall. Although this tactic is negative and carries risk, it is a frequently used tool.

Increasing indispensability is a tactic by which individuals or units make themselves necessary to the organization. Crafty administrators often develop specialized skills or units that make them important and essential in the operation of the organization. For example, they specialize in critical areas that require scarce knowledge such as computers or finance. Thus, their goal is to make the organization dependent upon their knowledge and skill. Further, they are not especially forthcoming in explaining or preparing others to do what they do. Such individuals are increasingly called upon to solve problems, and their successful solutions further enhance their status and value.

Flattery is a tactic of using high praise and adulation to make a person feel good, important, and appreciated. Evidence suggests that even if the person being flattered believes the comments are hyperbole, people like to hear nice things about themselves. Administrators welcome kind words and flattery. Anything can be overdone, but flattery holds up well even if it comes across as fawning and a little obsequious—much better to flatter than to criticize.

Getting the Attention of Superiors (GASing) is yet another tactic to gain power and influence. Good ideas need to be heard by the right people if they are to bring acclaim and reward. Distinguish yourself from others in a group by doing the unusual, by speaking out when it is appropriate while others hesitate. There is a fine line between bragging and getting attention, but the content and style of one's behavior are important, for example, innovative suggestions, volunteering for to perform activities that others avoid, initiating novel actions to solve problems, and list goes on. Go out of your way to get the attention of your superiors and deliver for them. The consequences will likely be the growth of your influence.

Some tactics are natural and legitimate; others are devious and illegitimate. When the tactics are based on dishonesty, deceit, and misinformation, they are hard to justify on moral grounds. Vecchio (1988), however, argues that on the grounds of self-defense, one should be familiar with such devious political tactics as scapegoating, nurturing conflict by spreading false rumors, excluding rivals from important meetings, and making false promises. Although political tactics are a fact of organizational life, not all are viewed as legitimate and ethical. Moreover, there are risks and common blunders to avoid. Consider the following:

- Violating the chain of command.
- Losing your temper in public.
- Saying “no” to superiors too often.

- Saying “yes” to subordinates too often.
- Challenging cherished beliefs.

These behaviors will likely give others pause and undermine your influence. The table below summarizes a potent set of political tactics along with their purposes. For further development of these tactics, see Hoy and Miskel (2013).

Political Tactic	Purpose
Ingratiating	Gain influence by doing favors.
Networking	Court influentials to gain power.
Managing information	Manipulate information to your advantage.
Managing impressions	Manage your appearance to impress.
Coalition building	Unite with others to increase power and achieve goals.
Scapegoating	Shift the blame to others when outcomes are bad.
Increasing indispensability	Make yourself indispensable.
Flattering	Make others feel good; it’s hard to overdo flattery.
Getting Attention of Superiors	Stand out and get ahead.

Figure **Summary of Political Tactics** (© W. Hoy, 2019)