Power and Influence Strategies: An Analysis across Departments

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Abstract. *The study explored the impact of task environment on influence strategies and the relationship between influence strategies and power. Results indicate that the frequency of use of four influence strategies—assertiveness, sanctions, higher authority, and coalition—differs significantly between the eight departments studied. Individuals in production departments use assertiveness more frequently than individuals in staff or non-production departments. The power differential across departments as perceived by individuals in the different departments seems to be a source for the variation. Findings also show that assertiveness is positively related to power as measured by network centrality and perceived power of the department.*

Power is endemic to organizational life like planning, organizing, directing and controlling, because each aspect of these activities entails the use of power. This paper examines the horizontal structural view of power and influence, that is, from the departmental perspective, which has not been adequately addressed by researchers. Of particular interest would be the relationships between departments (functions) and the use of influence tactics. We have attempted in this study to answer the question whether a particular department is associated with a particular influence style, and the extent to which a particular influence style is employed in the pursuit of some functional activity.

Theory and Hypotheses

Considerable research has been conducted on the sources of managerial power (Podsakoff & Schriesheim, 1988). The obvious importance of this subject has led Yukl (1998) to comment that "one of the most important determinants of managerial effectiveness is success in influencing people and developing their commitment to task objectives". Very few studies examined issues such as the types of influence tactics used by managers and the objectives of their influence attempts, until Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinson (1980) conducted their research.

Kipnis et al. (1980) developed a questionnaire to measure different categories of influence behavior (called *influence strategies*) and common reasons for making influence attempts in organizations (called *influence objectives)*. The dimensions or strategies of influence that they identified were (1) *Reason*: Use of facts and data to support the development of a logical argument; (2) *Friendliness*: Use of impression management, flattery and the creation of goodwill; (3)

Coalition: Mobilization of other people in the organization; (4) *Bargaining*: Exchange of benefits or favors; (5) *Assertiveness***:** Use of a direct and forceful approach; (6) *Higher authority*: Gaining support of higher levels in the organization to back up requests; and (7) *Sanctions*: Using organizationally sanctioned rewards and punishments.

Two reasons could be ascribed for the use of a particular influence tactic by an individual in a department. They are the task environment of the department, and power of the department.

Task Environment and Individual Influencing Behavior

Studies on influence strategies have generally ignored the role of moderating factors. One such moderating factor could be structure, which provides the context within which actors operate to acquire and exercise power (Brass, 1984). This structure is either vertically or horizontally differentiated. The vertical differentiation is the hierarchical level and the division of labor according to functions is the horizontal differentiation. Social science research on the antecedents of influence tactics has been dominated historically with a concern for vertical interpersonal power rather than horizontal power. Even the classic research done by Brass and Burkhardt (1993) on the structural basis for influence tactics focused on the hierarchical level. One unfortunate consequence of this focus has been the divorce of agent-target relations from their work context. Several authors have stressed the importance of including one or more direct context variables such as the task environment as influence tactic moderators (Schriesheim, 1980; Westphal, 1998; Yukl, Kim & Falbe, 1996). However, few studies have empirically examined the moderators or proposed any specific testable hypotheses. Therefore we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Frequency of usage of each influence strategy will be different between departments.

Departmental Power and Individual Power

Departmental power is strategically contingent on being central to an organization's workflow, monopolizing scarce resources and creating dependencies (Hickson et al., 1971). In addition, an employee's motivation, adaptability, and control are primarily determined by the department's perceived power in an organization (Ouchi, 1977). Functional departments that are pervasive in organizations are powerful and members of the department share that sense of power. A person in a powerful context is bound to feel powerful (Pfeffer, 1992).

Hypothesis 2: Perceived power of a department will be positively related to perceived power of the individual.

Departmental Power and Influence Strategies

Influence strategies could be categorized as (1) *Strong strategies*—those reflecting direct and intensive control over the target person—like assertiveness and rationality; and (2) *Weaker strategies*—those signifying weaker control over the target—like bargaining, coalitions, friendliness and higher authority (Erez, Keider & Rim, 1986).

Another perspective of looking at usage of influence tactics apart from the task environment is the power differential between the departments. According to Brass (1984: 518), "While personal attributes and strategy may have an important effect on power acquisition... structure imposes the ultimate constraints on the individual." Context becomes important in case of power in the

organization, because the capacity to influence is grounded in a differential access to material and structural resources. Power disparity between departments could be an important factor that affects individual influencing behavior. Also, influence strategies have been found to be related to perceptions about the work environment (Dulebohn & Ferris, 1999). Use of strong influence strategies would be related to perceptions of power. People who consider themselves to be in powerful departments are likely to use strong influence strategies. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Perceived power of the department will be positively related to use of assertiveness and reason.

Individual Power and Influence Tactics

Functional activities and positions of power couple to give rise to a particular behavior (Weick, 1976). Politics is the inevitable result of functional differentiation. Centrality in the workflow reinforces the political behavior and the perception of power. Centrality in the workflow can be measured through in-degree defined as the number of persons who choose a focal person. Individuals who have a high in-degree centrality are perceived to have power in an organizational setting (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993). Manager's proximity to power—that is, centrality in an intraorganizational network, is related to his or her own perceived power (Tushman & Anderson, 1986).

Hypothesis 4: In-degree centrality will be positively related to use of assertiveness and reason.

Methodology

The survey was carried out in an industrial concern located in eastern India. Sixty persons out of sixty-five people belonging to eight different departments returned usable questionnaires, giving approximately 91% response rate. The functional differentiation that prevailed in this organization made it particularly suitable for this study. Most of the respondents had been employed in the organization for more than 10 years. Those who had been with the organization for less than two years were not included in the study. Managers surveyed were from the highest level (Managers and Senior Managers) in all the departments. This was done in order to study the role of functional differentiation in power and influence, while controlling for the vertical source of power.

Measures

We measured the frequency of usage of seven influence strategies using the 33-item *Profile of Organizational Influence Strategies* (Kipnis et al., 1980). Managers were asked to indicate their responses on a five-point scale (1=never; 2=seldom; 3=occasionally; 4=frequently; 5=almost always).

We measured perceived departmental power by having the managers respond to four items: (1) Other departments depend on your department; (2) Other departments influence your department (reverse scored); (3) Your department is able to change the behavior of others; and (4) Your department is able to influence others in different departments. Responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

To measure in-degree centrality, respondents were asked to circle the names of people with whom they communicated as part of the job during a typical week. In-degree centrality was measured by counting the number of different persons who circled a focal person (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993).

We measured perceived individual power using the two items: (1) I control others more than I am controlled; and (2) Others influence me more than I influence them (reverse scored). Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

Results

Correlations between all variables are provided in Table 1. Reasoning was the most frequently used influence strategy, and sanctions and higher authority were the least frequently used. We did an analysis of variance to see if the frequency of use of influence strategies varied across departments. The results are presented in Table 2. Assertiveness, sanctions, higher authority and coalition varied significantly in frequency of use between the eight departments. There was however no significant difference between the departments in the case of friendliness, reason and bargaining. Thus hypothesis 1 was only partly supported. We did some further analysis of influence strategies across departments by grouping the departments into production (cold rolling mill and electrolytic tinplating, electrical services, commercial services, quality and assurance) and non-production (personnel, administration, finance, medical). Analysis of variance results showed that those in production-related departments used assertiveness significantly more frequently compared to those in the non-production departments (F=4.12, p < .01). There was no significant difference between the two groups of departments in the case of the remaining six influence strategies.

As can be seen from Table 1, perceived power of the department was significantly positively related to perceived power of the individual (r=.52, p<.001). Hence hypothesis 2 was supported. Perceived power of the department was significantly positively related to assertiveness (r=.21, p < .05), but not to reasoning. Thus, hypothesis 3 was only partially supported. Perceived power of the department was also significantly positively related to bargaining and friendliness, though we did not hypothesise such a relationship. Like in the case of perceived departmental power, in-degree centrality was also significantly positively related to assertiveness (r=.64, p < .001), but not to reasoning, thus supporting hypothesis 4 only partially. Perceived individual power was found to be significantly positively related to friendliness (r=.31, p<.01) and higher authority (.25, p<.05).

Discussion

The results of this study throw light on the importance of task environment in the area of power and influencing processes. That people in different departments use different influence strategies more frequently is a significant finding of this study. Particularly more significant is the finding that non-production departments use assertiveness less frequently compared to production departments. This highlights the importance of those in staffing functions developing greater skills in using softer strategies like friendliness. The findings of this study lend support to the claim that power is situational (Fombrun, 1983; Krackhardt, 1990). Since the production departments are engaged in directly producing the good, using the direct influence strategy of assertiveness might be considered acceptable. On the other hand, the support functions might be seen as acting appropriately if they used strategies like friendliness and reason.

Hence as seen, one cannot deny the context in the area of power. The support provided to hypothesis 2 indicates that people in powerful departments feel powerful. Pfeffer (1992) argued that the employee who has greater access to resources and information might have a greater advantage and therefore feel powerful. Our results also support Brass and Burkhardt's (1993) findings that assertiveness is used more often with increasing power. The agents seem to use assertiveness more because of the expectation that the target will comply with a simple straightforward request.

Results indicate that hard strategies like sanctions, bargaining, coalition, and higher authority are significantly positively related to each other. One who uses any of these hard strategies more frequently is also likely to use the other hard strategies more frequently. The results show that reason is a popular influence strategy irrespective of the department. A significant positive relationship between friendliness and perceived power (both individual and departmental) contradicts the assumption that friendliness is used by agents when they are unsure about their bases of power. A positive relationship exists between assertiveness and centrality. This indicates that individuals who are seen as the focal people in the organization, tend to use assertiveness as an influence strategy frequently. Assertiveness has a stronger positive relationship with in-degree centrality than with perceived departmental power. Individuals who are high on in-degree centrality, irrespective of whether they are in influential departments or not, have extensive networks and contacts. Such people are also recognized as being powerful by others. This factor is taken into cognizance by agents possessing high in-degree centrality and therefore they tend to use assertiveness more frequently. Hence adding to Brass & Burkhardt's (1993) findings that assertiveness implies control of resources, this study indicates that assertiveness is also used concerning extensive networking. This networking ability gives the agent a sense of power and confidence to employ assertiveness. The implicit assumption in Indian work culture that the powerful can assert themselves is vividly seen with these results.

However, a surprising finding is that reason is not associated with either a powerful department or a powerful individual. This contradicts previous research (Kipnis et. al., 1984; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988). This could be because employment of logic and rationality by most individuals is substituted for intelligence and expertise. This is probably true considering that most of the respondents surveyed were engineers with a heavy analytical orientation. Thus, reason is used frequently as an influence strategy by most of these people in the organization. Power does not seem to be related to use of reason as an influence strategy, suggesting that it is more of a generic strategy.

Conclusion

Departments have significant impact over individuals in the area of power and influence. Task environment affects the usage of influence strategies. Assertiveness is associated more with production departments as compared to the support functions in a manufacturing concern. This could be because of the relative power of production departments in a manufacturing concern. Further, individuals cannot divorce themselves from the context and in a powerful department, individuals feel powerful and vice versa. Assertiveness is a key influencing strategy for people in powerful departments and for those having high in-degree centrality. Reason is a generic influence strategy used uniformly by people in various departments.

Although these conclusions might best be thought as propositions requiring further testing, they demonstrate the value of including the horizontal structure along with the vertical structure in explaining the use of certain influence styles. Though the results and the research can be seen as a

first attempt, the underlying predictor of influence cannot be denied and is evident. Further research is required in this area to identify the functional complexities associated with power and influence.

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TABLE 1. Correlations Between Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Assertiveness										
2. Reason	*.27									
3. Bargaining	*.27	***.48								
4. Coalition	.03	.16	*.27							
5. Friendliness	.04	.09	**.35	.21						
6. Higher authority	.14	*.24	*.22	***.46	.01					
7. Sanctions	.12	.20	***.41	**.30	.17	*.23				
8. In-degree centrality	***.64	.08	.17	.06	-.17	-.03	.09			
9. Perceived individual power	-.12	-.11	.10	.17	**.31	*.25	.14	-.14		
10. Perceived departmental power	*.21	.07	*.24	-.07	**.32	.02	.12	-.21	***.52	

$* = p < .05$, $** = p < .01$, $*** = p < .001$.

TABLE 2. Analysis of Variance

Departments	Friendliness	Reason	Bargaining	Assertiveness	Sanctions	Higher Authority	Coalition
Medical	3.23	3.63	2.31	2.34	1.53	1.96	3.82
Cold Rolling Mill & Electrolytic Tinplating	3.08	4.09	2.91	3.31	1.84	1.92	3.16
Quality & Assurance	2.79	3.81	2.10	3.21	1.15	2.31	3.50
Administration	2.58	4.08	2.63	3.33	2.20	1.46	3.25
Electrical Services	2.69	3.79	2.43	2.57	1.83	1.38	2.17
Personnel	3.47	3.75	2.52	3.40	1.16	1.40	3.10
Commercial Services	3.42	4.75	2.70	3.07	2.67	2.00	4.33
Finance	3.00	4.42	2.93	3.29	1.60	2.33	3.17
F =	2.03	1.02	0.99	***12.93	***4.98	**3.05	*2.21

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$.