

# PEOPLE, POWER & POLITICS IN A WORLD OF COLLABORATION



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‘...power is defined as the ability to get other people to do what they want them to do and politics is the power in action by using a range of techniques and approaches.’

In my academic review for the *Postgraduate Certificate in Collaborative Transformation*, I chose to explore the issue of politics and power, one of the most extensive influencers of organisational change.

In the public sector, there is an unprecedented level of transformation required, to achieve the austerity measures across central and local government. Much value can be gained to deliver them through closer collaborative working between government departments, agencies and the locality based organisations.

However, as my research revealed, wherever there are people, then the work place politics and power issues can either accelerate, or hinder, collaborative progress.

## Defining politics and power

Over the last 40 years, there has been valuable and insightful academic research carried out on power and politics within organisational change.

Definitions of power and politics can create great debate due to their contentious nature<sup>1</sup> and even the academic world has frustration with regard to the lack of consensus in agreeing a common definition of power and politics<sup>2</sup>.

Buchanan and Badham suggest that ‘power is defined as the ability to get other people to do what they want them to do and politics is the power in action by using a range of techniques and approaches<sup>3</sup>’.

Power and politics are one of the most frequent problems encountered by organisations when managing change.

It is a significant given that most change projects fail to deliver on their business case<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Drory and Romm (1990)

<sup>2</sup> Kacmar and Carlson (1997)

<sup>3</sup> Buchanan and Badham (2008)

The occurrence of project failure in collaborative working (which are multi-partner, change management projects) is well documented within academic research and government reviews<sup>5</sup>.

Buchanan and Badham state that ‘research suggests that most managers view organisational politics as a routine part of their experience, and a key factor in career success. However, the evidence also reveals that most managers have had no training in how to deal with this dimension in their role<sup>6</sup>’.

French and Raven<sup>7</sup> in their theory on power suggested there was the role of the ‘Power-Holder’ and the ‘Subordinate’ and identified five power bases:

- **Coercive Power:** the psychological influence over an individual or group
- **Reward Power:** describes the ability to gain power by offering financial benefits and rewards to individuals.
- **Referent Power:** is the ability to show charisma
- **Expert Power:** can be achieved from a position of specialist knowledge and expertise
- **Legitimate Power:** refers to that gained by roles and hierarchy.

With reference to the subordinate role, they have a perception of the leader (a power-holder) which may not be accurate.

The power bases are interrelated and some or all can be demonstrated in the same situation.

<sup>4</sup> (CIPD, 2003)

<sup>5</sup> Beer, (1993), Macdonald-Wallace & Gatt, (2011) and Barratt-Pugh et al, (2013), National Audit Office (2011, 20014, 2016)

<sup>6</sup> Buchanan and Badham (2008)

<sup>7</sup> French and Raven (1959)

*The logic therefore is that any change agent (for example you, as the Collaborative Transformation Architect) is required to engage out of necessity in political behaviour as a result of both organisational and personal drivers.*

Reward, Legitimate and Coercive power are based on power as a result of position, while Expert and Referent power are personal power.

Traditionally, power is viewed in respect of changing behaviour, but more recently it has also been proposed that the power to get people to think the way that you do is known as 'soft power'<sup>8</sup>.

It is argued that power in isolation will be inactive without the use of politics which is the practical application. Eisenhardt and Bourgeois<sup>9</sup> talk about *'the observable, but often covert, actions by which executives enhance their power to influence decisions'*.

There is a suggestion that political behaviour is unavoidable, but also necessary in facilitating debate and providing imagination which will lead to better solutions and so should be considered as a benefit not an issue<sup>10</sup>.

As a result, there are constructive aspects of political behaviour which can serve to support the organisation's objectives in addition to the well documented negative aspects of political behaviour.

### **Being a Collaboration Architect in a world of people, politics and power?**

The logic therefore is that any change agent (for example you, as the Collaborative Transformation Architect) is required to engage out of necessity in political behaviour as a result of both organisational and personal drivers.

A number of academics, and you will find this in the SSA toolkits, also suggest that you

<sup>8</sup> Nye, (2002)

<sup>9</sup> Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988)

<sup>10</sup> Frost and Egri (1991)

should embrace it, and your organisation should equip you with the skills and tools to manage it rather than try to eradicate it<sup>11</sup>.

While isolated actions may be considered inappropriate, political behaviour may be defensible when considered in context.

### **Seeing the results of mis-management of power and politics...**

I was completing my postgraduate certificate at the same time as being in charge of a public sector project to deliver existing services, at a minimum of 25% cost reduction while improving management information and user experience.

I was the Shared Service Architect in the organisation and appointed to provide shared services expertise and recommend the best vehicle for delivery, in-house or commercial, to ensure best value for money for the tax payer.

The austerity agenda made cost reduction the primary 'unofficial' driver of decision making. Affordability was a key issue, with a severe lack of investment available to replace IT infrastructure in the near future.

There was significant reputational and financial risk to both the organisation and individuals if the programmes failed to deliver on their business cases, which could result in negative press coverage. As a result of the stakes being so high, it began to drive extreme power and political behaviours .

This is important considering the evidenced high failure rate of strategic change and the cost savings of £25-50m pa to the tax payer.

<sup>11</sup> Gatt & Wallace (2014)

*In terms of people who face change, I realise now that we need to equip them with the skills to handle it, rather than just do it to them.*

However, distance and geography also played a role in the power and politics problems that developed as the change programme began to be implemented.

For example, my colleagues and I were based in the north west of England, but London was the epicentre for strategic direction and where most senior officials were based.

Colleagues described the London base, as having its own distinct sub-group culture and political dynamic. The political and power perception of many staff in the north was to see London-based individuals as operating from an *ivory tower* and disconnected from the parts of the organisation about which they were making decisions.

It was also taken for granted that for individuals or groups in the north to have any influence over decision making in London, you have to be physically present in London, as out of sight was definitely out of mind.

I realise now that this undermined each of the five powers and led to resistance to change in these ways:

- **Coercive Power:** the psychological influence over an individual or group was broken by distance and the 'ivory tower' narrative
- **Reward Power:** the ability to gain power by offering financial benefits and rewards to individuals evaporated because the only offer was loss of livelihood, cuts in pay, or relocation to other parts of the country
- **Referent Power:** is the ability to show charisma. It's difficult to gain referent power by email and frequent personal visits from the leadership to talk to staff on so many different sites was not realistic

- **Expert Power:** achieved from a position of specialist knowledge and expertise. This was diminished as many of those who were the experts of many years, were often replaced with external consultants who had never done the work before
- **Legitimate Power:** this is gained by roles and hierarchy. They were still in place, however the psychological contract that made people willingly align with legitimate power had been broken

### So what did I learn?

Organisational politics has fascinated and frustrated me in equal measures throughout my career. I felt that in change management settings, people, power and political behaviour was usually negative and self-serving. During 'good' times individuals will support the greater good of the organisation more readily, whilst in 'difficult' times people revert to self-interest.

In terms of people who face change, I realise now that we need to equip them with the skills to handle it, rather than just do it to them.

In terms of the five powers, I now spend time analysing which of the five powers, the leadership I engage with own. Also, which of those powers I possess in the different situations I find myself in.

As a result I approach people, power and politics in collaborative working in a more informed and fluid way.

By the way, in 2015 I moved to shared service working in the private sector. I can confirm that there is life in shared services outside the public sector, if you are worried about the future of your current role.