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Interests, Conflict, and Power

Organizations as Political Systems

I live in a democratic society. Why should I have to obey the orders of my boss eight hours a day? He acts like a bloody dictator, ordering us around and telling us what we should be thinking and doing. What right does he have to act in this way? The company pays our wages, but does this mean it has the right to command all our beliefs and feelings? It certainly has no right to reduce us to robots who must obey every command.

This rather angry comment of a factory worker exasperated by the grinding and oppressive experience of daily work life captures an aspect of organization that has escaped us up to now. He recognizes that his rights as a citizen and as a paid employee are in conflict with each other. As a citizen in a democratic society he is theoretically free to hold his own opinions, make his own decisions, and be treated as an equal. As an

employee he is denied all these rights. He is expected to keep his mouth shut, do what he is told, and submit to the will of his superior. For eight hours a day, five days a week, he is expected to forget about democracy and get on with his work. His only democratic right rests in the freedom to find another job and move on. Or as his manager put it, "You can vote with your feet. If you don't like it here, you don't have to stay."

The situation described is an extreme one. Not all organizations are characterized by such entrenched relations between managers and workers or by such dictatorial modes of rule. But the situation is more common than we often like to think, especially in industrial organizations where battle lines have developed between labor and management. Typical or not, the point of our illustration is that it invites us to understand organizations as political systems.

Managers frequently talk about authority, power, and superior-subordinate relations. It takes but a small step to recognize these as political issues involving the activities of rulers and ruled. If we develop this idea, it is clear that we can understand organizations as systems of government that vary according to the political principles employed.

Some, like the one considered above, may be highly authoritarian while others may be model democracies. By recognizing that organization is intrinsically political, in the sense that ways must be found to create order and direction among people with potentially diverse and conflicting interests, much can be learned about the problems and legitimacy of management as a process of government and about the relation between organization and society.

The political metaphor can also be used to unravel the politics of day-to-day organizational life. Most people working in an organization readily admit in private that they are surrounded by forms of "wheeling and dealing" through which different people attempt to advance specific interests. However, this kind of activity is rarely discussed in public. The idea that organizations are supposed to be rational enterprises in which their members seek common goals tends to discourage discussion of political motive. Politics, in short, is seen as a dirty word.

This is unfortunate because it often prevents us from recognizing that politics and politicking may be an essential aspect of organizational life and not necessarily an optional and dysfunctional extra. In this regard, it is useful to remember that in its original meaning the idea of politics stems from the view that, where interests are divergent, society should provide a means of allowing individuals to reconcile their differences through consultation and negotiation. For example, in ancient Greece, Aristotle advocated politics as a means of reconciling the need for unity in the Greek *polis* (city-state) with the fact that the *polis* was an "aggregate

of many members." Politics, for him, provided a means of creating order out of diversity while avoiding forms of totalitarian rule. Political science and many systems of government have built on this basic idea, advocating politics and the recognition of the interplay of competing interests as a means of creating a noncoercive form of social order.

By attempting to understand organizations as systems of government and by attempting to unravel the detailed politics of organizational life, we are able to grasp important qualities of organization that are often glossed over or ignored.

Organizations as Systems of Government

In April 1979, *BusinessWeek* ran a cover story on the Ford Motor Company. The cover featured a cartoon of Henry Ford II sitting in a thronelike driving seat with a driving wheel between his hands. Behind the throne stands a shadowy figure—we are left to guess who. The prominent Ford-like nose suggests that it may be Henry Ford I, founder of the Ford dynasty, scrutinizing the way his grandson was driving the company. The focus of the story was on the problem of succession. After thirty-four years as chief executive officer, Henry II was contemplating retirement, but there was no obvious successor capable of taking the wheel. Up until his demotion and dismissal in summer 1978, the popular candidate had been Lee Iacocca, the highly successful Ford executive who later became head of Chrysler. The firing of Iacocca added depth to the imagery conveyed in the cartoon, for it symbolized the authoritarian nature of Ford under the two Henrys. Iacocca's dismissal was merely the most recent and controversial in a list of firings that had included the names of seven company presidents since 1960. Iacocca was a popular and powerful figure at the Ford company but obviously not popular where it mattered most: His dismissal was solely linked to the fact that he did not have Henry II's approval. Henry II is reported as having presented an "it's him or me" ultimatum to his board's organization review committee and won. The formal reason given by Henry II to *BusinessWeek* was that Iacocca did not fit into his way of looking at things. Informally, it is speculated that Iacocca's fate was sealed by the fact that he had become too powerful within the company. Although the guiding philosophy of Ford was reported to be toward a General Motors style of "group management," *Business Week* stated that it believed Henry had found it difficult to reconcile himself with the loss of personal power that this kind of decentralization involved.

The story at Ford is by no means unique. Many organizations are ruled by authoritarian managers who wield considerable power as a result of their personal characteristics, family ties, or skill in building influence and prestige within the organization. Obvious examples are the owner-operated firm where the principle that "It's my business and I'll do as I like" holds sway; the family business ruled through "iron hands" that respect family interest and tradition above all else; large corporations such as ITT under Harold Geneen; and business firms, labor unions, and even voluntary organizations or clubs dominated by self-perpetuating oligarchies. The basis of day-to-day order in these organizations tends to be autocratic rather than democratic in that the ultimate power to shape action rests in the hands of a single individual or group, who typically makes all the important decisions. Although it is rare in practice to find an organization that is completely autocratic, many organizations have strong autocratic tendencies and characteristics.

When we summon terms like autocracy and democracy to describe the nature of an organization we are implicitly drawing parallels between organizations and political systems. As indicated in Exhibit 6.1, we do the same when we talk about organizations as bureaucracies or technocracies because in each case we are characterizing the organization in terms of a particular style of political rule. In each of these words the suffix *cracy*, which derives from the Greek *kratia*, meaning power or rule, is coupled with a prefix that indicates the precise nature of the power or rule employed. Thus, the word autocracy signifies the kind of absolute and often dictatorial power associated with ruling by oneself. In a bureaucracy, rule is associated with use of the written word and is exercised by bureaucrats who sit behind their *bureaux*, or desks, making and administering the rules that are to guide organizational activity. Power and accountability in such organizations are intimately connected with one's knowledge and use of the rules and with the lawlike form of administration that this implies.

In technocratic organizations, such as the flexible and ever-changing firms that thrive in the electronics industry and other turbulent environments, power and accountability are directly linked to one's technical knowledge and expertise. Whereas in autocracies and bureaucracies the pattern of power and authority is fairly stable and clearly defined, in technocracies it is often in flux as different individuals and groups rise and decline in power along with the value of their technical contributions. Power and influence often tend to follow the "whiz kids" and other knowledgeable people who seem capable of addressing dominant concerns or of opening new paths to corporate fame and fortune.

Organizations, like governments, employ some system of “rule” as a means of creating and maintaining order among their members. Political analysis can thus make a valuable contribution to organizational analysis. The following are among the most common varieties of political rule found in organizations:

Autocracy: absolute government where power is held by an individual or small group and supported by control of critical resources, property or ownership rights, tradition, charisma, and other claims to personal privilege

Bureaucracy: rule exercised through use of the written word, which provides the basis for a rational-legal type of authority, or “rule of law”

Technocracy: rule exercised through use of knowledge, expert power, and the ability to solve relevant problems

Codetermination: the form of rule where opposing parties combine in the joint management of mutual interests, as in coalition government or corporatism, each party drawing on a specific power base

Representative democracy: rule exercised through the election of officers mandated to act on behalf of the electorate and who hold office for a specified time period or so long as they command the support of the electorate, as in parliamentary government and forms of worker control and shareholder control in industry

Direct democracy: the system where everyone has an equal right to rule and is involved in all decision making, as in many communal organizations such as cooperatives and kibbutzim. It encourages self-organization as a key mode of organizing

It is rare to find organizations that use just one of these different kinds of rule. More often, mixed types are found in practice. For example, although some organizations are more autocratic, more bureaucratic, or more democratic than others, they often contain elements of other systems as well. One of the tasks of political analysis is to discover which principles are in evidence, where, when, why, and how.

Exhibit 6.1 Organizations and Modes of Political Rule

Finally, in democratic organizations, the power to rule rests with the *demos*, or populace. This power may be exercised through representative forms of management, where different stakeholders are formally represented in decision-making processes, as in systems of codetermination or

coalition government and in forms of worker or shareholder control. Democratic power may also be exercised directly through participative forms of rule where everyone shares in the management process.

Many people hold the belief that there is a separation between business and politics and that they should be kept apart. Hence, when someone proposes the idea that workers should sit on boards of directors or that there is a case for employee control of industry, that person is often viewed as taking an unwarranted political stand. However, the foregoing discussion shows that this interpretation is not quite correct. The person advocating the case of employee rights or industrial democracy is not introducing a political issue so much as arguing for a different approach to a situation that is already political. Organizations that are autocratic, bureaucratic, or technocratic have as much political significance as those dominated by systems of worker control. Their political nature is simply of a different kind, drawing on different principles of legitimacy.

The system of industrial codetermination that developed in West Germany and other European countries after World War II explicitly recognizes the rival claims to legitimate rule that can be advanced by owners of capital, on the one hand, and by employees, on the other. Under this system, owners and employees codetermine the future of their organizations by sharing power and decision making. The system varies widely in application. For example, in Germany, codetermination varies from industry to industry. In the coal and steel industries, legislation dating from the 1950s provides for the appointment of supervisory boards comprising eleven members, five to be elected by shareholders and five by employees, the remaining member being appointed by the other ten. The supervisory board is then responsible for appointing a managing board of three members to run the day-to-day affairs of the organization. One member of this board must be a business specialist, another a production specialist, and the other a trade unionist. Elections to these boards are held every three years. The boards are designed to give capital and labor equal rights, although many would argue that this does not always work out in practice. A modification of the codetermination principle in other European and North American countries is found in the appointment of worker directors, as in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, where a certain number of seats on corporate boards are usually allocated to union representatives. Another application of the principle is found in the forms of corporatism where management, unions, and government join together to consult and collaborate with each other on issues of mutual interest.

Although such developments recognize the rights of labor to participate in the management of an enterprise, they have not always been readily embraced by those in the labor movement. The reason for this is found

in another political principle: that in healthy systems of government those in power should be held in check by some form of opposition. Many people concerned with the rights of labor fear that direct involvement in the management process creates a situation that co-opts or incorporates, and hence reduces, the power of dissent. By being a part of a decision-making process one loses one's right to oppose the decisions that are made. Many advocates of labor rights have thus suggested that employee interests can best be protected through associations such as labor unions or professional bodies that adopt an oppositional role in order to shape policy without owning it.

This problem of "incorporation" often accompanies changes in organization favoring increased employee participation in decision making. The fear of many opponents of such changes is that employees will be allowed to exercise their democratic rights in decisions of minor importance while being excluded from major ones. "We're allowed to choose the color of the wallpaper but little else" is a familiar complaint. As these critics see it, partial movements toward industrial democracy are often motivated by a managerial intent to divert or diffuse potential opposition by sharing the less important aspects of control. For these reasons, advocates of industrial democracy suggest that participation is not enough and that organizations should move toward styles of management based on fully developed forms of workers' control.

These have been widely employed in Eastern European countries such as the former Yugoslavia, where workers elected their managers and where the principle of self-management provided a key organizational value. This kind of system differs from schemes of codetermination that recognize that owners of capital and labor have equal rights by dissolving the distinction between capital and labor. In countries where industry is state owned, this form of self-management is fairly easily achieved, but elsewhere it has run into difficulties from those who wish to protect the rights of owners.

The most obvious large-scale experiments in workers' control in capitalist countries have occurred in ailing firms and industries where changes in fortune have increased the probability of unemployment and plant closures and prompted the desire of owners to sell their interest in the organization. The employee response has occasionally been to buy and run the company, often with mixed success, partly because the organizations are in declining industries and partly because of the problems of co-option that arise when workers become or appoint managers of an organization operating in a capitalist system. Like other managers in nondemocratic organizations, they find that survival in the system calls for certain kinds of action that are not always popular with their fellow

owner-employees. The system has a logic of its own, and being an owner does not necessarily imply freedom of action.

Whether we are discussing the management of the Ford Motor Company under a member of the Ford dynasty or the management of a worker-controlled cooperative, it is clear that organizational choice always implies political choice. Although the language of organization theory often presents ideas relating to the management and motivation of people at work in relatively neutral terms—for example, as issues of leadership style, autonomy, participation, and employer-employee relations—they are by no means as neutral as they seem. In understanding organizations as political systems we have a means of exploring the political significance of these issues and the general relation between politics and organization.

Organizations as Systems of Political Activity

An analysis of organization from the perspective of comparative government can place our understanding of organizations in a refreshing perspective. However, in order to understand the day-to-day political dynamics of organization, it is also necessary to explore the detailed processes through which people engage in politics. For this purpose, it is useful to return to Aristotle's idea that politics stems from a diversity of interests, and trace how this diversity gives rise to the "wheeling and dealing," negotiation, and other processes of coalition building and mutual influence that shape so much of organizational life.

An organization's politics is most clearly manifest in the conflicts and power plays that sometimes occupy center stage, and in the countless interpersonal intrigues that provide diversions in the flow of organizational activity. More fundamentally, however, politics occurs on an ongoing basis, often in a way that is invisible to all but those directly involved.

We can analyze organizational politics in a systematic way by focusing on relations between *interests*, *conflict*, and *power*. Organizational politics arise when people think differently and want to act differently. This diversity creates a tension that must be resolved through political means. As we have already seen, there are many ways in which this can be done: autocratically ("We'll do it this way"); bureaucratically ("We're supposed to do it this way"); technocratically ("It's best to do it this way"); or democratically ("How shall we do it?"). In each case the choice between alternative paths of action usually hinges on the power relations between the actors involved. By focusing on how divergent interests give rise to

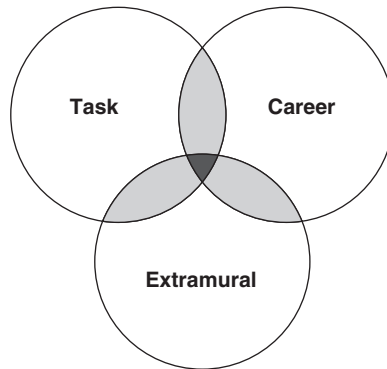
conflicts, visible and invisible, that are resolved or perpetuated by various kinds of power play, we can make the analysis of organizational politics as rigorous as the analysis of any other aspect of organizational life.

ANALYZING INTERESTS

In talking about “interests” we are talking about predispositions embracing goals, values, desires, expectations, and other orientations and inclinations that lead a person to act in one way rather than another. In everyday life we tend to think of interests in a spatial way: as areas of concern that we wish to preserve or enlarge or as positions that we wish to protect or achieve. We live “in” our interests, often see others as “encroaching” on them, and readily engage in defenses or attacks designed to sustain or improve our position. The flow of politics is intimately connected with this way of positioning ourselves.

There are many ways in which we can define and analyze this pursuit and defense of interests. One way that has particular relevance for understanding organizational politics is to conceive interests in terms of three interconnected domains relating to one’s organizational task, career, and personal life (Exhibit 6.2). *Task interests* are connected with the work one has to perform. The manager of a production plant has to ensure that products are produced in a timely and efficient manner. A salesperson must sell his or her quota of goods and sustain customer relations. An accountant must maintain appropriate records and produce regular accounts. However, work life always involves more than just doing one’s job. Employees bring to the workplace aspirations and visions as to what their future may hold, providing the basis for *career interests* that may be independent of the job being performed. They also bring their personalities, private attitudes, values, preferences, and beliefs and sets of commitments from outside work, allowing these *extramural interests* to shape the way they act in relation to both job and career.

The relations among the three sets of interests are best understood if we examine a specific situation. Consider, for example, the position of a corporate executive working in a large organization. He may be highly committed to his job, ambitious, and also highly involved with family life. In his work experience, he may desire to manage all three: to do a good job, move ahead in the organization, and strike a reasonable balance between work and leisure so that he can spend weekends and most evenings with his family. In some situations, all three may coincide; in others, two spheres of interest may be compatible; whereas in others, the different interests may have no relation with each other. Life runs very smoothly for the executive in the first case (e.g., he gets a great idea that



The above diagram illustrates the relationships and tensions that often exist between one's job (task), career aspirations, and personal values and lifestyle (extramural interests). The three domains can interact (the shaded areas) and also remain separate. In working in an organization we try to strike a balance between the three sets of interests. Most often, the balance is an uneasy and ever-changing one, creating tensions that lie at the center of political activity. The fact that the area of complete convergence of interests is often small (the darkest area) is one reason why organizational (or task) rationality is such a rare phenomenon. The degree of overlap varies from situation to situation.

Exhibit 6.2 Organizational Interests: Task, Career, and Extramural

contributes to his job performance and promotion prospects and gives him more leisure time as well) but gets difficult in the latter cases. His great idea may improve performance and career prospects but mean more work and less leisure. Or it may enable him to reduce his workload but in a way that makes him less visible and hence a less obvious candidate for promotion. Sometimes, the idea will be great for getting on with his job but have no other significance at all. The executive's attitude and relation to tasks, ideas, and the suggestions of others are all likely to be crucially affected by where the tasks, ideas, or suggestions fall on the map of interests depicted in Exhibit 6.2. The tensions existing between the different interests that he wishes to pursue make his relation to work inherently "political," even before we take into account the existence and actions of other organizational members. These tensions are inherent in work life in Western society because of the latent contradictions between the demands of work and leisure, on the one hand, and the demands of present and future, on the other.

The orientation of different people toward these tensions varies from situation to situation, producing a great variety of styles of behavior.

Some people are committed to doing their job as an end in itself; others are more careerist. Yet others spend most of their energy attempting to make work life less onerous or as comfortable and consistent with their personal preferences as possible. Many people manage to achieve considerable degrees of overlap between competing aims and aspirations, shaping their general task or mission in a way that allows them to achieve all their aims at once. Others have to content themselves with compromise positions.

This way of understanding different kinds of interests provides us with a means of decoding the personal agendas underlying specific actions and activities. We can begin to understand how people relate to their work through their own personal concerns and detect the motivating factors that underpin the varied styles of careerism, gamesmanship, task commitment, rigidity, "turf protection," zealousness, detachment, and free-wheeling that lend the politics of organizational life its detailed character.

By simply following one's personal inclinations, the drama of organizational life is shaped by a political script. However, the political content increases manyfold when we begin to recognize the existence of other players, each with interest-based agendas to pursue. The politicking to which this gives rise becomes particularly visible in situations that present choices between different avenues for future development and in other transitional contexts such as the influx of new people or the succession of one person by another.

For the purpose of illustration, consider the following case example.

Mr. X was the flamboyant marketing vice president in a medium-size cosmetics firm. After five years, he had a solid reputation within his firm, having steered many successful campaigns designed to establish the firm's products as premier brands available in up-market retail outlets. Although he had encountered difficult times in persuading his colleagues that it was preferable to concentrate on relatively low-volume, high-quality products rather than to go for the mass market, over the years they had come to accept his viewpoint. His marketing philosophy and vision were in keeping with his personality, reflecting an interest and involvement with the social elites with whom he felt at home. The settings and themes of the firm's ads were selected by Mr. X and, as noted by many of his colleagues, were very much a reflection of his personal lifestyle. Crucial to the adoption of this marketing strategy and the line of corporate development it involved was the support of key members of the board who shared family connections and a taste for the style of life symbolized by Mr. X and his marketing philosophy. Other, less well-connected members who were appointed for their professional knowledge and links with the industry at large, along with the chief executive

officer and a number of vice presidents, felt that many opportunities were being lost by the need to preserve an elite image. Whenever possible, they thus tried to mobilize an awareness of the need to consider other policy options, but the success of the company muted their inclination to press their concerns too far. So long as Mr. X's charismatic influence remained an important driving force, the firm was thus committed to preserving and developing its elite status.

An opportunity for change dropped by chance in the mailbox of Mr. Y, vice president for corporate planning and one of those most concerned about the lost opportunities. A friend and former colleague, now chief of a prestigious "head-hunting" firm, had written asking if he could recommend possible candidates for the position of marketing VP in the new North American branch of a European firm dealing in high-society fashion. A vision of Mr. X smiling in the midst of furs, diamonds, and Paris fashions immediately floated into Y's mind. Within the hour he had made an off-the-record call to his friend suggesting that Mr. X might well be approached. Within two months, Mr. X had been offered and had accepted the job.

Mr. X's successor at the cosmetics firm, Ms. Z, was a relatively young and ambitious woman with a liking for the glossy life. She had been a compromise selection, the board having been split on two other candidates. Ms. Z seemed to strike the balance between the dashing style to which X's allies had become accustomed and the promise of new initiative favored by those who had felt constrained by the direction set by X's philosophy. Even though neither group was delighted with the appointment, they both felt that Ms. Z was eminently capable of handling the job, especially since she would inherit a successful operation.

For Ms. Z, the job was a great opportunity. She felt that the time was right to make her mark in the industry and saw in the steady direction steered by X a base on which to launch new initiatives. In her interview discussions with X's former supporters she had made much of the need to conserve what had been achieved. In her discussions with those less committed to this philosophy she had stressed the promise of new markets. Her first year in the new job was spent developing an initiative that would bring these goals together: By retaining the up-market image but broadening marketing outlets to include selected chains of retail drug and department stores. She knew that she had to come up with a philosophy that set her apart from X, but that she must retain the support of the board and the senior executives who were essential for ensuring success. Her colleagues ready for a change were willing partners, and excellent working relations soon developed through a give-and-take approach that helped define ideas and opportunities where all seemed to gain. Her task

in relation to those who still equated the style and personality of Mr. X with what the company stood for was much more difficult. Resistance and heated exchange became a feature of boardroom discussion. Over a period of three years, however, most came to accept the idea that the broadening of the market was still consistent with the image of a high-status product, particularly since the changing strategy was sweetened by its obvious financial success. As one board member put it while looking at the latest returns, "I think I'll be able to live with even more ads in those dreadful magazines if I think about these figures."

Our case only sketches the dynamics of the situation in broadest outline. However, it serves to illustrate the politics intrinsic to any situation where people wish to pursue divergent interests. Mr. X had a vision that others were persuaded to share. His charismatic personality allowed him to use the organization to express himself through a strategy that combined task, career, and extramural interests in a coherent way. The colleagues who bought into his strategy did so to the extent that their aims were achieved as well. Those opposed to the strategy had other aspirations. They wanted to see the organization go elsewhere. For this reason Mr. Y took advantage of a chance opportunity to change the situation. The state of transition opened up new opportunities. Rival coalitions formed around the candidates who people thought would be able to advance their interests. Ms. Z, the very able compromise candidate, read and played the situation well. She saw a convergence between personal and corporate opportunity and used her new job to further both. Given her ambitions there was no way that she could accept the status quo. Her personal style and career aspirations required her to "be a mover" and "make her mark." X's philosophy, although solidly successful, thus had to change. Others were prepared to join Z in shaping a new corporate direction in return for prizes of their own. The confidence of the rival coalitions, although doubtful at times, was retained because the new situation resulted in a transformation that most could identify with. Even though our discussion glosses over the power relations and other aspects of this case, the interactions between these few key actors and their supporters illustrate the thick and rich political dynamic of organizational life. The diversity of interests that Aristotle observed in the Greek city-state is evident in every organization and can be analyzed by tracing how the ideas and actions of people collide or coincide.

In contrast with the view that organizations are integrated rational enterprises pursuing a common goal, the political metaphor encourages us to see organizations as loose networks of people with divergent interests who gather together for the sake of expediency (e.g., making a living, developing a career, or pursuing a desired goal or objective).

Organizations are coalitions and are made up of coalitions, and coalition building is an important dimension of almost all organizational life.

Coalitions arise when groups of individuals get together to cooperate in relation to specific issues, events, or decisions or to advance specific values and ideologies. Organizations fit this definition of coalitions in the sense that they comprise groups of managers, workers, shareholders, customers, suppliers, lawyers, governmental agents, and other formal and informal groups with an interest or stake in the organization but whose goals and preferences differ. The organization as a coalition of diverse stakeholders is a coalition with multiple goals.

Some organization theorists draw a distinction between cliques that become aware of common goals and coalitions of two or more such groups who unite to pursue a joint interest, often working against a rival network. Clearly, people in organizations can pursue their interests as individuals, specific interest groups, or more generalized coalitions, so this distinction is often a useful one. In many organizations, there is often a dominant coalition that controls important areas of policy. Such coalitions usually build around the chief executive or other key actors in the organization, each participant making demands on and contributions to the coalition as a price of participation. All coalitions have to strike some kind of balance between the rewards and contributions necessary to sustain membership, a balance usually influenced by factors such as age, organizational position, education, time spent in the organization, and values and attitudes.

Most approaches to organization actually foster the development of cliques and coalitions, as functional and other divisions fragment interests—for example, allocating different goals and activities to subunits such as departments or project teams. The “bounded rationality” discussed in Chapter 4 thus assumes a political dimension as salespeople become preoccupied with sales objectives, production people with production, and project teams with their group projects. Given such fragmentation, there is often considerable disagreement about specific objectives, requiring the organization to function with a minimal degree of consensus. This allows the organization to survive while recognizing the diversity of the aims and aspirations of its members. The organization often has to be content with satisfactory rather than optimal solutions to problems, with negotiation and compromise becoming more important than technical rationality.

Coalition development offers a strategy for advancing one’s interests in an organization, and organization members often give considerable attention to increasing their power and influence through this means. Sometimes, coalitions are initiated by less powerful actors who seek the

support of others. At other times, they may be developed by the powerful to consolidate their power; for example, an executive may promote people to key positions where they can serve as loyal lieutenants. Whether formal or informal, confined to the organization or extended to include key interests outside, coalitions and interest groups often provide important means of securing desired ends.

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

Conflict arises whenever interests collide. The natural reaction to conflict in organizational contexts is usually to view it as a dysfunctional force that can be attributed to some regrettable set of circumstances or causes. "It's a personality problem." "They're rivals who always meet head-on." "Production people and marketing people never get along." "Everyone hates auditors and accountants." Conflict is regarded as an unfortunate state that in more favorable circumstances would disappear.

Our analysis in the previous section suggests otherwise. Conflict will always be present in organizations. Conflict may be personal, interpersonal, or between rival groups or coalitions. It may be built into organizational structures, roles, attitudes, and stereotypes or arise over a scarcity of resources. It may be explicit or covert. Whatever the reason, and whatever the form it takes, its source rests in some perceived or real divergence of interests.

As Scottish sociologist Tom Burns has pointed out, most modern organizations actually encourage organizational politics because they are designed as systems of simultaneous competition and collaboration. People must collaborate in pursuit of a common task, yet are often pitted against each other in competition for limited resources, status, and career advancement. These conflicting dimensions of organization are most clearly symbolized in the hierarchical organization chart, which is both a system of cooperation, in that it reflects a rational subdivision of tasks, *and* a career ladder that people are motivated to climb. The fact that there are more jobs at the bottom than at the top means that competition for the top places is likely to be keen and that in any career race there are likely to be far fewer winners than losers. The system more or less ensures the kinds of competitive struggle on which organizational politics thrives. One does not have to be consciously cunning or deviously political to end up playing organizational politics. The corporate Machiavellis who systematically wheel and deal their way through organizational affairs merely illustrate the most extreme and fully developed form of a latent tendency present in most aspects of organizational life.

The literature on organization theory is full of examples of how everyday organizational life produces "political" forms of behavior. Some of the most vivid of these are found in reports by sociologists who have infiltrated the workplace in the role of participant observers. The setting of budgets and work standards, the day-to-day supervision and control of work, and the pursuit of opportunity and career are often characterized by sophisticated forms of gamesmanship. Take, for example, the situations reported by W. F. Whyte in his classic study *Money and Motivation*. These reveal the guile with which factory workers are able to control their pace of work and level of earnings, even when under the close eye of their supervisors or of efficiency experts trying to find ways of increasing productivity. The workers know that to maintain their positions they have to find ways of beating the system and do so with great skill and ingenuity.

For example, Starkey, an experienced factory worker, finds ways of building extra movements into his job when work standards are being set so that the job can be made easier under normal circumstances. He also finds completely new ways of working at high speeds when his supervisor is not around, thus allowing him to create slack time elsewhere in his day. Ray, famed among his fellow workers for his skill in outthinking and outperforming his controllers, finds ways of getting his machine to destroy the product on which he is working when he is asked to work at too fast a pace. He also has a great ability to look as if he is working harder than he is, generating a profuse sweat to impress and deceive his observers. Workers share ideas on how to get better work standards, to restrict output, to cash in on "gravy" jobs, or to land their competitors with the "stinkers." Such collaboration is often used against management and at other times against other workers or work teams. Management, of course, often knows that this is happening but is frequently powerless to do anything about it, particularly where plants are unionized. Sometimes, management gains control of the problem at hand, only to find another one arising elsewhere. The relationship is essentially combative. The status and self-respect of each group rest on their ability to outwit or control the other.

Similar relations are found in office settings, where staff manage impressions and schedules in a way that makes them seem busier and more productive than they actually are. Also, in budget-setting and other decision-making sessions, managers often attempt to outwit their own managers by padding their estimates to create slack resources or by negotiating easy work targets to allow room for error or to allow them to look good when the next salary review comes around.

Politicking is also latent in the horizontal relations between specialist units and within multidisciplinary teams. As noted earlier, people begin to identify with the responsibilities and objectives associated with their

specific role, work group, department, or project team, in a way that often leads them to value achievement of these responsibilities and objectives over and above the achievement of wider organizational goals. This is especially true when reward systems and one's general status and sense of success are linked with good performance at the level of one's specialized responsibilities.

Even when people recognize the importance of working together, the nature of any given job often combines contradictory elements that create various kinds of role conflict. For example, the politicized interactions so often observed between production and marketing staff or between accountants and the users of financial services often rest in part on the fact that they are being asked to engage in activities that impinge on each other in a negative way. The product modification requested by marketing creates problems in the design and sequencing of production. The accountant's concern for firm control over expenditures proves an unwelcome constraint for executives in the spending department. As the actors in their various roles attempt to do the job for which they have been appointed, interpreting their task interests in a way that seems ideally suited for the achievement of organizational goals, they are set on a collision course. Similar conflicts are often observed between "line" managers responsible for day-to-day results and "staff" people such as planners, lawyers, accountants, and other experts who perform an advisory role; between professionals seeking to extend their sphere of autonomy and bureaucrats seeking to reduce it in the interests of improving control; and so on.

The potential complexity of organizational politics is mind-boggling, even before we take account of the personalities and personality clashes that usually bring roles and their conflicts to life. Sometimes, the conflicts generated are quite explicit and open for all to see. At other times, they lie beneath the surface of day-to-day events. For example, relations in meetings may be governed by various hidden agendas of which even the participants are unaware. In some organizations, disputes may have a long history, decisions and actions in the present being shaped by conflicts, grudges, or differences that others believe long forgotten or settled. The manager of a production department may align with the marketing manager to block a proposal from the production engineer not because he disagrees with the basic ideas but because of resentments associated with the fact that he and the production engineer have never gotten along. Although such resentments may seem petty, they are often powerful forces in organizational life.

Many organizational conflicts often become institutionalized in the attitudes, stereotypes, values, beliefs, rituals, and other aspects of organizational culture. In this socialized form, the underlying conflicts can be

extremely difficult to identify and to break down. Here again, history can shape the present in subtle ways. However, by remembering Aristotle's injunction to understand the source of politics in the diversity of interests to which conflicts merely lend visible form, organizational analysts have a means of penetrating the surface of any conflict situation to understand its genesis. We will examine some of the ways in which conflicts can be managed when we discuss the politics of pluralist organizations later in this chapter.

EXPLORING POWER

Power is the medium through which conflicts of interest are ultimately resolved. Power influences who gets what, when, and how.

In recent years, organization and management theorists have become increasingly aware of the need to recognize the importance of power in explaining organizational affairs. However, no really clear and consistent definition of power has emerged. While some view power as a resource (i.e., as something one possesses), others view it as a social relation characterized by some kind of dependency (i.e., as an influence *over* something or someone).

Most organization theorists tend to take their point of departure from the definition of power offered by American political scientist Robert Dahl, who suggests that power involves an ability to get another person to do something that he or she would not otherwise have done. For some theorists, this definition leads to a study of the "here-and-now" conditions under which one person, group, or organization becomes dependent on another, whereas for others it leads to an examination of the historical forces that shape the stage of action on which contemporary power relations are set. As listed in Exhibit 6.3, the sources of power are rich and varied, providing those who wish to wheel and deal in the pursuit of their interests with many ways of doing so. In the following discussion we will examine how these sources of power are used to shape the dynamics of organizational life. In so doing we will be creating an analytical framework that can help us understand the power dynamics within an organization and identify the ways in which organizational members can attempt to exert their influence.

Formal Authority

The first and most obvious source of power in an organization is formal authority, a form of legitimized power that is respected and acknowledged by those with whom one interacts. As

The following are among the most important sources of power:

1. Formal authority
2. Control of scarce resources
3. Use of organizational structure, rules, and regulations
4. Control of decision processes
5. Control of knowledge and information
6. Control of boundaries
7. Ability to cope with uncertainty
8. Control of technology
9. Interpersonal alliances, networks, and control of "informal organization"
10. Control of counterorganizations
11. Symbolism and the management of meaning
12. Gender and the management of gender relations
13. Structural factors that define the stage of action
14. The power one already has

The sources of power provide organizational members with a variety of means for enhancing their interests and resolving or perpetuating organizational conflict.

Exhibit 6.3 Sources of Power in Organizations

sociologist Max Weber has noted, legitimacy is a form of social approval that is essential for stabilizing power relations. It arises when people recognize that a person has a right to rule some area of human life and that it is their duty to obey. Historically, legitimate authority has been underpinned by one or more of three characteristics: charisma, tradition, or the rule of law (see Exhibit 9.1 in Chapter 9 for further details).

Charismatic authority arises when people respect the special qualities of an individual (*charisma* means "gift of grace") and see those qualities as defining the right of the individual to act on their behalf. Traditional authority arises when people respect the custom and practices of the past and vest authority in those who symbolize and embody these traditional values. Monarchs and others who rule because of some kind of inherited

status acquire their right to rule through this kind of principle. Bureaucratic or rational-legal authority arises when people insist that the exercise of power depends on the correct application of formal rules and procedures. Those who exercise bureaucratic authority must win their rights to power through procedural means—for example, by demonstrating ownership or property rights in a corporation, through election in a democratic system, or by demonstrating appropriate professional or technical qualifications in a meritocracy.

Each of these three kinds of formal authority may be found in modern organizations. A hero figure may acquire immense charismatic power that allows that person to control and direct others as he or she wishes. The owner of a family firm may exercise authority as a result of membership in the founding family. A bureaucrat may exercise power as a result of the formal office held. So long as those who are subject to the kind of authority in use respect and accept the nature of that authority, the authority serves as a form of power. If it is not respected, the authority becomes vacuous, and power depends on the other sources named in Exhibit 6.3.

The most obvious type of *formal* authority in most organizations is bureaucratic and is typically associated with the position one holds, whether as sales manager, accountant, project coordinator, secretary, factory supervisor, or machine operator. These different organizational positions are usually defined in terms of rights and obligations, which create a field of influence within which one can legitimately operate with the formal support of those with whom one works. A factory manager may be given a “right” to direct those under his or her control. A sales manager may be given the “right” to influence policy on sales campaigns—but not on financial accounting. The formal positions on an organization chart thus define spheres of delegated authority. To the extent that authority is translated into power through the assent of those falling under the pattern of command, the authority structure is also a power structure. Although the authority is often seen as flowing down from the top of the organization chart, being delegated by one’s superior, our discussion of the nature of legitimacy suggests that this is only partly true. The authority becomes effective only to the extent that it is legitimized from below. The pyramid of power represented in an organization chart thus builds on a base where considerable power belongs to those at the bottom of the pyramid as well as to those at the top. Trade unionization has of course recognized this, channeling the power existing at the lower levels of the pyramid to challenge the power at the top. To the extent that trade union power is legitimized by the rule of law and the right to unionize, it too represents a type of formal authority. We will have more to say on this later in our discussion of “counterorganizations.”

Control of Scarce Resources

All organizations depend for their continued existence on an adequate flow of resources, such as money, materials, technology, personnel, and support from customers, suppliers, and the community at large. An ability to exercise control over any of these resources can thus provide an important source of power within and between organizations. Access to funds, possession of a crucial skill or raw material, control of access to some valued computer program or new technology, or even access to a special customer or supplier can lend individuals considerable organizational power. If the resource is in scarce supply and someone is dependent on its availability, then it can almost certainly be translated into power. Scarcity and dependence are the keys to resource power!

When we begin to talk about the power associated with resources, attention usually focuses on the role of money, for money is among the most liquid of all resources and can usually be converted into the others. A person with a valued skill, a supplier with a precious raw material, or a person holding information on a new project opportunity can often be persuaded to exchange his or her valued resource for an attractive price. Money can also be converted into promotions, patronage, threats, promises, or favors to buy loyalty, service, support, or raw compliance.

No wonder therefore that so much organizational politics surrounds the process of budgeting and the control and allocation of financial resources. As Jeffrey Pfeffer of Stanford University has suggested, the use of such power is critically linked with one's ability to control the discretionary use of funds. It is not necessary to have full control over financial decisions. One needs to have just enough control to pull the crucial strings that can create changes at the margin. The reason for this is that most of the financial resources available to an organization are committed to sustaining current operations. Changes to these operations are usually incremental, decisions being made to increase or reduce current expenditure. It is the ability to increase or decrease this flow of funds that gives power.

Hence, if a manager can acquire access to uncommitted resources that can be used in a discretionary way (e.g., as a slush fund or to support a new initiative), he or she can exert a major influence over future organizational development and at the same time buy commitment from those who benefit from this use of funds. Similarly, someone outside an organization who is responsible for deciding whether his or her financial support to that organization should be continued is in a position to exercise considerable influence on the policies and practices of the organization. Often, this influence is out of all proportion with the amount actually

given, as organizations are often critically dependent on marginal funds to create room to maneuver. Organizations often have a tendency to use their slack in one year in ways that create commitments or expectations for the next year—for example, by giving a raise in salary that will be expected to be repeated next year, by appointing staff whose appointments will need to be renewed, or by launching a new program that staff will wish to continue—thus lending considerable power to the marginal funder.

The principles that we have discussed in relation to the use of financial power apply to other kinds of resource power as well. The important point is that power rests in controlling resources on which the organization is dependent for current operations or for creating new initiatives. There must be a dependence before one is able to control, and such control always derives its power from there being a scarcity of, or limited access to, the resource in question. Whether we are talking about the control of finance, skills, materials, or personnel, or even the provision of emotional support to a key decision maker who has come to value one's support and friendship, the principles remain the same. The more Machiavellian among us will quickly see how these principles point the way to a strategy for increasing power by *creating* dependence through the planned control of critical resources.

One's power can also be increased by reducing one's dependence on others. This is why many managers and organizational units like to have their own pockets of resources. The seemingly needless duplication of resources where each unit has the same underemployed machine, technical experts, or reserve of staff that can be used in rush periods is often a result of attempts to reduce dependence on the resources of others. The idea of "stockpiling" staff and expertise used to be a very familiar sign of organizational power. With the streamlining that comes with "cost cutting" and efficiency drives, and the possibility of gaining the required flexibility through "outsourcing" or subcontracting, it has now become less common.

Use of Organizational Structure, Rules, Regulations, and Procedures

Most often, organizational structure, rules, regulations, and procedures are viewed as rational instruments intended to aid task performance. A political view of these arrangements, however, suggests that in many situations they are best understood as products and reflections of a struggle for political control.

Consider the following example drawn from research that I conducted on British "new town" development corporations. The corporation in

question was established in the early 1960s to develop a new town in an old industrial area. A functional organization was established with separate departments (finance, law, administration, commercial development, housing, architecture and planning, and engineering services) reporting to a general manager, who reported to the board. A few years later, an energetic businessman became chairman of the board. He made the corporation's chief legal officer the new general manager and split the now vacant legal officer's post into two parts, creating the post of corporation secretary and leaving the new legal officer with a narrower range of functions. The corporate secretary's post was filled by a nominee of the chairman who had worked with him in a similar capacity at another organization. The chairman and secretary began to work closely together, and the board eventually agreed that the secretary should have direct access to the board without having to go through the general manager. The chairman involved himself in the day-to-day running of the organization, often bypassing the general manager, whose role became very difficult to perform.

This situation came to a rather abrupt end with the surprise resignation of the chairman in response to a controversy over policy issues. With the appointment of a new chairman who was interested in delegating the task of running the organization to the general manager, power relations within the corporation changed dramatically. The general manager gradually established his control over his department heads, many of whom had become quite powerful through the interventions of the former chairman. His approach was to bring many of the functions that had been allocated to the secretary under his own control and to reorganize other departmental responsibilities. For example, he split the functions of the architecture and planning department, establishing a new planning department and a new department dealing with surveys. This move left the chief architect, who had become a strong executive during the reign of the previous chairman, with but a fraction of the department he once ran. These structural redesigns were later accompanied by further changes that in effect demoted the heads of the functional departments, and it was not long before a number left the organization, including the secretary and the chief architect.

Although these structural changes were justified in technical terms, they were also motivated by political considerations relating to issues of control. The initial changes created by the corporation's energetic chairman were designed to enhance his own control of the organization by weakening that of the general manager. The changes introduced after the chairman's resignation were primarily designed to help the general manager regain control over powerful department heads. Structural change

was part of a power play to limit the role and influence of other key individuals.

The circumstances of this case may be unique, but the pattern is quite general; organizational structure is frequently used as a political instrument. Plans for organizational differentiation and integration, designs for centralization and decentralization, and the tensions that can arise in matrix organizations often entail hidden agendas related to the power, autonomy, or interdependence of departments and individuals.

The tensions surrounding the process of organizational design and redesign provide many insights on organizational power structures. People and departments often cling to outdated job descriptions and resist change because their power and status within the organization are so closely tied with the old order. Or they learn to use key aspects of organizational structure for their own ends. Consider, for example, how job descriptions can be used by employees to define what they are not prepared to do ("that's not part of my job" or "I'm not paid to do that!"). Rules and regulations in general can prove to be two-edged swords.

Take, for example, the case of the old state-owned British Rail, where employees discovered the power of "working to rule." Rather than going on strike to further a claim or address a grievance, a process that proved costly to employees because they forfeited their pay, the union acquired the habit of declaring a "work to rule," whereby employees did exactly what was required by the regulations developed by the railway authorities. The result was that hardly any train left on time. Schedules went haywire, and the whole railway system quickly slowed to a snail's pace, if not a halt, because normal functioning required that employees find shortcuts or at least streamline procedures.

The case is by no means unique. Many organizations have comprehensive systems of rules that, as almost every employee knows, can never be applied if the system is to achieve any degree of operational effectiveness.

What, then, is the real significance of the rules? Although their formal purpose may be to protect employees, customers, or the public at large, they also are there to protect their creators.

For example, if an accident occurs in a railway system, it is possible to launch an investigation comparing practice against the rules to find who or what was in error. Sometimes, gaps in the rules are found. Sometimes, gross negligence is discovered. But often the accident is no more than what Charles Perrow of Yale University calls a "normal accident," in the sense that its probability is built into the nature of the system. The broken rules that accompany the accident have often been broken thousands of times before as part of normal work practice, since normal work is impossible without breaking the rules. The railwaymen in Britain, like others

who have adopted the “work to rule” practice, discovered how a weapon designed to control and possibly punish them could be used to control and punish others.

Rules and regulations are often created, invoked, and used in either a proactive or retrospective fashion as part of a power play. All bureaucratic regulations, decision-making criteria, plans and schedules, promotion and job-evaluation requirements, and other rules that guide organizational functioning give potential power to both the controllers and those controlled. Rules designed to guide and streamline activities can almost always be used to block activities. Just as lawyers make a profession out of finding a new angle on what appears to be a clear-cut rule, many organizational members are able to invoke rules in ways that no one ever imagined possible. An ability to use the rules to one’s advantage is thus an important source of organizational power and, as in the case of organizational structures, defines a contested terrain that is forever being negotiated, preserved, or changed.

Control of Decision Processes

An ability to influence the outcomes of decision-making processes is a well-recognized source of power that has attracted considerable attention in the organization-theory literature. In discussing the kinds of power used here, it is useful to distinguish between control of three interrelated elements: decision *premises*, decision *processes*, and decision *issues and objectives*.

By influencing decision *premises* one can control the foundations of decision making—preventing crucial decisions from being made and fostering those that one actually desires. Hence, the attention is devoted to the control of decision agendas and to strategies for guiding or deflecting people’s attention to the grounds or issues defining a favored point of view. As Charles Perrow has noted, an unobtrusive or unconscious element of control can also be built into vocabularies, structures of communication, attitudes, beliefs, rules, and procedures. Though often unquestioned, they exert a decisive influence on decision outcomes by shaping how we think and act. Our understandings of problems and issues often act as mental straitjackets that prevent us from seeing other ways of formulating basic concerns and finding the alternative courses of action. Many of these unobtrusive controls are “cultural” in the sense that they are built into organizational assumptions, beliefs, and practices about “who we are” and “the way we do things around here.”

Control of decision-making *processes* is usually more visible than the control of decision premises. How should a decision be made? Who

should be involved? When will the decision be made? By determining whether a decision can be taken and then reported to appropriate quarters, whether it must go before a committee and which committee, whether it must be supported by a full report, whether it will appear on an agenda where it is likely to receive a rough ride (or an easy passage), the order of an agenda, and even whether the decision should be discussed at the beginning or end of a meeting, a manager can have a considerable impact on decision outcomes. The ground rules to guide decision making are thus important variables that organization members can manipulate and use to stack the deck in favor of or against a given action.

A final way of controlling decision making is to influence the *issues and objectives* to be addressed and the evaluative criteria to be employed. An individual can shape issues and objectives most directly through preparing the reports and contributing to the discussion on which the decision will be based. By emphasizing the importance of particular constraints, selecting and evaluating the alternatives on which a decision will be made, and highlighting the importance of certain values or outcomes, decision makers can exert considerable influence on the decision that emerges from discussion. Eloquence, command of the facts, passionate commitment, or sheer tenacity or endurance can in the end win the day, adding to a person's power to influence the decisions with which he or she is involved.

Control of Knowledge and Information

Evident in much of the above discussion, particularly with regard to the control of decision premises, is the idea that power accrues to the person who is able to structure attention to issues in a way that in effect defines the reality of the decision-making process. This draws attention to the key importance of knowledge and information as sources of power. By controlling these key resources a person can systematically influence the definition of organizational situations and can create patterns of dependency. Both these activities deserve attention on their own account.

The American social psychologist W. I. Thomas once observed that if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. Many skillful organizational politicians put this dictum into practice on a daily basis by controlling information flows and the knowledge that is made available to different people, thereby influencing their perception of situations and hence the ways they act in relation to those situations. These politicians are often known as "gatekeepers," opening and closing

channels of communication and filtering, summarizing, analyzing, and thus shaping knowledge in accordance with a view of the world that favors their interests. Many aspects of organizational structure, especially hierarchy and departmental divisions, influence how information flows and are readily used by unofficial gatekeepers to advance their own ends. Even by the simple process of slowing down or accelerating particular information flows, thus making knowledge available in a timely manner or too late for it to be of use to its recipients, the gatekeeper can wield considerable power.

Often, the quest for control of information in an organization is linked to questions of organizational structure. For example, many battles have been fought over the control and use of centralized computer systems because control of the computer often carries with it control over information flows and the design of information systems. The power of many finance and other specialist information processing departments is often tied up with this fact. Finance staff are important not only because they control resources but because they also define and control information about the use of resources. By influencing the design of budgeting and cost-control information systems they are able to influence what is perceived as being important within the organization both on the part of those who use the information as a basis for control and among those who are subject to these controls. Just as decision-making premises influence the kind of decisions that are made, the hidden and sometimes unquestioned assumptions that are built into the design of information systems can be of crucial importance in structuring day-to-day activity.

Many of the hot issues regarding the merits and problems of micro-processing hinge on the question of power. The new information processing technology creates the possibility of multiple points of access to common databases and the possibility of local rather than centralized information systems. In principle, the technology can be used to increase the power of those at the periphery or local levels of the organization by providing them with more comprehensive, immediate, and relevant data relating to their work, facilitating self-control rather than centralized control. In practice, the technology is often used to sustain or to increase power at the center. The designers and users of such systems have been acutely aware of the power in information, decentralizing certain activities while centralizing ongoing surveillance over their performance. Thus executives in remote parts of the world, airline reservation staff in unsupervised offices, and workers on the factory floor perform under the watchful eye of the computer, which reports almost every move to someone or some point at the heart of the information system.

Besides shaping definitions of organizational realities or exercising control, knowledge and information can be used to weave patterns of dependency. By possessing the right information at the right time, by having exclusive access to key data, or by simply demonstrating the ability to marshal and synthesize facts in an effective manner, organizational members can increase the power they wield within an organization. Many people develop these skills in a systematic way and jealously guard or block access to crucial knowledge to enhance their indispensability and "expert" status. Obviously, other organizational members have an interest in breaking such exclusivity and widening access. There is thus usually a tendency in organizations to routinize valued skills and abilities whenever possible. There is also a tendency to break down dependencies on specific individuals and departments by acquiring one's own experts. Thus, departments often prefer to have their own specialist skills on hand, even if this involves duplication and some redundancy of specialisms within the organization as a whole.

A final aspect of expert power relates to the use of knowledge and expertise as a means of legitimizing what one wishes to do. "The expert" often carries an aura of authority and power that can add considerable weight to a decision that rests in the balance or, though already having been made in the minds of key actors, needs further support or justification.

Control of Boundaries

Any discussion of power in organizations must give attention to what is sometimes known as "boundary management." The notion of boundary is used to refer to the interface between different elements of an organization. Thus we can talk about the boundaries between different work groups or departments or between an organization and its environment. By monitoring and controlling boundary transactions, people are able to build up considerable power. For example, it becomes possible to monitor changes occurring outside one's group, department, or organization and initiate timely responses. One acquires knowledge of critical interdependencies over which one may be able to secure a degree of control. Or one gains access to critical information that places one in a particularly powerful position to interpret what is happening in the outside world and thus help define the organizational reality that will guide action. One can also control transactions across boundaries by performing a buffering function that allows or even encourages certain transactions while blocking others.

Most people in leadership positions at all levels of an organization can engage in this kind of boundary management in a way that contributes to

their power. The process is also an important element of many organizational roles, such as those of a secretary, special assistant, or project coordinator, and of liaison people of all kinds. People in such roles are often able to acquire power that goes well beyond their formal status. For example, many secretaries and special assistants are able to exert a major impact on the way their boss views the reality of a given situation by determining who is given access to the manager and when and by managing information in a way that highlights or downplays the importance of events and activities occurring elsewhere in the organization. One of the most famous examples of boundary management is found in the management of the White House under the Nixon administration, where Nixon's top aides Richard Erlichman and Bob Haldeman exercised tight control over access to the president. In doing so, it seems they were able to manage the president's view of what was happening in the White House and elsewhere. One of the main issues in the notorious Watergate affair and the collapse of the presidency was whether Nixon's aides had allowed the president to receive the critical information regarding the Watergate burglary. Erlichman and Haldeman were experts at boundary management, and their basic strategy for acquiring power is found in many different kinds of organizations all over the world.

Boundary management can help integrate a unit with the outside world, or it can be used to isolate that unit so that it can function in an autonomous way. The quest for autonomy—by individuals, groups, and even departments—is a powerful feature of organizational life because many people like to be in full control over their life space. Boundary management aids this quest, for it often shows ways in which a unit can acquire the resources necessary to create autonomy and points to strategies that can be used to fend off threats to autonomy. Groups and departments often attempt to incorporate key skills and resources within their boundaries and to control admissions through selective recruitment. They also often engage in what sociologist Erving Goffman has described as "avoidance rituals," steering clear of issues and potential problems that will threaten their independence.

The quest for autonomy is, however, often countered by opposing strategies initiated by managers elsewhere in the system. They may attempt to break down the cohesiveness of the group by nominating their own representatives or allies to key positions, find ways of minimizing the slack resources available to the group, develop information systems that make activities transparent to outsiders, or encourage organizational redesigns that increase interdependence and minimize the consequences of autonomous actions. Boundary transactions are thus often characterized by competing strategies for control and countercontrol. Many groups

and departments are successful in acquiring considerable degrees of autonomy and in defending their position in a way that makes the organization a system of loosely coupled groups and departments rather than a highly integrated unit.

Ability to Cope With Uncertainty

One source of power implicit in much that has been discussed above is the ability to cope with the uncertainties that influence the day-to-day operation of an organization. Organization implies a certain degree of interdependence, so that discontinuous or unpredictable situations in one part of an organization have considerable implications for operations elsewhere. An ability to deal with these uncertainties gives an individual, group, or subunit considerable power in the organization as a whole.

The ability to cope with uncertainty is often intimately connected with one's place in the overall division of labor in an organization. Generally speaking, uncertainty is of two kinds. Environmental uncertainties (e.g., with regard to markets, sources of raw materials, or finance) can provide great opportunities for those with the contacts or skills to tackle the problems and thus minimize their effects on the organization as a whole. Operational uncertainties within the organization (e.g., the breakdown of critical machinery used in factory production or data processing) can help troubleshooters, maintenance staff, or others with the requisite skills and abilities acquire power and status as a result of their ability to restore normal operations. The degree of power that accrues to people who can tackle both kinds of uncertainty depends primarily on two factors: the degree to which their skills are substitutable, and hence the ease with which they can be replaced; and the centrality of their functions to the operations of the organization as a whole.

Organizations generally try to reduce uncertainties whenever possible, usually by "buffering" or through processes of routinization. For example, stocks of critical resources may be built up from different sources, maintenance programs may be developed to minimize technological failures, and people may be trained to deal with environmental contingencies. However, some uncertainty almost always remains, for, by their nature, uncertain situations cannot always be accurately predicted and forestalled. Then, too, those who see the power deriving from their capacity to deal with uncertainty often preserve their power base by ensuring that the uncertainties continue and sometimes by manipulating situations so that they appear more uncertain than they actually are.

In understanding the impact of uncertainty on the way an organization operates, we thus have an important means of understanding the power relations between different groups and departments. We also get a better understanding of the conditions under which the power of the expert or troubleshooter comes into play and of the importance of the various kinds of power deriving from the control of resources discussed earlier. The existence of uncertainty and an ability to cope with uncertainty are often reasons explaining why and when these other kinds of power become so critical in shaping organizational affairs.

Control of Technology

From the beginning of history, technology has served as an instrument of power, enhancing the ability of humans to manipulate, control, and impose themselves on their environment. The technology employed in modern organizations performs a similar function. It provides its users with an ability to achieve amazing results in productive activity, and it also provides them with an ability to manipulate this productive power and make it work effectively for their own ends.

Organizations usually become vitally dependent on some form of core technology as a means of converting organizational inputs into outputs. This may be a factory assembly line, a telephone switchboard, a centralized computer or record-keeping system, or perhaps a capital-intensive plant like those used in oil refining, the production of chemicals, or power generation. The kind of technology employed influences the patterns of interdependence within an organization and hence the power relations between different individuals and departments. For example, in organizations where the technology creates patterns of sequential interdependence, as in a mass-production assembly line where task A must be completed before task B, which must be completed before task C, the people controlling any one part of the technology possess considerable power to disrupt the whole. In organizations where the technology involves more autonomous systems of production, the ability of one individual or group to influence the operation of the whole is much more limited.

The fact that technology has a major impact on power relations is an important reason why attempts to change technology often create major conflicts between managers and employees and between different groups within an organization, for the introduction of a new technology can alter the balance of power. The introduction of assembly-line production into industry, designed to increase managerial control over the work process,

also had the unintended effect of increasing the power of factory workers and their unions. In standardizing jobs, the technology standardized employee interests in a way that encouraged collective action, and also gave employees the power over the production process to make that action extremely effective. A strike on any part of an assembly line can bring the work of hundreds or even thousands of people to a complete halt. The technology is designed in a way that makes collective action by a small group of people extremely effective.

The system of production based on the use of autonomous work groups and other forms of "cellular technology," however, fragments the interests of workers. Work and rewards accrue to the work team as a primary organizational unit. The interests of an employee thus often become more closely associated with those of his team than with those of a general type of employee or occupational group, making unionization and collective action much more difficult, especially as competitive relations may develop between different work teams. Under the group system, a withdrawal of work does not affect overall operations unless other work groups do the same. Hence the power of workers and their unions tends to be reduced quite substantially.

The introduction of new production methods, machines, computing facilities, or any kind of technological change that increases the power of one group or department at the expense of another thus tends to develop into a hot political issue. Groups of employees usually have a clear understanding of the power relations inherent in current work arrangements and are usually ready to marshal all their resources and ingenuity to fight changes that threaten their position.

The power associated with the control of technology becomes most visible in confrontations and negotiations surrounding organizational change or when groups are attempting to improve their lot within the organization. However, it also operates in more subtle ways. In working with a particular machine or work system, an employee learns the ins and outs of its operation in a way that often lends that person considerable power. Earlier in this chapter we discussed how machine operators were able to use their knowledge of their machines to outwit the experts attempting to set work standards. They were able to control the use of their technology to improve their wages and control their pace of work. This kind of process is used for many purposes in different kinds of work settings every day. People manipulate and control their technology just as they twist and turn rules, regulations, and job descriptions. Technology designed to direct and control the work of employees frequently becomes a tool of workers' control!

*Interpersonal Alliances, Networks, and
Control of "Informal Organization"*

Friends in high places, sponsors, mentors, ethnic or cultural affiliations, coalitions of people prepared to trade support and favors to further their individual ends, and informal networks for touching base, sounding out, or merely shooting the breeze—all provide a source of power to those involved. Through various kinds of interlocking networks, individuals can acquire advance notice of developments that are relevant to their interests, exert various forms of interpersonal influence to shape these developments in a manner that they desire, and prepare the way for proposals they are interested in advancing. The skilled organizational politician systematically builds and cultivates such informal alliances and networks, incorporating whenever possible the help and influence of all those with an important stake in the domain in which that person is operating. Alliances and coalitions are not necessarily built around an identity of interests; rather, the requirement for these forms of informal organization is that there be a basis for some form of mutually beneficial exchange. Successful networking or coalition building involves an awareness that besides winning friends it is necessary to incorporate and pacify potential enemies. It also requires an ability to see beyond immediate issues and find ways of trading help in the present for promises in the future. The successful coalition builder recognizes that the currency of coalition building is one of mutual dependency and exchange.

The coalitions, alliances, and networks built through these processes may remain highly informal and to a degree invisible. The coalition building may occur over the telephone, through old-boy networks and other friendship groups, through the golf club, or through chance contacts. For example, people sharing a meeting on one project may find that they share an interest in relation to another area of their work and use informal exchanges at the meeting to lay the groundwork for cooperative action elsewhere. Much of the coalition building found in organizational life occurs through this kind of chance encounter or through planned informal meetings such as lunches and receptions. Sometimes, however, alliances and networks are forged through various kinds of institutionalized exchange, such as meetings of professional groups and associations, and may themselves eventually become institutionalized in enduring forms such as project teams, advisory boards, joint ventures, or cartel-like organizations. As is clear from the above examples, networks may be internal to an organization or extend to include key people outside. Sometimes, they are explicitly interorganizational, such as interlocking directorships

where the same people serve on the boards of different organizations. In all networks, some players may take an active central role, and others may operate at the fringes. Some will contribute to and derive power from the network more than others, according to the pattern of mutual dependence on which the alliance builds.

Besides drawing power from networking and coalition building, many members of an organization may draw power from their role in the social networks known as the "informal organization." All organizations have informal networks where people interact in ways that meet various kinds of social needs. Groups of coworkers may make a habit of going to lunch together or drinking on Fridays after work or may evolve means of enhancing the quality of their life at work. They may share similar ethnic or cultural backgrounds and have affiliations that extend beyond the workplace. Informal group leaders may become as powerful an influence on their network or group as any rule, regulation, or manager. In a culturally diverse workforce, such leaders can acquire enormous power as "gatekeepers," "boundary managers," and representatives and interpreters of reality for the groups they lead.

One other variant of informal organization arises in situations where one member of an organization develops a psychological or emotional dependency on another. This becomes particularly significant when the dependent party draws considerable power from other sources. The history of corporate and public life is full of examples where a key decision maker has become critically dependent on his or her spouse, lover, secretary, or trusted aide or even on a self-proclaimed prophet or mystic. In the power-behind-the-throne syndrome that results, the informal collaborator exerts a critical influence on how the decision maker's power is used. Such relations often develop by chance, but it is by no means uncommon for people to rise to power by cultivating such dependencies in a Machiavellian way.

Control of Counterorganizations

Another route to power in organizations rests in the establishment and control of what can be called "counterorganizations." Trade unions are the most obvious of these. Whenever a group of people manages to build a concentration of power in relatively few hands it is not uncommon for opposing forces to coordinate their actions to create a rival power bloc. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith has described the process as one involving the development of "countervailing power." Thus, unions develop as a check on management in industries where there is a high degree of industrial concentration; government and other regulatory agencies develop as a check on the abuse of monopoly power;

and the concentration of production is often balanced by the development of large organizations in the field of distribution—for example, chain stores often develop in ways that balance the power exercised by the large producers and suppliers.

The strategy of exercising countervailing power thus provides a way of influencing organizations where one is not part of the established power structure. By joining and working for a trade union, consumers' association, social movement, cooperative, or lobby group—or by exercising citizens' rights and pressuring the media, one's political representative, or a government agency—one has a way of balancing power relations. Many people make a career out of doing this. Thus, a shopfloor worker may spend a major part of his leisure time working for his union, perhaps rising through the ranks of the union bureaucracy to a level at which he deals with senior management face-to-face. A spokesperson or advocate for a social, ethnic, or cultural minority may build considerable influence in a way that mobilizes power bases both within that person's organization and within the wider community. For many people at the lower levels or marginalized areas of an organization, the only effective way that they can influence their work life is through this form of countervailing power.

Consumer advocates like Ralph Nader also illustrate the potential of countervailing power. Nader and his colleagues have been able to exert a much greater influence on American industry by acting as critics and champions of consumer rights than they would have had as employees of any of the organizations they have criticized. Many socially conscious lawyers, journalists, academics, and members of other professional groups have also found an effective route to influence by criticizing rather than joining the organizations that are the object of their concern.

The principle of countervailing power is also often employed by the leaders of large conglomerates, who in effect play a form of chess with their environment, buying and selling organizations as corporate pawns. More than one multinational has attempted to counter the power of its competitors or bargain with its host government with the principle of countervailing power in mind.

Symbolism and the Management of Meaning

Another important source of power in organizations rests in one's ability to persuade others to enact realities that further the interests one wishes to pursue. Leadership ultimately involves an ability to define the reality of others. While the authoritarian leader attempts to "sell," "tell," or force a reality on his or her subordinates, more democratic leaders allow definitions of a situation to evolve from the

views of others. The democratic leader's influence is far more subtle and symbolic. He or she spends time listening, summarizing, integrating, and guiding what is being said, making key interventions and summoning images, ideas, and values that help those involved to make sense of the situation with which they are dealing. In managing the meanings and interpretations assigned to a situation, the leader in effect wields a form of symbolic power that exerts a decisive influence on how people perceive their realities and hence the way they act. Charismatic leaders seem to have a natural ability to shape meaning in this way.

We will focus upon three related aspects of symbolic management: the use of imagery, the use of theater, and the use of gamesmanship.

Images, language, symbols, stories, ceremonies, rituals, and all the other attributes of corporate culture discussed in Chapter 5 are tools that can be used in the management of meaning and hence in shaping power relations in organizational life. Many successful managers and leaders are aware of the power of evocative imagery and instinctively give a great deal of attention to the impact their words and actions have on those around them. For example, they often encourage the idea that the organization is a team and the environment a competitive jungle, talk about problems in terms of opportunities and challenges, symbolize the importance of a key activity or function by giving it high priority and visibility on their own personal agenda, or find other ways of creating and massaging the systems of belief deemed necessary to achieve their aims. In managing the meaning of organizational situations in these ways, they can do much to shape patterns of corporate culture and subculture that will help them achieve desired aims and objectives.

Many organizational members are also keenly aware of the way in which theater—including physical settings, appearances, and styles of behavior—can add to their power, and many deserve organizational Oscars for their performances. We have all walked into senior executives' offices that exude power in terms of decor and layout, shouting out that someone of considerable influence works there. An executive's office is the stage on which that person performs and is often carefully organized in ways that help that performance. In one area we may find a formal desk with a thronelike chair where the executive plays authoritarian roles. In another we may find casual chairs around a coffee table, setting a more convivial scene. When one is summoned to such an office, one often senses the likely tone of the meeting according to where one is seated. If you are guided to a low-level chair facing a desk where the manager can physically look down and thus dominate you, you can almost be sure that you are in for a hard time. Situations often speak louder than words and do much to express and reproduce the power relations existing within an organization.

Appearances can also count for a great deal. For example, most people in an organization soon learn the rules of dress and other unwritten requirements for successful progress to higher ranks. In some organizations, it is possible to distinguish marketing people, accountants, or even those who work on a certain floor according to their choice of fashion and general demeanor. Many aspiring young executives quickly learn the value of carrying the *Wall Street Journal* to work and ensuring that it is always visible, even if they never actually manage to read it. Some people symbolize their activity with paper-strewn desks, and others demonstrate their control and mastery of their work with a desk where no trace of paper is ever seen. In organizational contexts, there is usually more to appearance than meets the eye.

Style also counts. It is amazing how you can symbolize power by being a couple of minutes late for that all-important meeting where everyone depends on your presence or how visibility in certain situations can enhance your status. For example, in many organizations, senior executives dramatize their presence at high-profile events but fade into the woodwork at low-status functions. It is reported that in the White House people often dramatize their access to the president by making sure they arrive at least half an hour early so that others can see that they are seeing the president. Access to the president is itself both a reflection and a source of power, but if others know that you have such access, it can usually be used to acquire even more power. Those who are aware of how symbolism can enhance power often spend a great deal of time dramatizing their work, using "impression management" to influence the systems of meaning surrounding them and their activities.

Finally, we must note the skills of "gamesmanship." The organizational game player comes in many forms. Sometimes, he is reckless and ruthless, "shooting from the hip," engaging in boardroom brawls, and never missing an opportunity to intimidate others. Other kinds of game players may be more crafty and low profile, shaping key impressions at every turn. In seeing organization—with its rewards of success, status, power, and influence—as a game to be played according to their own sets of unwritten rules, organizational game players often have a significant influence on the structure of power relations.

Gender and the Management of Gender Relations

It often makes a great deal of difference if you're a man or a woman! Many organizations are dominated by gender-related values that bias organizational life in favor of one sex over another. Thus, as many feminist writers have emphasized,

organizations often segment opportunity structures and job markets in ways that enable men to achieve positions of prestige and power more easily than women. It is sometimes called the "glass ceiling" effect. Women can see opportunities at the top of their organizations, but the path is often blocked by gender biases. These biases also shape how organizational reality is created and sustained on a day-to-day basis. This is most obvious in situations of open discrimination and various forms of sexual harassment but often pervades the culture of an organization in a way that is much less visible.

Consider, for example, some of the links between gender stereotypes and traditional principles of organization. Exhibit 6.4 counterposes a series of characteristics that are often used to differentiate between male and female. The links between the male stereotype and the values that dominate many ideas about the nature of organization are striking. Organizations are often encouraged to be rational, analytical, strategic, decision-oriented, tough, and aggressive, and so are men. This has important implications for women who wish to operate in this kind of world, for insofar as they attempt to foster these values, they are often seen as breaking the traditional female stereotype in a way that opens them to criticism (e.g., for being "overly assertive" and "trying to play a male role"). Of course, in organizations that cultivate values that are closer to those of the female stereotype, women can have an advantage, reversing the traditional imbalance.

These and other gender biases are also found in the language, rituals, myths, stories, and other modes of symbolism that shape an organization's culture. General conversation and day-to-day ritual can serve to include or to exclude and is sometimes constructed to achieve this end. A lone man or woman can quickly feel outnumbered or "out on a limb" when others talk about matters that this individual cannot share or when language and jokes assume a derogatory form. Such people can miss important conversation by not being in the same locker room and can be subjected to all kinds of subtle degradation through the stories and myths that circulate on the organizational grapevine. All the factors shaping corporate culture discussed in Chapter 5 are relevant for understanding the gender realities constructed in an organization. They also identify the means through which a person can begin to counter and reshape the power relations thus produced.

The subtleties associated with gender often create different experiences of the same organizational situation and present many practical problems for the way men and women interact on a daily basis. Sometimes, the difficulties created are so significant that they give rise to conscious and unconscious strategies for "gender management."

Relations between men and women are frequently shaped by predefined stereotypes and images as to how they are expected to behave. Here are some of the common traits traditionally associated with being male and female in Western society:

The Male Stereotype

Logical

Rational

Aggressive

Exploitative

Strategic

Independent

Competitive

"A leader and decision maker"

The Female Stereotype

Intuitive

Emotional

Submissive

Empathic

Spontaneous

Nurturing

Cooperative

"A loyal supporter and follower"

Under the influence of the "gender revolution," these stereotypes are now in flux and transition.

Exhibit 6.4 Traditional Male and Female Stereotypes

Consider the following situation, drawn from research conducted by my colleague Deborah Sheppard:

Susan Jones is a marketing research manager in a male-dominated industry. She frequently has to give presentations to her male colleagues and feels a need to ensure that she "blends in" by managing her appearance and behavior so that conventional expectations and norms relating to sex roles are maintained. She strives to be "credible" while not overly challenging the status quo and monitors herself on a continuing basis. She is particularly careful not to act in a masculine way, and much of her "impression management" rests in avoiding giving offense because she is a woman. In her oral presentations she tries to demonstrate competence while avoiding being assertive. She stands in the same place rather than engaging in the more aggressive act of walking around, even if the presentation lasts three hours. She attempts to get her ideas across gently. She does not raise her voice, finding other ways of emphasizing critical points (e.g., using overheads) but being sure never to use a pointer. She avoids wearing pants or three-piece suits with a vest and is always careful to balance her more formal attire with a feminine blouse.

Susan Jones works in a male-dominated reality and spends a lot of her time living on other people's terms. Ms. Jones knows exactly what she is doing: She feels that to succeed in her organization she must try to fit in as best she can.

Many people would challenge her style of gender management and suggest that she should be more assertive and confront and change the status quo. Many women in organizations do this very effectively or, like their male counterparts, adopt a variety of other roles for managing gender relations, such as those illustrated in Exhibit 6.5.

But the point about the case for present purposes rests in the fact that it shows how life in organizations is often guided by subtle and not so subtle power relations that guide attention and behavior in one direction rather than in another. To do a good job in a male-dominated organization, Susan Jones has to put much greater effort into accomplishing everyday reality than her male colleagues do.

The gender balance in many organizations is changing rapidly as gender and equal opportunity issues hit the political "hot list." Also, as discussed in Chapter 5, the shift from hierarchical to flat, networked forms of organization is creating a major political shift that favors what have been traditionally seen as female styles of management. The ability to weave "webs of inclusion," build consensus, mobilize insight and intuition, and pay more attention to "process" than "product" are all part of the shifting balance.

As recently as the 1980s, the best advice to women wishing to succeed in organizational life was to "fit in" and beat men at their own game. For example, Betty Harragan's influential *Games That Mother Never Taught You* in effect offered a guide for playing the male-dominated game. Many of the most prominent female leaders have also reflected skill in succeeding within the male archetype. For example, Margaret Thatcher, one of the strongest political leaders of the twentieth century, has been openly and only half-jokingly described as "the best man the British Conservative Party has ever had"—and that includes the wartime leadership of Sir Winston Churchill, a major hero and role model for Thatcher.

Now, a lot of the advice given women is to change the rules of the game. Switch the archetype. In a networked as opposed to hierarchical world, new skills and competencies are needed. The characteristics of the female archetype have much to offer here.

Gender politics are in a state of flux. Everyone's power is shaped to some degree by his or her position on the gender continuum, whether male, female, or somewhere in between. We shall have much more to say about the nature of gender issues in Chapter 7, where we discuss the role of sexuality and the patriarchal family in corporate life.

<p>As one looks around the organizational world it is possible to identify different ways in which people manage gender relations. Here are a variety of popular strategies. Each can be successful or unsuccessful, according to the persons and situations involved.</p>	
<p>Some Female Strategies</p> <p>Queen Elizabeth I</p> <p>The First Lady</p> <p>The Invisible Woman</p> <p>The Great Mother The Liberationist</p> <p>The Amazon</p> <p>Delilah</p> <p>Joan of Arc</p> <p>The Daughter</p>	<p>Rule with a firm hand, surrounding oneself as far as possible by submissive men. Margaret Thatcher provides a modern example.</p> <p>Be content to exercise power behind the throne: a tactic adopted by many "corporate wives" such as executive secretaries and special assistants.</p> <p>Adopt a low profile and try and blend with one's surroundings, exercising influence in whatever ways one can.</p> <p>Consolidate power through caring and nurturing. Play rough and give as good as you get; be outspoken and always make a stand in favor of the role of women.</p> <p>Be a leader of women. This style is especially successful when one can build a powerful coalition by placing like-minded women in influential positions.</p> <p>Use the powers of seduction to win over key figures in male-dominated organizations.</p> <p>Use the power of a shared cause and mission to transcend the fact that you are a woman and gain widespread male support.</p> <p>Find a "father figure" prepared to act as sponsor and mentor.</p>
<p>Some Male Strategies</p> <p>The Warrior</p> <p>The Father</p> <p>King Henry VIII</p> <p>The Playboy</p>	<p>Frequently adopted by busy executives caught up in fighting corporate battles. Often used to bind women into roles as committed supporters.</p> <p>Often used to win the support of younger women searching for a mentor.</p> <p>Use of absolute power to get what one wants, attracting and discarding female supporters according to their usefulness.</p> <p>Use of sex appeal (both real and imagined) to win support and favor from female colleagues. A role often adopted by executives lacking a more stable power base.</p>

Exhibit 6.5 Some Strategies for the Management of Gender Relations

(Continued)

Exhibit 6.5 (Continued)

The Jock	Based on various kinds of “display behavior” intended to attract and convince women of one’s corporate prowess. Often used to develop administration and support from women in subordinate or lateral positions.
The Little Boy	Often used to try to “get one’s way” in difficult situations, especially in relation to female co-workers and subordinates. The role may take many forms—for example, the “angry little boy” who throws a temper tantrum to create a stir and force action; the “frustrated or whining little boy” who tries to cultivate sympathy; and the “cute little boy” who tries to curry favor, especially when he’s in a jam.
The Good Friend	Often used to develop partnerships with female colleagues, either as confidants or as key sources of information and advice.
The Chauvinist Pig	Often used by men who feel threatened by the presence of women. Characterized by use of various “degradation” rituals that seek to undermine the status of women and their contributions.

***Structural Factors That
Define the Stage of Action***

One of the surprising things one discovers in talking with members of an organization is that hardly anyone will admit to having any real power. Even chief executives often say that they feel highly constrained, that they have few significant options in decision making, and that the power they wield is more apparent than real. Everyone usually feels in some degree hemmed in either by forces within the organization or in terms of requirements posed by the environment. Given the numerous and varied sources of power already discussed, these attitudes present us with a paradox. How is it that there can be so many sources of power, yet so many feelings of powerlessness?

One possible answer is that access to power is so open, wide, and varied that to a large extent power relations become more or less balanced. Whereas some people may be able to amass considerable personal power,

this is offset by the power of others, and even the powerful thus feel constrained. We will give more attention to this “pluralist” view later in the chapter.

Another possible explanation rests in the idea that it is important to distinguish between the surface manifestations and the deep structure of power. This view is linked with perspectives on organization to be explored in Chapters 8 and 9. It suggests that while organizations and society may at any one time comprise a variety of political actors drawing on a variety of power bases, the stage on which they engage in their various kinds of power play is defined by economics, race, class relationships, and other deep-structural factors shaping the social epoch in which they live.

This view summons the idea that organization and society must be understood from a historical perspective. To illustrate, let us examine an analogy from the natural world. Suppose that we are considering the ecology of a river valley. We can understand that ecology in terms of the “power relations” between the various species of tree, shrub, fern, and undergrowth and the soil from which they draw sustenance. But these power relations are underpinned by the basic structure of the river valley, as determined by the impact of glaciation millennia before. One species of tree may be more powerful and thus dominate another, but the conditions of this domination are structurally determined.

Applying this analogy to organizational life, we see how underlying structures or logics underpin power relations. A manager may control an important budget, have access to key information, and be excellent at impression management and be a powerful person for all these reasons. But his ability to draw on and use these sources of power is underpinned by various structural factors, such as intercorporate power plays or an impending merger that will eliminate his job. Many powerful managers have been the victims of downsizing. Similarly, a factory worker may possess considerable power to disrupt production as a result of his or her role on an assembly line. Knowing the way in which production can be disrupted is the immediate source of power, but the ultimate source is the structure of productive activity that makes such power significant. A black manager may be extremely skilled in mobilizing ideas and valued resources, only to find himself blocked by racial prejudice.

These considerations encourage us to see people as agents or carriers of power relations embedded in the wider structure of society. As such, people may be no more than semiautonomous pawns moving themselves around in a game where they can learn to understand the rules but have no power to change them. This phenomenon may explain why even the powerful often feel that they have little real choice as to how they should

behave. For example, a chief executive may face some of these wider rules of the game in terms of the economic conditions that influence the survival of her organization. Insofar as she wishes the organization to survive, she may perceive herself as having no real options about what must be done to ensure its survival.

This view of the deep structure of power leads us to recognize the importance of factors such as economics, race, and class relations in determining the roles we occupy within organizations and hence the kind of opportunity structure and power to which we have access. It draws attention to the way educational systems and other processes of socialization shape basic elements of culture. It draws attention to the logic of capital accumulation that shapes the structure of industry, levels of employment, patterns of economic growth, and the ownership and distribution of wealth. We will consider these underlying factors in more detail in the following chapters. They define the stage on which organizational members act and moderate the influence of the other sources of power to which one has access.

The Power One Already Has

Power is a route to power, and one can often use power to acquire more. The biographies of many consummate politicians illustrate this fact. For example, politicians within organizations and in public life frequently tie the use of power to informal IOU agreements where help or favor begs its return in kind at a later date. Thus a manager may use his or her power to support X in a struggle with Y, knowing that when X is successful it will be possible to call upon similar (if not more) support from X: "Remember last July. Your future was on the line, and I risked everything to help out. Surely you'll now do a small favor for me?" Often, the exchanges are more subtle than this, but the message is essentially the same. Power used in a judicious way takes the form of an investment and, like money, often becomes useful on a rainy day.

It is also possible to take advantage of the honey-pot characteristic of power. The presence of power attracts and sustains people who wish to feed off that power and actually serves to increase the power holder's power. In the hope of gaining favor, people may begin to lend the power holder uninvited support or buy into that person's way of thinking to show that they're on the same side. When the time comes for the power holder to recognize this interest with active support, people then actually become indebted to the power holder, with all kinds of IOUs coming into a play. Power, like honey, is a perpetual source of sustenance and attraction among fellow bees.

Finally, there is the empowering aspect of power. When people experience progress or success, they are often energized to achieve further progress and success. In this way, a sense of power can actually lead to more power. This perspective has received considerable attention in the 1990s as a result of the "New Age" human potential movement, which stresses how individuals have access to all kinds of personal power that can be unleashed by feeling powerful.

The approach emphasizes the importance of developing proactive "Can Do!" mind-sets that lead people to see and act on their world in a way that will produce the results they desire. The process is most evident in situations where people who believe that they have absolutely no power or ability fight and win a small victory or achieve unbelievable things, like running over hot coals or bungee-cord jumping from the top of a cliff. The experience of success becomes a transforming force as they realize that one victory can lead to another. Many organizations and communities have been transformed by this kind of experience in quite unexpected ways.

The Ambiguity of Power

Although we have identified numerous sources of power, which are probably far from being exhaustive, it is difficult to tie down exactly what the phenomenon is. We know that it has a great deal to do with asymmetrical patterns of dependence whereby one person or unit becomes dependent on another in an unbalanced way, and that it also has a great deal to do with an ability to define the reality of others in ways that lead them to perceive and enact relations that one desires. However, it is far from clear whether power should be understood as an interpersonal behavioral phenomenon or as the manifestation of deep-seated structural factors. It is not clear whether people have and exercise power as autonomous human beings or are simply carriers of power relations that are the product of more fundamental forces. These and other issues—such as whether power is a resource or a relationship, whether there is a distinction between power and processes of societal domination and control, whether power is ultimately linked to the control of capital and the structuring of the world economy, or whether it is important to distinguish between actual manifest power and potential power—continue to be the subject of considerable interest and debate among those interested in the sociology of organization.

These problems aside, however, it is clear that our discussion of possible sources and uses of power provides us with an inventory of ideas through which we can begin to decode power plays and political dynamics

in organizational contexts. Like our analysis of interests and our discussion of conflict, it provides us with a working tool with which we can analyze organizational politics and, if we so wish, orient our action in a politicized way.

Managing Pluralist Organizations

The image of organizations developed above reflects what is sometimes known as a “pluralist” frame of reference, for it emphasizes the plural nature of the interests, conflicts, and sources of power that shape organizational life. The term *pluralism* is used in political science to characterize idealized kinds of liberal democracies where potentially authoritarian tendencies are held in check by the free interplay of interest groups that have a stake in government. The pluralist vision is of a society where different groups bargain and compete for a share in the balance of power and use their influence to realize Aristotle’s ideal of politics: a negotiated order that creates unity out of diversity.

This pluralist philosophy stands in contrast with an older organic or “unitary” frame of reference. The unitary view pictures society as an integrated whole where the interests of individual and society are synonymous. This unitary view emphasizes the sovereignty of the state and the importance of individuals subordinating themselves in the service of society as a means of realizing and satisfying their true interests and the common good. It is an ideology that has grown in importance along with the development of the nation-state and the idea that individuals should place the interests of the state above all else.

The pluralist view also contrasts with the so-called “radical” frame of reference, which views society as comprising antagonistic class interests characterized by deep-rooted social and political cleavages and held together as much by coercion as by consent. This radical view, influenced by a Marxian perspective, suggests that the interests of disadvantaged groups can be furthered in a substantial way only through radical changes in the structure of society that displace those currently in power.

These three frames of reference (Exhibit 6.6) have considerable relevance for understanding organizations and the ideologies that shape management practice. Some organizations tend to function like unitary teams, others as vibrant political systems with the kind of pluralist politics discussed earlier in this chapter, and others as battlefields where rival groups engage in ongoing warfare.

Organization can be understood as mini-states where the relationship between individual and society is paralleled by the relationship between individual and organization. The unitary, pluralist, and radical views of organization can be characterized in the following terms:

	<i>Unitary</i>	<i>Pluralist</i>	<i>Radical</i>
Interests	Places emphasis on the achievement of common objectives. The organization is viewed as being united under the umbrella of common goals and striving toward their achievement in the manner of a well-integrated team.	Places emphasis on the diversity of individual and group interests. The organization is regarded as a loose coalition with just a passing interest in the formal goals of the organization.	Places emphasis on the oppositional nature of contradictory "class" interests. The organization is viewed as a battleground where rival forces (e.g., management and unions) strive for the achievement of largely incompatible ends.
Conflict	Regards conflict as a rare and transient phenomenon that can be removed through appropriate managerial action. Where it does arise it is usually attributed to the activities of deviants and troublemakers.	Regards conflict as an inherent and ineradicable characteristic of organizational affairs and stresses its potentially positive or functional aspects.	Regards organizational conflict as inevitable and as part of a wider class conflict that will eventually change the whole structure of society. It is recognized that conflict may be suppressed and thus often exists as a latent rather than manifest characteristic of both organizations and society.

Exhibit 6.6 Unitary, Pluralist, and Radical Frames of Reference

(Continued)

Exhibit 6.6 (Continued)

	<i>Unitary</i>	<i>Pluralist</i>	<i>Radical</i>
Power	Largely ignores the role of power in organizational life. Concepts such as authority, leadership, and control tend to be preferred means of describing the managerial prerogative of guiding the organization toward the achievement of common interests.	Regards power as a crucial variable. Power is the medium through which conflicts of interests are alleviated and resolved. The organization is viewed as a plurality of power holders drawing their power from a plurality of sources.	Regards power as a key feature of organization, but a phenomenon that is unequally distributed and follows class divisions. Power relations in organizations are viewed as reflections of power relations in society at large and as closely linked to wider processes of social control (e.g., control of economic power, the legal system, and education).

SOURCE: Based on Burrell and Morgan (1979: 204–388).

Unitary characteristics are most often found in organizations that have developed a cohesive culture based on respect for management's right to manage, especially those that have a long and continuous history of paternalistic management. Organizations where there are sharp racial or class distinctions between different categories of employee, where there are strong divisions between blue- and white-collar workers such as those found in many heavy industries, or where there has been a history of conflict between management and labor, tend to reflect the characteristics of the radical model. Organizations primarily made up of white-collar staff, particularly where there is room for employees to acquire considerable autonomy, often tend to fit the pluralist model. Sometimes, the three models apply to different parts of the same organization. It is often a salutary experience for a person to ask, "Which frame of reference applies to my organization?" By using the model presented in Exhibit 6.6 to assess the general pattern of interests, conflicts, and power, one can often gain a useful initial grasp on the character of the political system with which one is dealing.

Besides serving as analytical tools, the three frames of reference often serve as organizational ideologies. Thus, managers or employees may encourage the idea that “we’re a team, let’s work together” or that “we all want different things, so let’s talk about and resolve our differences so we can all gain” or that “we’re at war, I don’t trust you, so we’ll have to fight it out.” Clearly, the ideology in use will determine the character of the organization. If a manager believes that he or she is managing a team and can persuade employees to believe that this is the case, harmonious cooperation with a three musketeers’ attitude of “all for one and one for all” may gain ground. If the radical frame of reference provides the major context for interpreting organizational events, then a battle-torn organizational life is almost certain. These ideologies may emerge and be used as a management tool as a means of shaping the organization to conform with the image that best suits specific ends. This, after all, is the role of ideology in organizations, as in society.

Each frame of reference leads to a different approach to management. If one believes that one is managing a team, one tends to expect and demand that people rally around common objectives and to respect “the right of the manager to manage and the duty of employees to obey.” Employees are expected to perform the roles for which they have been appointed. No less, no more. Conflict is seen as a source of trouble and as an unwanted intrusion. Hence, the orientation of the unitary manager is usually to eliminate or suppress conflict whenever possible. Given this ideology, there is no room to recognize or accept the kind of organizational politics discussed earlier in this chapter. Unitary managers tend to see formal authority as the only legitimate source of power and thus rarely acknowledge the right or ability of others to influence the management process. Unions are seen as a scourge, and the pursuit of individual interest through use of different kinds of power is viewed as a form of malpractice.

Although this unitary view may seem somewhat narrow and old-fashioned, it is often extremely pervasive and influential and is supported by many theories of management. For example, theories based on the mechanical and organismic metaphors discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 often encourage this unitary view, emphasizing the importance of designing or adapting the organization to achieve common goals. Hence, they provide primary resources for the unitary manager who wishes to believe that an enterprise *ought* to possess the unity and shared sense of direction that we find in carefully designed machines or in organisms in the natural world. The team idea is often much more attractive than the idea of a somewhat chaotic political system that wishes to move in many directions at once. Hence, many managers often unconsciously take refuge in this team ideology rather than deal with political realities.

Also, unitary ideology can serve as a resource for a crafty manager who recognizes that espousing the attitude that "we're a team" may help create unity among divergent elements. By identifying conflict as a *source* of trouble, the manager may be able to unite the rest of the organization against those who are key actors in the trouble. This tactic is often used to unite employees against individuals or groups who are seen as disruptive elements in an otherwise harmonious and rational enterprise. The unitary frame of reference is a powerful ideology among the public at large, and managers can often use this public ideology as a strategy for mobilizing support and achieving control in the pluralist or radical power plays that characterize their organization. The fact that managers who at times espouse the unitary ideology may not actually believe in that ideology themselves can make it difficult to determine which ideology has a controlling influence in an organization. However, the person who has an awareness of the role played by rhetoric and espoused ideology has a means of understanding when this form of power play is occurring. The unitary manager is often a pluralist in unitary clothing!

The hallmark of the pluralist manager is that he or she accepts the inevitability of organizational politics, recognizing that because individuals have different interests, aims, and objectives, employees are likely to use their membership in the organization for their own ends. Management is thus focused on balancing and coordinating the interests of organizational members so that they can work together within the constraints set by the organization's formal goals, which really reflect the interests of shareholders and others with ultimate control over the fate of the organization. The pluralist manager recognizes that conflict and power plays can serve both positive and negative functions; hence, the main concern is to manage conflict in ways that will benefit the overall organization or, more selfishly, in ways that will promote his or her own interests within the organization. The pluralist manager is, after all, not politically neutral. He or she is an active player in the politics of organization and uses the roles of organizational power broker and conflict manager to maximum effect.

For example, the pluralist manager may seek ways of using conflict as an energizing force to counteract staleness and keep people "on their toes." Conflict can encourage self-evaluation and challenge conventional wisdom. It may cause a certain degree of pain within an organization but can also do much to stimulate learning and change. It can help an organization keep abreast of a changing environment and be a source of constant innovation.

This is particularly true in group decision-making situations, where the absence of conflict often produces conformity and "groupthink." The

existence of rival points of view and of different aims and objectives can do much to improve the quality of decision making. Conflict can also serve as an important release valve that gets rid of pent-up pressures. It facilitates processes of mutual accommodation through the exploration and resolution of differences, often in a way that preempts more subversive or explosive resolutions. Somewhat paradoxically, conflict can at times serve to stimulate change and at other times help maintain the status quo.

One of the main tasks of the pluralist manager is to find ways of maintaining just the right level of conflict. Too much conflict can immobilize an organization by channeling the efforts of its members into unproductive activities, but too little conflict may encourage complacency and lethargy. In the former case, the manager may need to employ conflict resolution techniques or reorient conflict in more productive directions. In the latter he or she may need to find ways of promoting appropriate conflicts, often by making hidden conflicts overt, or perhaps by actually creating conflict. Although this may at times help to enliven the atmosphere and performance of an organization, it can also be perceived as a form of unwarranted manipulation, with disastrous results for relations between managers and their employees.

In approaching the task of conflict management, the pluralist manager is faced with a choice of styles, which hinge on the extent to which he or she wishes to engage in assertive or cooperative behavior (Exhibit 6.7). Although a manager may have a preferred style, all the different styles are likely to be appropriate at one time or another (Exhibit 6.8). Even in the realm of politics, contingency theory thus has an important place. On some occasions, the manager may wish to buy time through various kinds of avoidance behavior. On others, head-on competition, collaboration, accommodation, or compromise may prove more effective. While some managers prefer to battle it out in a way that all can see, others prefer more subtle fly-fishing techniques that depend on an intimate knowledge of the situation and the skillful use of the right bait at the right time for the right people. The choice of the style and tactics to be used in a given situation is crucial, but unfortunately it cannot be explored in detail here.

Regardless of style, successful pluralist management always depends on an ability to read developing situations. The manager must be able to analyze interests, understand conflicts, and explore power relations so that situations can be brought under a measure of control. This requires a keen ability to be aware of conflict-prone areas, to read the latent tendencies and pressures beneath the surface actions of organizational life, and to initiate appropriate responses. In general, the manager can intervene to change perceptions, behaviors, and structures in ways that will help redefine or redirect conflicts to serve constructive ends.



The five styles can be characterized in terms of the following kinds of behavior:

Avoiding:

- Ignoring conflicts and hoping that they'll go away.
- Putting problems under consideration or on hold.
- Invoking slow procedures to stifle the conflict.
- Using secrecy to avoid confrontation.
- Appealing to bureaucratic rules as a source of conflict resolution.

Compromise:

- Negotiating.
- Looking for deals and trade-offs.
- Finding satisfactory or acceptable solutions.

Competition:

- Creating win-lose situations.
- Using rivalry.
- Using power plays to get one's ends.
- Forcing submission.

Accommodation:

- Giving way.
- Submitting and complying.

Collaboration:

- Problem-solving stance.
- Confronting differences and sharing ideas and information.
- Searching for integrative solutions.
- Finding situations where all can win.
- Seeing problems and conflicts as challenging.

Exhibit 6.7 Conflict Management: A Question of Style

SOURCE: Adapted from Thomas (1976: 900). Used by permission of Marvin Dunnette.

Situations in which to use the five conflict-handling modes, as reported by twenty-eight chief executives

Competing

1. When quick, decisive action is vital (e.g., emergencies).
2. On important issues where unpopular actions need implementing—e.g., cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline.
3. On issues vital to company welfare when you know you're right.
4. Against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior.

Collaborating

1. To find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised.
2. When your objective is to learn.
3. To merge insights from people with different perspectives.
4. To gain commitment by incorporating concerns into a consensus.
5. To work through feelings that have interfered with a relationship.

Compromising

1. When goals are important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes.
2. When opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals.
3. To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues.
4. To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.

5. As a backup when collaboration or competition is unsuccessful.

Avoiding

1. When an issue is trivial, or more important issues are pressing.
2. When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns.
3. When potential disruption outweighs the benefits of resolution.
4. To let people cool down and regain perspective.
5. When gathering information supersedes immediate decision.
6. When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.
7. When issues seem tangential or symptomatic of other issues.

Accommodating

1. When you find you are wrong—to allow a better position to be heard, to learn, and to show your reasonableness.
2. When issues are more important to others than to yourself—to satisfy others and maintain cooperation.
3. To build social credits for later issues.
4. To minimize loss when you are outmatched and losing.
5. When harmony and stability are especially important.
6. To allow subordinates to develop by learning from mistakes.

Exhibit 6.8 When to Use the Five Conflict-Handling Styles

SOURCE: Thomas (1977: 487). © 1977 *Academy of Management Review*. Reprinted with permission of the *Academy of Management Review* and the author.

Many organizational conflicts can be fruitfully resolved through pluralist means, but not all. This is particularly true in radicalized organizations where conflicts between managers and employees run deep, and there are no “win-win” solutions. Here, issues often have to be negotiated in fairly formal terms if progress is to be made, or else grind their way to a bitter end through the raw interplay of structural forces embedded in the economic and industrial structure of society itself. Disputes leading to head-on clashes between management and unions, such as those relating to the replacement of skilled employees by automation or the closing and relocation of plants, are obvious examples. The underlying power relations and bitterness between the parties involved often encourage a winner-take-all or fight-to-the-death attitude that makes compromise extremely difficult, often leading to painful outcomes such as unemployment or bankruptcy of the organizations involved. Even though the intransigence that often accompanies such disputes can seem senseless to outside observers, it is intelligible in terms of the basic premises on which the radical frame of reference builds. We will examine these in Chapter 9.

Strengths and Limitations of the Political Metaphor

One of the curious features of organizational life is that although many people know they are surrounded by organizational politics they rarely come out and say so. One ponders politics in private moments or discusses it off the record with close confidants and friends or in the context of one's own political maneuverings with members of one's coalition. One knows that manager A is pushing for a particular project because it will serve her own aims or that B got a particular job because of his associations with C, but one can rarely say so. It breaks all the rules of organizational etiquette to impute private motive to organizational acts, which are supposed to serve the organization's interests above all else. For these and other reasons, including the fact that privatization and secrecy can serve political ends, organizational politics becomes a taboo subject, which at times makes it extremely difficult for organization members to deal with this crucially important aspect of organizational reality.

The discussion presented in this chapter helps us accept the reality of politics as an inevitable feature of organizational life and, following the Aristotelian view, to recognize its constructive role in the creation of social order. The political metaphor encourages us to see how *all* organizational activity is interest based and to evaluate all aspects of organizational

functioning with this in mind. Organizational goals, structure, technology, job design, leadership style, and other seemingly formal aspects of organizational functioning have a political dimension as well as the more obvious political power plays and conflicts. The model of interests, conflict, and power developed in this chapter provides a practical and systematic means of understanding the relationship between politics and organization and emphasizes the key role of power in determining political outcomes. The metaphors considered in earlier chapters tend to underplay the relation between power and organization. The political metaphor overcomes this deficiency, placing a knowledge of the role and use of power at the center of organizational analysis.

The metaphor also helps explode the myth of organizational rationality. Organizations may pursue goals and stress the importance of rational, efficient, and effective management. But rational, efficient, and effective for whom? Whose goals are being pursued? What interests are being served? Who benefits? The political metaphor emphasizes that organizational goals may be rational for some people's interest but not for others. An organization embraces many rationalities because rationality is always interest based and thus changes according to the perspective from which it is viewed. Rationality is always political. No one is neutral in the management of organizations—even managers! They, like others, use the organization as a legitimizing umbrella under which to pursue a variety of task, career, and extramural interests. Like others, they often use the idea of rationality as a resource for pursuing political agendas—justifying actions that suit their personal aspirations in terms that appear rational from an organizational standpoint. The idea of rationality is as much a resource to be used in organizational politics as a descriptive term describing the aims of organization.

These considerations suggest a reevaluation of the ideological significance of the concept of rationality. Above all else, the idea of rationality seems to be invoked as a myth to overcome the contradictions inherent in the fact that an organization is simultaneously a system of competition and a system of cooperation. The emphasis on rationality attempts to bind together a political system that, because of the diversity of interests on which it builds, always has a latent tendency to move in diverse directions and sometimes to fall apart.

This leads us to another strength of the political metaphor: that it helps us find a way of overcoming the limitations of the idea that organizations are functionally integrated systems. As will be recalled from discussion in Chapter 3, much organization theory has built on the assumption that organizations, like machines or organisms, are unified systems that bind part and whole in a quest for survival. The political metaphor suggests

otherwise, pointing to the disintegrative strains and tensions that stem from the diverse sets of interests on which organization builds.

The strains have become increasingly apparent with the organizational "downsizing movement" of the 1990s. Organizations that have promoted the unitary ideology that "we're a family" or "we're a team" have found themselves firing team members in order to cut costs. If team members are so dispensable, is the organization really a team? Or is the team idea merely used to promote a sense of unity? Is the more fundamental reality that of diverse and often incompatible interests? Genuinely pluralist organizations recognize that a high degree of integration and commitment is problematic and ultimately depends on the degree to which people *really* need each other. In such circumstances it is much better to think about the organization as a coalition of changing interests and manage it that way than to pretend that it has more integrated properties.

Many organizations are more likely to have the characteristics of loosely coupled systems, where semiautonomous parts strive to maintain a degree of independence while working under the name and framework provided by the organization, than the characteristics of a completely integrated organism. In organizations where a desire for autonomy or subunit goals becomes more important than the aims of the wider organization, schismatic tendencies may be a constant feature and transforming force. Such organizations usually spawn new organizations when key members or subunits spin off into entities of their own. Or different elements may end up fighting and destroying each other. An analysis of organizational politics in terms of the interplay among rival interests, conflicts, and sources of power can help us understand and manage these forces.

Another strength of the metaphor is the fact that it politicizes our understanding of human behavior in organizations. We may not agree with Nietzsche that humans have a will to power, mastery, and control, or with writers who suggest that politics and game playing are fundamental to human nature, but we are obliged to recognize that tensions between private and organizational interests provide an incentive for individuals to act politically. Whereas some people view such action as a manifestation of the selfish or "dark" side of human personality, the analysis presented here suggests that there is usually a structural as well as a motivational basis. Even the most altruistic persons may find their action following a political script in the sense that their orientation to organizational life is influenced by the conflicting sets of interests that they bring to issues of immediate concern. Although some people are no doubt more political in orientation than others, employing gamesmanship and other forms of wheeling and dealing as a basic strategy, the enactments of everyone are, at least in part, of a political nature. The political metaphor

encourages us to recognize how and why the organizational actor is a political actor and to understand the political significance of the patterns of meaning enacted in corporate culture and subculture.

Finally, the metaphor also encourages us to recognize the sociopolitical implications of different kinds of organization and the roles that organizations play in society. Recall the quotation that opened this chapter. Should people be prepared to surrender their democratic rights when they begin work each morning? Is it possible to have a democratic society if the majority of the population spend their working lives obeying the commands of others? Should organizations be allowed to play politics by lobbying in an attempt to influence legislation and other government policies? Should there be closer or more distant relations between business and government? The political metaphor brings questions such as these to the center of our attention. Although it is common to draw strict divisions between organization theory and political science, it is clear that business and organization is always to some extent political and that the political implications of organization need to be systematically explored.

Against these strengths of the metaphor, it is necessary to identify a number of important limitations. The first can be framed as a potential danger. When we analyze organizations in terms of the political metaphor it is almost always possible to see signs of political activity. This can lead to an increased politicization of the organization, for when we understand organizations as political systems we are more likely to behave politically in relation to what we see. We begin to see politics everywhere and to look for hidden agendas even where there are none. For this reason, the metaphor must be used with caution. There is a very real danger that its use may generate cynicism and mistrust in situations where there was none before. In a course that I teach on the nature of organizational politics I usually begin by warning my students that by the second or third week there is a danger that they will be looking for hidden motives everywhere, even wondering whether a colleague's innocent offer to buy the coffee is really a political act. Although at first my warning is seen as a joke, by week two or three its gravity and significance usually hit home. Under the influence of a political mode of understanding, everything becomes political. The analysis of interests, conflicts, and power easily gives rise to a Machiavellian interpretation that suggests everyone is trying to outwit and outmaneuver everyone else. Rather than use the political metaphor to generate new insights and understandings that can help us deal with divergent interests, we often reduce the metaphor to a tool to be used to advance our own personal interests.

This kind of manipulative stance is reflected in many contemporary writings on the politics of organization, which have a tendency to

emphasize the cynical, selfish, ruthless, get-ahead-at-all-costs mentality that so often turns organizations into corporate jungles. These writings "sell" the insights of the metaphor through statements such as "Find out where the real power is and use it," "Understand and harvest the grapevine," "Win through intimidation," "Protect your job by knowing your enemies," or "Seize power and wield clout." This use of the metaphor breeds mistrust and encourages the idea that organization involves a zero-sum game where there must be winners and losers. There may be a measure of truth in this, in that many organizations are dominated by competitive relations, yet the effect is to reduce the scope for genuine openness and collaboration. This kind of thinking loses sight of the more general implications of the political metaphor, such as the Aristotelian vision of politics as a constructive force in the creation of social order, and the possibility of using political principles to examine and restructure the relationship between organization and society.

A final limitation of the metaphor, and one to which I have briefly alluded, relates to the assumptions of pluralism. Is it realistic to presume a plurality of interests and a plurality of power holders? Are more radical organization theorists correct in seeing class, racial, and other social divisions as primary forces defining unequal and antagonistic structures of interest and power?

A strong case can be made for the idea that the interests of individuals or small coalitions may best be served if they recognize affinities of a "class" kind and act in a unified manner. Such is the logic of trade unionism, although the trade union movement has fragmented along sectionalist rather than class lines. A strong case can also be made for the idea that, although everyone has access to sources of power, ultimate power rests with the people or forces that are able to define the stage of action on which the game of politics is played. From a radical standpoint, pluralist power may be more apparent than real. Ultimately, some people have much more power than others. These considerations, which will be examined in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9, suggest that pluralist politics may be restricted to the resolution of marginal, narrow, and superficial issues and may fail to take account of the structural forces that shape the nature of those issues. As a result, the political metaphor may overstate the power and importance of the individual and underplay the system dynamics that determine what becomes political and how politics occurs.