
'Star Wars': Managers & MBAs in the Corporate Snakepit

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Abstract

This article is a reminder that managing organisational politics remains an essential management skill. It highlights several ways in which a manager can tune-into the political and power dynamics of organisations. Aimed primarily at new managers and younger MBA graduates, who may be experiencing these managerial politics at work for the first time, the article provides advice based on the author's own experiences to enable managers to negotiate some of the leadership pitfalls to enable them to develop into the type of leaders that all organisations need.

1. Purpose

Welcome to the Corporate Snakepit! This paper highlights the importance of adopting a political lens through which to examine - and interpret - organisational behaviour. Whilst doing this will not necessarily guarantee survival in the complex world of corporate politics, it will help to make you safer and probably enable you to manage your career more successfully. Although the world of business still tends to be portrayed as being a logical and rationally driven one it seems to me that decision-making remains profoundly influenced by the emotions and self-interest of an organisation's influential role holders. Whilst my views on organisational politics will necessarily be biased by my readings and experiences, if accurate, they have significant implications for the success and failure of new managers, including MBAs, as they progress up the organisational ladder and find themselves (increasingly!) confronted by the inherent inter-personal dynamics and rivalries of everyday business life.

With these matters in mind the primary aim for this paper is to act as a reminder of the political - 'snakepit' - features of organisational life into which managers, whether they like it or not, find themselves catapulted. Newly appointed managers in particular - often recently qualified MBAs - can falter if they fail to take sufficient account of the power dynamics within organisations. An executive's success will rest, in part at least, on their ability to anticipate and cope with the array of inter-personal tensions and dynamics they will encounter during their career.

A secondary aim is to note the limitations - perhaps even 'delusions' - of relying on business metrics alone as the basis for managing an organisation's performance and assessing its state of well-being. Too strong a reliance on newly acquired analytical skills, combined with a belief in the sanctity of 'metrics', can result in managers becoming overly susceptible to manipulation by more politically astute and savvy sponsors, colleagues and more senior

managers. Of course such data matters but too obsessive an attachment to them can result in inappropriate, untimely, ill-judged and disastrous decision-making as the crisis in the financial systems of 2008-2009 has illustrated all too profoundly. As Einstein is attributed to have said, "not everything that matters can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts"ⁱ - in spite of what some business school professors and management gurus may profess!

What however does remain profoundly important as a key basis underpinning effective leadership and organisational performance - in good times and bad - is the quality of relationships at work and the importance of building and maintaining personal networks of trusted colleagues.ⁱⁱ This is why it is so important to look at your organisation and examine how it is working in terms of its power hierarchy, its pattern of internal politics and the predominant people-dynamics displayed.

This article is about becoming better prepared to cope with a wider bandwidth of human emotions and behaviour in the workplace - not only the positive and bright sides of organisational life which so often presented and emphasised in the literature.

2. Managers, MBAs and the 'Dynamics' Which Surround Them

My perspectives on organisational behaviour and politics are based on my wide-ranging experiences as a clerk in a shipping office, an organisation & methods officer in retail, a junior manager in manufacturing, a senior manager in health care, a stint in a UK government department, time as an ex-pat in the USA, an interesting time as a full-time academic, and from many years as a management consultant. I have an array of (non-fatal) 'war wounds' which I – in part at least – attribute to my naivety as a manager who neglected to take enough notice of the internal political landscapes where I was working. Unsurprisingly perhaps I am left with a profound sense that tuning-into such matters really does matter!

On the basis that my experiences are, more or less, generally valid and broadly applicable to organisational life in general I propose a number of ways through which a manager may be able to protect him- or herself. For a start it is worth remembering that snazzy job titles and impressive post-graduate qualifications come complete with high delivery expectations and can position you as a target for the envy and jealousy from some of those around you. This, if for no other reason, should prompt you to read on and to review your organisation in the various 'political' ways outlined in this article.

So what might it be prudent - career enhancing even - to attend to as you take up your new managerial appointment or perhaps in how you manage your re-entry to the business world on completion of your management qualifications? Ten 'survival hints' are outlined below for you to consider based on my consulting experiences in the private and the public sector, in the UK and abroad:

1- Adopt a Systemic Perspective:

Remember to look at the organisation as a system of interconnected departments and functions. The key point here is that if just one feature of the organisation as a whole is changed, - such as the *structure*, the *key people* or perhaps the *flow of information* - such changes may have an unintended impact elsewhere within that organisation and may destabilise the workings of the organisation as a whole. Conversely, keeping the 'bigger picture' in mind will help you to understand how your organisation is functioning as an integrated entity in its own right far more than if you only focused on your part of the enterprise alone. Change frameworks such as the Burke-Litwin Model,ⁱⁱⁱ the 7-S framework^{iv} or the Galbraith 'Fit' Framework^v offer insightful ways of looking at an organisation, and aspects of its internal dynamics, in a joined-up systemic way.

2- Remember that the Map is not the Territory:

It is salutary to remember – during a period where business has become overly attached to, and possibly fixated upon, metrics and targets - just how significant the *political* aspects remain in shaping and defining success and failure in business life. Whilst the metrics may help to shape the direction of travel desired, the 'journey' itself will be a very different experience than the targets and figures may predict. An over-reliance on figures alone is likely to be misleading, and possibly illusory, because so much revolves around *what* is counted, *who* 'counts', *how* the standards are defined & applied and *how* a final assessment is reached about success or failure. Whilst targets and KPIs *etc* chart what is being looked for they can only present a uni-directional perspective on the multi-dimensional and convoluted world of organisational life and as such they offer a limited perspective on what goes on. They just do not - on their own - tell the whole story about the success, well-being or effectiveness of an organisation.

3- Broaden your perspectives on leadership:

A working knowledge about how people 'tick', and people-dynamics generally, are surprisingly useful in trying to assess what is happening at work, especially when things seem to be going wrong! Depending on your more formal preparation for leadership (*i.e.* your professional background, further training, career history *etc*) the emphasis placed on the more irrational and darker sides of organisational behaviour may well have ranged from a brief review of organisational culture & sources of power to a deeper examination of the psychological bases of executive dysfunction, collusion & corruption in the workplace. You may have also had emphasised to you the benefits of charismatic and of transformational leadership. All well and good but less consideration was probably given to the limitations of such leadership styles and the damage which rampant narcissistic ego-driven leadership brings to individuals and the organisation at large.^{vi}

In my view some appreciation of these facets of business life are vital if you are to begin to diagnose more accurately - and cope with - the behaviour of the key people around you in the organisation. Without any frameworks or models about these things to work from you will be lost! Handy texts as starters to look at here would include *Images of Organizations*,^{vii} *The Leadership Mystique*^{viii} and *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*.^{ix} All well worth a read; practical, illustrative, creative.

4- 'Read' the Politics of Power:

Understanding how power is exercised within organisations remains an essential skill and attribute without which other skills in data interpretation such as business ratio analysis, balanced scorecard competency, and comprehensive stakeholder analyses could be reasonably be described as lower-level activities. In contrast tuning-into, and diagnosing, the key features of the political landscape inside your firm will help to facilitate a more effective application of your analytical techniques and approaches in enhancing organisational - and (your) personal - effectiveness. For example, being aware of the power and impact of social influence processes at work and how these intertwine with the internal organisational politics is essential to a person's continuing success in an organisation. Social influence processes such as *reciprocity* (i.e. how a person can feel socially obliged to concur to the request made) and *liking* (i.e. how our decisions are influenced by how well we like and know the other person) are important to recognise and attend to at work.^x

5- Remain alert to Hidden Agendas:

As Heifetz and Linsky put it, "when the game is highly structured and the goal is clear, interpreting events on the playing field is a matter of technical expertise. But in organisational life, the various players compete by different rules and hold different visions of what it means to score a goal".^{xi} Quite so; yet perplexingly, or so it seems to me, much of the preparation for leadership is invariably based on a false premise that we all 'play' on a level playing field, follow the espoused rules, do not cheat or work to undermine those we perceive as competitors or rivals. My experience is that some colleagues - for various reasons - *will* compete on a win-lose basis with those around them and follow their own set of personal rules in the pursuit of what they deem to represent 'success' irrespective of collateral damage caused in the process!

For example one boss I worked for always had to be 'the winner' and would set us tasks we could not succeed at whereupon he was then able to heroically, and publicly, 'rescue' us from impending failure and thus be reaffirmed as 'top dog'. In another organisation a senior Director created the conditions internally for the outsourcing of work to an organisation in which they had an undisclosed financial interest whilst all the while presenting other reasons for the outsourcing decisions he made. Sussing out possible hidden agendas - without becoming paranoid of course - is an important part of one's decision-making armoury.

My experiences suggests that 'What you see' is not necessarily 'What you get' - in spite of the popular adage to the contrary - and that sometimes 'the writing on the tin' is ambiguous, illusory and misleading!

6- Remember - People protect their Power, their Reputation & their Position:

Loss of power, position and reputation - real or imagined - will be ferociously defended. Maintaining one's position in the hierarchy of power is an understated yet powerful dynamic probably underlying much of a person's behaviour. A motivation to protect one's position at work may well be at the base of much organisational decision-making and if so would help to account for some of the (otherwise) seemingly irrational behaviour that can be observed in the workplace; behaviour such as hiding information, restricting access to required resources,

imposing trivial and unnecessary rules and procedures, blocking reports, delaying tactics, 'losing' files, blaming others for failings, creating false crises, imposing self-promoting rituals.

Hogan notes how "people find the loss of power profoundly distressful and history is replete with examples of the lengths to which people will go to gain or retain power".^{xii} Whilst we may not all display the degree of sociopathic behaviour described in *Snakes in Suits*.^{xiii} the interesting collection of HBR papers entitled *The Mind of the Leader* illustrates leader behaviours which betray deep-seated competitive traits which can emerge and wreak destruction when the leader feels under threat and has been enabled to do what they like.^{xiv}

7- Monitor your Sponsors & Advocates:

When new managers are appointed, or newly minted MBAs (re-)enter the world of work, they arrive as significant - although generally hierarchically junior - players in that organisation's political system. Often they enter the power system though in a privileged position and often under the tutelage and guidance of a well regarded senior executive, or 'minder'. Mentors will, of course, have their own personal political agenda and they may be tempted to use their new mentees to further their own personal aims and objectives. This possibility can all too easily be overlooked, albeit temporarily, and perhaps to the cost of the naïve new manager or MBA.

As an example, one director I knew was proud of the high churn rate (i.e. failure rate) of managers and protégés appointed to his team. He chose to project their failings as evidence of his own excellence, high standards and competence in contrast to the inadequacy and mediocrity of those he had appointed. It emerged later however that his appointees were being set up to fail, primarily through his poor selection methods, narcissism, penalistic style of leadership and arrogant ways of working.

8- Work out how 'Success' is defined:

This is an important question because if organisational 'success' becomes too dependent on the whims of the influential few, the more toxic and dysfunctional that workplace is susceptible to becoming. The more toxic the workplace the more vulnerable new managers and MBAs will be to being pressured to meet the personal work agendas of key leaders who wield the power and who determine what is right and wrong (and what is good and bad) in that organisation.^{xv} It is very much the case, as Casse aptly observes, that what actually happens in organisations is often rather different from the more sanitized - and 'sane' - textbook material taught in some business schools.^{xvi}

Hidden agendas, political manoeuvring, deceit, envy, rivalry and hypocrisy will feature and influence internal organisational behaviour just as much as ethical, constructive, thoughtful, collaborative, and collegial working relationships.

9- Take Note: 'Nothing personal, just business':

I realise that this may now come as a surprise to some readers, but "contrary to expectations those chosen to lead will not necessarily do so with the interests of the organisation foremost in mind as colleagues and bosses may not have the well-being of the organisation at heart. Indeed, many are often indifferent to us or see us as competitors".^{xvii} This is how Kramer

sums up the situation. Downs perceives that bureaucratic officials are significantly, although not solely, motivated by their own self-interest even when acting in a purely official capacity.^{xviii} He does not suggest that such motivations are necessarily unhelpful or even against the wider interests of the organisation as a whole but that the 'self-interest' factor remains a significant feature to be considered when working in organisations in spite of any attestations to the contrary. Remember that for many people, work is nothing personal, it is *just* business even though intense emotions are triggered at, and by, work activities and responsibilities.

10-Beware 'Groupthink':

Familiarity at work breeds many things including closed, self-prophetic and complacent thinking. This is a danger for teams because conformity, cohesion, collaboration and collegiality are significant and important aspects of organisational life which help bind otherwise disparate people together towards the successful completion of their work responsibilities. These very same dynamics can however become counter-productive when healthy debate, including challenging decisions and the *status quo*, comes to be interpreted as rebellion, and when proposing new ways of doing/looking at things is deemed to be evidence of traitorous intent! Sounds dramatic - yet these processes and types of reactions do occur and can take hold within organisations.

Unless such processes are moderated and countered, work groups can become increasingly inward-looking and - over a period of time - lose contact with what is actually happening in the business outside their tightly knit, self-conforming and confirming work group. This can result in potentially disastrous and fatal decision-making which progressively comes to be based on what the group *want* to believe is the situation they are addressing rather than what the actual situation is. Examples of dramatic and catastrophic instances of 'Groupthink' have been notably captured by Janis^{xix} and similar organisational processes are illustrated in material by Orwell (Nineteen Eighty-Four), Wilson (The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit), Whyte (The Organization Man), Harrington (Life in the Crystal Palace) and Bradbury (Fahrenheit 451).^{xx}

In summary, each of these ten 'survival hints' focuses on related, yet differing, aspects of the political dynamics underpinning organisational behaviour. Keeping these in mind will (i) remind the reader of the complex and dynamic interplay surrounding individual and group behaviour at work and (ii) enable the reader to be even more considered and thoughtful in how they manage such dynamics and their behaviour at work. Attending to these perspectives puts the reader in a more informed position from which to proactively manage and adapt to the political and power undertones at work.

Many of the 'survival hints' described reflect different aspects of a person's desire to protect their self-interests; these may not be selfish however, but be far more about maintaining a person's sense of purpose, integrity, standing and influence in competitive settings. Self-interest at work - and how this may be displayed - is where we go now.

3. Self-interest at Work; Security, Status, Power, Reputation & Legacy

The protection of a person's 'self-interest' - and position - in the organisation is a perfectly reasonable, and legitimate, focus for people at work. It is *how* this is pursued however that can generate problems and difficulties, particularly if it results in *toxic* ways of operating which subvert the workings of the organisations as a whole.

Trying to analyse the internal dynamics in any organisation is complicated because, as Jackall suggests, everyone in the organisation constructs their own view about what is going on and where, "as a matter of survival, not to mention advancement, corporate managers have to keep their eye fixed not on the abstract principles but on the social framework of their world and its requirements".^{xxi} Managers and MBAs are not of course immune to thoughts of career advancement, future glory and the successful management of their own self-interest anymore than anyone else will be.

However, as the alert & attentive reader will have discerned by now, far from leaders being good, ethical, prudent, unemotional and honest we know leaders are not, by definition, necessarily 'a good thing'; necessary yes but not inevitably 'good'. Just how much havoc can be caused by dishonest leaders has become painfully apparent in recent times - re: Enron, Arthur Anderson *et al* - yet caution about the misuse of power is nothing new and has been researched and commented upon for decades.^{xxii} In spite of the attention such matters are now receiving,^{xxiii} it is intriguing to wonder why so little - until the fall-out surrounding events such as the Enron debacle and the sub-prime scenarios hit the news and forced the situation - high priority attention was given to monitoring & policing senior executive behaviour more carefully.

Decades ago, Michael Maccoby captivantly described in *The Gamesman* how the challenge of competitive activity and the drive for power, conquests and status can take over and result in stealth and politicising as the way leaders decide to operate to secure personal advancement.^{xxiv} Promotion of self interest can get out of hand though and lead to a culture of false confidence and arrogance resulting in leadership *hubris*, overconfidence, egotistical behaviour, complacency, and an exaggeration of personal strengths and narcissistic posturing. These are features of leadership dysfunction which Hayward and Maccoby have highlighted more recently.^{xxv} Indeed one of the dangers in securing executive prestige, status & power is that it can blind that person to what is actually happening around them - or as Pfeiffer & Sutton put it, " that the mere act of stepping into a powerful position can transform them (from wise, successful leaders) into stubborn, dumb, and evidence resistant jerks".^{xxvi}

Features of such a transformation have been neatly captured by Lenconi who describes leaders' deviations - from their formal responsibilities - in terms of five core temptations, each of which can derail a CEO *et al* if unaddressed.^{xxvii} These are:

- Too much attention to protecting their *ego & status* rather than achieving *results*
- A wish to maintain personal *popularity* rather than holding others *accountable for performance*

- Too strong a need to be seen as 'right' rather than being clear about what has actually happened
- A temptation for *harmony over productive conflict*, and
- A desire for *invulnerability*

Such tendencies illustrate just how a concern to maintain status, prestige and power can emerge as significant driving forces behind the behaviour of the leader. Managers are especially vulnerable to such tendencies if they subscribe to the more heroic model of leadership because of the high profile individualistic behaviour that this generally necessitates.

4. Describing Leaders at Work

Working through the ten 'survival hints' and thinking about how those in positions of power and influence behave in safeguarding their interests may have led you to think a little more about the *types* of managers and leaders around you. How, for example, might you describe those you value and how might you describe those whom you don't.

Devising a 'quick & easy' way of describing (to yourself that is) the workplace behaviour of leaders can help you to manage and respond prudently to what is going on around you and, at the same time, remain more in control of your reactions. One way of doing this is to create your own categorisation of 'leader types' - based on your observations of colleagues' patterns of behaviour. Whilst your labels will have limited scientific validity, describing how you see key colleagues operating will remind you about what you value in management and what you don't but may need be aware of and guard against in the workplace.

As a prompt, Table 1 below sets out how some scholars and practitioners have described 'non-heroic' leader types they have seen during the course of their organisational work. This is not to say that such labels are totally accurate but they characterise how corporate bosses are seen and can be experienced. You can expect to experience most, if not all, of these types of manager during your career each displaying their own particular features and characteristics.

Bing (2007) ^{xxviii}	The Bully	The Disaster-Hunter	Paranoid	The Wimp	The Narcissist	
Downs (1967) ^{xxix}	Zealots	Climbers	Advocates	Conservers	Statesmen	
Maccoby (1976) ^{xxx}	The Craftsman	The Jungle-Fighter	The Company Man	The Gamesman		
Whicker (1996) ^{xxxi}	The Bully	The Street-Fighter	The Enforcer	The Absentee Leader	The Busy-Body	The Controller

Table 1: Leader Types

Creating your own table of leader-types will remind you of the very different ways in which leaders can operate and the extent to which each of these (i) appeals to you and (ii) matches the overall culture and tone of the organisation you are a part of. Again, being clearer about what is going on around you will empower you in situations of strain, tension and confusion.

5. Empowerment in 'Snakepit' settings!

Whilst not every organisation will have *deadly* snakepit dynamics you might want to keep in mind the following rules of thumb:

- Rule 1: Avoid jumping into any snakepit without thinking about doing so very carefully beforehand and asking yourself why you might want to take such an action in the first place
- Rule 2: If you do find yourself in a snakepit remember snakes can bite but that they are not all deadly & some may be quite cute
- Rule 3: Note that it can be difficult to discriminate between those which are deadly & those which are not (*i.e.* not all snakes are necessarily to be avoided) - so watch how they behave
- Rule 4: Exposure to snakes, and minor snake bites, will help to build -up resistance against future more challenging encounters
- Rule 5: If you are unfortunate enough to find yourself in the snakepit:
 - (i) move carefully & don't panic or thrash around
 - (ii) try not to unnecessarily antagonise
 - (iii) identify & locate the most deadly snakes (and avoid them!)
 - (iv) look for a way to escape ideally without treading on any of them
 - (v) converse neutrally, be polite, tread carefully; avoid pythons!
- Rule 6: Take the time to read the references that underpin many of the values in this article.

Without doubt the corporate world is an exciting, engaging, confusing, complex and convoluted one in which to work. For instance superficial harmony may mask profound and divisive differences between colleagues. Overt displays of bravado may mask inner timidity, and apparent introverted leader behaviour may disguise the real hard-edged power behind the throne.

Displays of power and political manoeuvrings abound in business organisations. They are an integral feature of organisational life and thus impact on the behaviour of all. For 'star performers' such as MBAs, managing such dynamics are critical to career development and their continuing success in business. The 'survival hints' outlined suggests several ways of

peeking beneath the presented behaviour of colleagues to illuminate more clearly what is actually going on and in the process enable and empower the new manager to mobilise constructively their own abilities and capabilities to the full. It should be remembered that not all snakepits will be toxic and not all snakes are dangerous even though it would be prudent to watch and manage them with due care and attention.

This article is not intended to deny or diminish the majority of ethical, well-grounded and collaborative executives who do well and who seek to do well in their relationships with colleagues - but it is helpful to be reminded that not all leaders will be quite as ethical or principled as they may present themselves to be. Used appropriately, the exercise of organisational power and influence when harnessed and mobilised for constructive and positive change is a force for good. It can also be used to usurp and diminish, as Enron *et al* have so forcefully illustrated.

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