Executive Values and the Ethics of Company Politics: Some Preliminary Findings

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ABSTRACT. A model of correlates of executives' views of organizational politics was presented. The model incorporated three sets of variables: executives' background, values and attitudes. Data collected from 302 managers were used to validate the model. The results showed that precursors of executive perceptions of the ethics and effect of company politics were different. Values were stronger than background variables in explaining executives' views of company politics.

Today, power and politics are considered integral parts of organizational life (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980; Pfeffer, 1981; Tuchman, 1977). Organizations consist of diverse coalitions and groups whose interests and motives may not coincide with formal goals (March, 1962; Pearce and DeNisi, 1983). On occasion, this divergence of goals leads to discord. It is also increasingly recognized that power and politics influence the selection of corporate objectives, formulation of strategy, deployment of scarce resources, implementation of strategies, and the process and criteria of evaluating top managerial as well as employee performance (Farrell and Peterson, 1982; Kotter, 1978; Miles, 1980; McMillan, 1983; Narayanan and Fahey, 1982; Pfeffer, 1981; Schein, 1977). Thus, understanding the nature of organizational power and politics is essential not only because it affects one's career (Larwood et al., 1980) but also because it may impact the very survival of the company.

Understandably, there is a widespread concern over the ethics and impact of organizational politics (Mayes and Allen, 1977; Zahra, 1984, 1985). This concern stems from the pervasiveness of company politics and the fact that it has not been studied carefully. In fact, the bulk of the literature consists of a few case studies which are replete with assertions on how managers view the ethics of organizational politics (Allen et al., 1978; Gandz and Murray, 1980; Zahra, 1984, 1985). A major deficiency of these efforts is that they do not clarify the factors that determine the views executives hold on the ethics of company politics. How do these views form? Are they situational in nature or do they reflect persistent attitudes executives may espouse? Answers to these questions can help in enriching our appreciation of the nature of the ethics of company politics.

Study objective

The present study probes the correlates of executives' views regarding the ethics of company politics. To achieve this goal, a model of these potential correlates is presented. It embodies three sets: background, values, and attitudes. The model is tested, and the implications of the findings for future research are discussed.

Organizational politics

Vredenburgh and Maurer (1981) define organizational politics as "either attempts to use mustered power to affect organizational decisionmaking processes or acts or behaviors that are self-serving and organizationally unsanctioned" (p. 171). In a similar fashion, Mayes and Allen's (1977) propose that company politics is the "management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organization or to

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obtain sanctioned ends through non-sanctioned influence means” (1977, p. 675).

Together, these two definitions suggest that organizational politics refer to power plays intended to further an individual’s or a group’s interests or goals through legitimate as well as non-sanctioned means. This definition implies that the goals of organizational politicians may differ from the formal objectives of the firm or unit. In addition, company politicians may use unauthorized resources. In addition, the above definition does not outrule the possibility that the firm may also benefit from an individual’s pursuit of self-interest.

Organizational politics and business ethics

For a long time, organizational politics has been characterized as unethical, self-serving behavior. As a result, whether organizational politics is ethical or not has been a major question that has sparked interest in the literature. Writers have only recently attempted to delineate the conditions under which some political tactics are ethical.

Past researchers tended to espouse two almost contrasting views of the ethics of company politics: universal and situational. Those researchers who believed in the universal view tended to assert that organizational politics is unethical because it may undermine the formal rules that govern organizational life, may cause misallocation of resources, and may encourage unpredictable “maverik” behavior. As a result, these writers posited that company politics should be discouraged. In contrast, the “situationalist” perspective suggested that political behavior is often triggered by the many forces with which a manager must contend in achieving company goals. Therefore, these authors advised caution and careful analysis of the political actions taken by organizational members.

Velasquez et al. (1983) observe that “many managers view their political activities with moral ambivalence” (p. 65). This is because managers often lack the appropriate information to determine if a certain company tactic is ethically sound or unacceptable. To reach such a conclusion, political actions should be evaluated on three criteria: the utility of the act to all constituencies, the rights of the individuals involved, the consistency of the act with the canons of justice (Velasquez et al., 1983). Thus, simple “judgmental” rules do not readily apply in evaluating political tactics in organizational settings.

Research by Allen et al. (1979) found that executives did not hold universally negative views of company politics. Using data collected from 97 managers, Allen et al. (1979) found that organizational politics was believed to improve communication and coordination in the organization. In his earlier analysis of the Polaris submarine and missile system Sapolsky (1972) concluded that it was the political skill of the program managers, not their technical competence, that largely accounted for that project’s success. Murray and Gandz (1980) and Pfeffer (1981) also provided many examples that demonstrated that political maneuvering by middle managers was crucial to the introduction of strategic changes. Zahra (1984), using data from 114 managers, concluded that remarkable similarities existed between the way the respondents in his sample described the effective manager and the organizational politician. The managers surveyed believed that organizational politics could help the organization in the areas of communication, decision-making, and leadership.

The above findings were consistent with the growing realization that organizational politics is an integral component of the social influence process innate to corporate life (Allen et al., 1979; DuBrin, 1974; Pfeffer and Sherwood, 1960; Poole, 1983; Schein, 1977). Organizational missions are rarely well articulated. Similarly, strategies are often vague and goals are broad. Thus, multiple interpretations may emerge, making it essential to rely on political maneuvers to achieve unity of direction and commitment to a chosen course of action.

Recent models of strategy implementation corroborate this observation. Strategies emanate from several sources in the organization and to organizational politics managers have the challenging task of creating a collective vision for the firm by incorporating multiple perspectives (McMillan, 1978, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981). Thus, it is not uncommon to find middle managers employing political tactics to create a favorable climate for certain projects that are not sanctioned by the firm; indeed, these projects