Negotiating the Political Minefields

A leader of an integrated healthcare information effort once told us, “I knew our project was necessary and important when suddenly everyone wanted to take it away from me.” We have all probably found ourselves in a political quagmire and wondered how we got there. This is especially true when we are certain that we have covered all the bases or we consider ourselves to be a good “politician.” One often-expressed concept is that the more widespread use of information technology will stimulate the flow of information and eliminate traditional organizational hierarchies. A possible inference—or desperate hope—is that this will then reduce the amount of politics in the organization. However, more people are now realizing that information and the control of it are still key organizational “currencies.”

Whether we like it or not, introducing any type of change into an organization, but especially a technological change, is inevitably a very political process. These political issues surrounding both information and information technology management in information-based organizations must be addressed. This chapter is devoted to understanding and negotiating the political minefields.

“Say It Ain’t So, Charlie Brown”

Just when you think you are making good progress on your project and have touched all the bases, the infamous “grapevine” starts telling you that you have problems. You are surprised and you wonder what’s happening. One senior information systems person said to us that he did not like politics; therefore, he was going to stay out of all the organizational politics and just do his job. While this may be an attractive fantasy for many of us, in reality a major portion of our jobs is effectively dealing with the organizational political process.
Examples of Political Problems

When we attempt to introduce complex informatics systems into organizations, most of the problems fall into the general “Yes, but…” category, which is found in such comments as “Great idea, but….” “I really support this effort, but…” “This is good, but…” and “I support you strongly, but…” These reactions have a variety of political ramifications and play out in different ways depending on the political skills of those involved. We have seen all of the following examples occur in various organizations.

“Great Idea, But…”

A hospital administrator once said that he really supported the integrated information concept, but he was concerned that the physicians would really like the proposed prototype and would then want the system implemented throughout the hospital, pressuring him to find the money for it. He said that if the project leader could raise all the money from outside sources, then it would be okay with him to implement the prototype. The organizational conflict was between the needs of the clinicians and the willingness of the hospital to support anything but a major financial-based information system. Some of the major stakeholders in this organization had very different objectives, and the change leader was caught in the political crossfire between the groups.

A variation in this category is, “Great idea, but do it my way.” In one organization, a new chief executive officer arrived and liked the fact that the organization was moving toward a clinical information system. However, he decided that the information system used in his last hospital was an excellent system and should be transported intact to his new location. Even though many of the clinicians at his new site had different thoughts about what constituted a good clinical information system, the new CEO only wanted the “same system as we had back at my old place.”

Another variant occurs when a CIO says, “Great idea, but you are going about this in the wrong way.” They then pressure you to use—and pay for, of course—this wonderful new technology that they are desperately trying to fund. It may be a poor choice for your projects.

“I Really Support This Effort, But…”

There are a number of endings that go with this “Yes, but…” Some examples: “. . . the organization is just not ready for this project.” “. . . I don’t like the particular technology you have selected.” “. . . You didn’t include me as much as you should have.” “. . . I don’t like where you are going to place the terminals.” “. . . I don’t really think our nurses will have time for this new technology.” “. . . I could do it better.”

The comments in this category are the sniping type, consisting typically of snide remarks and potshots. Often arising from jealousy, they are