

MANAGING WITH POWER

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In the book *Managing with Power* by Jeffrey Pfeffer, suggests that 'power' is used more frequently under conditions of moderate interdependence. This paper looks at the issues of managing in the context of power and internal conflict.

Introduction

According to Pfeffer, It is important to develop power and influence when the people with whom you are interdependent have a different point of view than you, and thus cannot be relied upon to do what you want. Interdependence results from many things, including the way in which tasks are organised. One factor that is critical in affecting the nature and the amount of interdependence is the scarcity of resources. Slack resources reduce interdependence, while scarcity increases it. As an example, consider the case of job promotions. If an organisation is growing rapidly and there are promotional opportunities, the competition for promotions will be less intense.

Managers have to operate and survive in many worlds and are reliant to some degree on the 'good will' of other peer managers. Some academics have argued that a comprehensive view of the interdependence of a manager relationship should include not only interdependence (relative power), but also total interdependence (or total power) McManus, 2006. The total interdependence refers to the intensity of a relationship. A high level of total interdependence is an indicator for a strong, co-operative long-term relationship in which both managers have invested. Like 'good will power', mutual trust and mutual commitment will characterise these relationships. Besides loyalty towards the other party and the accompanying desire to continue the relationship, there is an alternative motivation for both parties to keep the partnership intact. In the case that both parties know that the other party possesses much power, it is not likely that either side is going to use it. The risk of retaliation is often considered as being too high. In addition, when total interdependence is high, both managers are faced with high exit barriers. In accordance with the teachings of Bacharach and Lawler (1981), we may measure total interdependence in a relationship by 'the sum' of the manager's dependence on one another. Although power is inherent in a given formal position, leaders cannot maintain authority unless followers are prepared to believe in that

authority. In a sense, leadership is conferred by followers. As previously pointed out, it is not enough to know the sources of power or that power exists. It is also critical to know how power may be used and to have an armoury of strategies and tactics that translate power and influence into practical results. One such strategy is power sharing.

Power sharing

Power sharing is a strategy for resolving difference of opinions over who should have the power. Instead of fighting over who should have power over whom, power sharing relies upon the joint exercise of power. If conflicts can be reframed to focus on how such power, sharing might take place, they can become much more constructive. Power sharing can take a variety of forms. One approach is to grant minority groups autonomy over some, or all aspects of their own affairs. This autonomy can be limited to cultural issues religion and education for example, or it can be extended to cover the social, economic, and political spheres as well. At the extreme, it can take the form of granting complete independence and allowing a minority group to form its own sovereign nation state. Another approach to power sharing is more integrative. Governance is handled by leaders from each group who work jointly and cooperatively to make decisions and resolve conflicts. This approach relies on ethnically neutral decision making and policies. Implementing either approach is usually difficult, as groups holding power are reluctant to relinquish that power, and groups without it tend to want massive change to occur more quickly than the dominant group is likely to accept. For this reason, demands for power-sharing and autonomy often ferment conflict more than they resolve it. However, if minority groups can frame their demands in a way that emphasises joint benefit, and focus on developing a mutually acceptable way of achieving self determination for all groups, they are likely to meet with more success than they are if they take a more combative or competitive approach.

Maintaining power

Niccolo Machiavelli wrote his famous dissertation on power, *The Prince*, in 1517. According to Machiavelli, the purpose of power is to maintain itself and to extend itself. It has nothing to do with the welfare of the people. It has nothing to do with principles or ideology or right and wrong. These are related to the means to the end, but the goal is power. Do whatever it takes to keep your power and extend your power. Machiavelli again notes "Men will succeed as long as method and fortune are in harmony." If not they stand to lose all they have gained. Machiavelli promoted the idea that a ruler (leader) should be gentle most of the time, but when necessary the ruler must make use of any

form of manipulation, deceit, and even murder to achieve his ends. People in power are seldom challenged or given bad news, and even when challenged, they have a tendency to reject the discrepant information. It is no wonder, then, that changing circumstances often produce, with some lag, a dynamic that causes those in power to lose that power, (Pfeffer, Chapter 16). To avoid losing power, managers (or leaders) should be sensitive to subtle changes in the political, economic and social environment, and understand how a particular management style, or a particular set of actions jeopardise their position and power base. social how a particular management style, or a particular set of actions jeopardise their position and power base.

Managing conflict

Conflict may be described as: a struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing desires. It could be argued that a manager's view of the cause of conflict is encouraged by the perspective offered by the classical theory which is largely related to the breakdown of formal authority linked to legitimate power and the need for measures to maintain such power and restore it when need be. In some respect management sees the occurrence of conflict as a rejection of its legitimate right to govern and control. As a consequence, conflict is identified as abnormal behaviour and therefore is likely to result in punishment for the perpetrators of deviant behaviour. In some respects this supports the view that management is based on a 'unitary view' which carries with it the expectations that everyone within the organisation shares the same view, will work together as a team, acknowledge the legitimacy of hierarchy and respect senior management. Anything which appears to interfere with this view is considered 'bad' for business and is dealt with according to the rules, procedures, customs and conventions which exist within a particular organisation.

Causes of conflict

As stated above conflict results from incompatible or opposing desires. Conflict is a natural outcome of human interaction. Conflict exists whenever there is disagreement and derives from differences in attitudes, beliefs, and expectations. As described above conflict can result from not acknowledging management authority or legitimacy or lack of results differences in perception as to what has happened or what needs to be done. Whenever two or more people disagree about a decision or action, conflict exists. Conflict is inevitable because not all persons think alike. Not all persons hold the same values or priorities. Not all persons react to situations in the same manner. The manager should recognise the difference between resolving conflict and managing conflict. The goal of conflict resolution is conflict elimination. Conflict resolution is often an impossible task and not

always a desirable goal. Managers who accept conflict resolution as their ultimate objective will undoubtedly fail. Conflict management is directed toward reducing destructive conflict but allows for the existence of constructive conflict. Managers who accept conflict management as the objective realise that all conflict cannot or should not be eliminated. Although there are many causes of conflict, I would like to discuss two.

1. Conflict between manager and managed

Conflict between the manager and those that are managed is more likely to occur when communication is not clear and when there is confusion about what is valued and rewarded. It is the responsibility of the manager to make goals and expectations clear. It is imperative that the manager translates the more general customer expectations into activities and achievements that are discipline specific. In my own management experience and experience based on 15 years in project management conflict between those who manage and are managed tends to be an issue in the early phases of a project and issues tend to centre on time, cost and resource priorities. These three attributes create tension between parties because managers have limited control over external risks that are likely to impact these areas. Keeping the objectives clearly in mind goes a long way towards minimising disruptive conflicts as does involving personnel directly affected by the decisions made by the manager.

2. Conflict between individuals

Conflict between individuals occurs when they operate under different value systems. Some individuals prefer to see themselves as responding purely to the demands of their own set of values. The view of another's value system and position is probably the greatest block to handling conflict between individuals constructively. Some of the more common misrepresentations can be found in almost all conflicting positions between individuals, groups, and organisations. Three of these misrepresentations are: Mirror image: each person thinks they are an innocent victim representing truth and justice. Each may see the other person as 'the enemy.' Each perceives themselves as totally right; the other is totally wrong. The position is 'everything I do is right; everything you do is wrong.' Tunnel vision: each person can see clearly the underhanded, slanted, or false and vicious acts of others while being totally blind to the same behaviour in themselves. This position is described as 'What is okay for me to do is not acceptable for you to do.' This distortion allows a double standard, even when people are aware of the unfair actions on both sides.

Polarised Thinking

This kind of thinking happens when one or both parties have an oversimplified view of the conflict. A value judgement is involved, with one side seen as good and the other side seen as bad. If managers allow these misrepresentations to control the way they handle conflict, the issue will probably remain unresolved. The focus is on blaming the other and justifying yourself, rather than focusing on the issue at hand. The other person almost instinctively will become defensive in an attempt to justify their own positions. The result is likely to be hostility rather than resolution. Each person in the relationship probably will see the other as overly emotional and unreasonable. The relationship ends up with more conflict rather than less. It should also be noted that conflict that is allowed to run its own course is more likely to be destructive. Managers need to be ready to manage conflict. However, two precautions must be noted. First, how a manager responds to a conflict affects the conflict. Even when a manager opts to ignore an existing conflict, their silence affects the conflict. Second, the manager's response is never static in that a manager brings to each conflict a personal set of beliefs perceptions, and expectations. Managers need to remember that their perception of the persons involved or the situation may not be congruent with reality. Only by identifying the interests, underlying the issues and positions and recognising the different levels of importance each party gives to these interests can the disputing parties create mutually satisfying, durable solutions to conflicts.

Conflict Resolution Strategies

Strategies or ways of dealing with conflict vary according to its nature. Managers faced with the inevitability of conflict brought about by competition over resources, priorities and objectives and reinforced by individual or inter group rivalry must attempt to manage this state of affairs in such a way as to achieve a balance of conflict resolution. Managers sometimes overlook the fact that individuals in a conflict situation usually have mixed feelings. While there are hostile feelings and each wishes the other would give in, usually there is also some affection and a wish for agreement. Those misrepresentations mentioned above keep people from noticing the positive feelings, setting the seeds for failure. Try to avoid the defensive position and the feeling that the other person is the irrational enemy. Being defensive makes it hard to build a healthy relationship. Managers must be willing to listen to the other person's point of view and try to understand it. That doesn't mean you have to agree. It just means you have to try hard to understand and identify with that person's feelings. As managers, you should avoid creating conflict over unimportant matters. If you find yourself frequently in conflict over trivial matters, you may need to seek help to find out what is

underneath the hostility. It is also common sense to keep conflicts current. Old conflicts simply clutter up your relationships. Managers do not have a monopoly on interpersonal skills so review your interpersonal skills periodically. It is almost impossible to resolve conflict without the ability to listen well, express your feelings honestly, and avoid judging the other person.

References

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Quotations from *The Prince* are taken from Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).