Project managers don't have the luxury of turning their backs on organizational politics. Instead, they must become astute politicians.

Project managers don't have the luxury of turning their backs on organizational politics. Instead, they must become astute politicians.

Power, politics, and project management are three processes that, while very different, are also inextricably linked. No one can go far in project management without understanding just how far power will take them in their organization. It is in confronting frequent failures at getting their projects successfully implemented through traditional power that most managers are forced, through expedience, to adopt methods for influence and politics. These are not dirty terms, in spite of the fact that the majority of managers in our organizations (1) do not enjoy employing political means to their ends, and (2) do not understand the political processes very well. Too many of us have learned about politics the hard way, through being victimized by someone who was more experienced or more ruthless than we. Given that our first experiences with politics were often unpleasant, it is hardly surprising that many of us “swore off” political behavior, as we would some form of intoxicant.

For better or worse, project managers do not have the luxury of turning their backs on organizational politics. Too much of what they do depends upon their ability to effectively manage not only the technical realms of their job, but the behavioral side as well. Politics constitutes one organizational process that is ubiquitous; it operates across organizations and functional boundaries. Politics is not inherently evil or vicious. Rather, it is only in how it is employed that has earned it so much animus. All of us, bearing the scars of past experiences, understand the potential for misuse that comes from organizational politics.

Understanding the political side of organizations and the often intensely political nature of system implementation gives rise to the concomitant need to develop appropriate attitudes and strategies that help project managers operate effectively within the system. If this approach is necessary for effective project implementations, what are some steps project managers can take to become politically astute?

Understand and acknowledge the political nature of most organizations. In dealing with individuals suffering from a variety of illnesses, therapists and counselors of all types have long taken as their starting point the importance of the patients’ acknowledgment that they have a problem. Positive results cannot be achieved in a state of continued denial. While this analogy does not hold completely true for organizational politics, the underlying point is still important: denial of the political nature of organizations does not make that phenomenon any less potent. Organizations in both the public and private sectors are inherently politicized [1]. In offering this view, we may offend those who are uncomfortable with the idea of politics and believe that through the combined efforts of all organizational actors it is possible to eradicate the political nature of companies or governmental agencies. Politics, however, are too deeply rooted within organizational operations to be treated as some aberrant form of bacteria or diseased tissue that can be excised from the organization’s body.

Before managers are able to learn to use politics in a manner that is supportive of project implementation, they must first acknowledge (1) its existence, and (2) its impact on project success. Once there is an understanding of the political nature of organizations and the political environment in which systems are implemented, managers can develop the skills and strategies that are necessary to operate effectively within these political systems.
understanding of the political nature of organizations, it is possible to develop some action steps that will aid in project implementation.

**Learn to cultivate “appropriate” political tactics.** There are appropriate and inappropriate methods for using politics. Since the purpose of all political behavior is to develop and keep power, both the politically naive and shark personalities are equally misguided and, perhaps surprisingly, equally damaging to the likelihood of project implementation success. A project manager who, either through naiveté or stubbornness, refuses to exploit the political arena is destined to be less effective in introducing the project than a project team leader who knows how to use politics effectively. On the other hand, project managers so politicized as to appear predatory and aggressive to their colleagues are doomed to create an atmosphere of such distrust and personal animus that there is little chance for successful project adoption.

Pursuing the middle ground of political sensibility is the key to project implementation success. The process of developing and applying appropriate political tactics means using politics as it can most effectively be used, as a basis for negotiation and bargaining. Politically sensible managers understand that initiating any sort of organizational disruption or change in developing a new project is bound to reshuffle the distribution of power within the organization. That effect is likely to make many departments and managers nervous as they begin to wonder how future power relationships will be rearranged. “ Politically sensible” implies being politically sensitive to the concerns—real or imagined—of powerful stakeholder groups. Legitimate or not, their concerns about the new project are real and must be addressed. Appropriate political tactics and behavior include making alliances with powerful members of other stakeholder departments, networking, negotiating mutually acceptable solutions to seemingly insoluble problems, and recognizing that most organizational activities are predicated on the give-and-take of negotiation and compromise [2]. It is through these uses of political behavior that managers of project implementation efforts put themselves in the position to effectively influence the successful introduction of their systems.

In an article on project management and the nature of power, Lovell [3] makes a similar point, arguing that effective project managers must work to maintain constructive political alliances with powerful senior management and influential department managers. He further suggests that the persuasive skills and political acumen of a seasoned project manager will allow him or her to understand and make use of the organization’s power environment, the positions of the various stakeholders, the time and means to develop and maintain alliances, and how to move around political roadblocks. Each skill requires objectivity and sensitivity from project managers in order to be successful.

**Understand and accept “WIIFM.”** One of the hardest lessons for newcomers to organizations to learn is the consistently expressed and displayed primacy of departmental loyalties and self-interest over organization-wide concerns. There are many times when novice managers will feel frustrated at the unwillingness of other departments and individuals to accept new ideas or systems that are “good for them.” It is vital for these managers to understand the beauty of a new project is truly in the eyes of the beholder. One may be absolutely convinced a project will be beneficial to the organization; however, convincing members of other departments of this truth is a different matter altogether.

Other departments and project stakeholders are not likely to offer their help and support for a project unless they perceive it is in their interests to do so—assuming that these departments understand the value of a project is simplistic and usually wrong. Bob Graham, a noted project management consultant, refers to the “WIIFM” in describing the reactions of stakeholder groups to new innovations. WIIFM—What’s In It For Me?—is the question most often asked by individuals and departments when presented with requests for their aid. They are asking why they should support the process of implementing a new project. The worst mistake project managers can make is to assume that the stakeholders will automatically appreciate and value the project as much as they themselves do. Graham’s point is that time and care must be taken to use politics effectively, to cultivate a relationship with power holders, and to make the deals needed to bring the system online. This is the essence of political sensibility: being level-headed enough to have few illusions about the difficulties one is likely to encounter in attempting to develop and implement a new project.

**Try to provide project managers with some “equal footing.”** A functional line manager often views the initiation of a new project with a degree of suspicion and trepidation because of its potential to upset the power balance and reduce his or her authority. A project team does, in fact, create an artificial hierarchy that could compete with the traditional line managers for resources, support, status, talented personnel, and
Project managers are forced to negotiate daily. But except for some seasoned project managers who have developed their skills the hard way, most are uncomfortable with the process. Further, because they find it distasteful, they have never sought to improve their skills or learn new techniques.

other scarce commodities. However, it is also clear that organizational realities, which mandate the need for project managers and teams, also need to give these individuals authority and status to do their job effectively.

Authority and status, however, typically do not come easily to project managers in most organizations. One way to give project managers a measure of status as part of the formal functional hierarchy is to have them conduct performance appraisals on project team subordinates. On the surface, this suggestion seems to be simple common sense and yet it is often resisted in organizations. Line managers want to maintain control over subordinates through keeping sole right to this evaluation process and, hence, may resist allowing project managers this measure of equal footing. Nevertheless, it is a powerful tool because it sends the clear message throughout the company that projects are valuable and project contributions from team members will be remembered and rewarded [4].

Learn the fine art of influencing. How does a project manager succeed in establishing the sort of sustained influence throughout the organization that is useful in the pursuit of project-related goals? An article by Keys and Case [5] highlights five methods managers can use to enhance their influence with superiors, clients, team members, and other stakeholders. First, they suggest one powerful method for creating a base of influence is to first establish a reputation as an expert in the project that is being undertaken. This finding was also shown in research on project manager influence styles by Thamhain and Gemmill [6]. A project manager who is perceived as lacking any sort of technical skill or competency cannot use influence as a power mechanism to secure the support of other important stakeholders nor be perceived as a true “leader” of the project team. One important caveat to this, however, is that the “expert” label is typically a perceptual one. It may or may not be based in fact. Many of us are aware of project managers who cultivate reputations as technical experts. Unfortunately, in many of these cases, when faced with a true technical problem, the “expertise” they have taken such pains to promote is shown to be woefully inadequate, obsolesce or perhaps non-existent. A reputation as an expert is very useful for gaining influence: truly being an expert helps immeasurably with a project manager’s credibility.

A second technique for establishing greater influence is to make a distinction between the types of relationships we encounter on the job. Specifically, Keys and Case [5] suggest that managers should make conscious decisions to prioritize their relationships in terms of establishing close ties and contacts with those around the company who will help to accomplish their goals, rather than on the basis of social preference. Certainly, there are personality types and interest groups that each of us is more prone to gravitate toward. However, to broaden their influence ability, project managers need to break the ties of habit and expand their social networks, particularly with regard to those who can be of future aid.

The third tactic for enhancing influence is networking. As part of creating a wider social set composed of organizational members with the power or status to aid in the project’s development, canny project managers will also establish ties to acknowledged experts or those with the ability to provide scarce resources. It is helpful to have experts and resource-providers handy during times of trouble.

A fourth technique for expanding influence is the importance of understanding a key aspect of the influence process: it only works when it is done well. To be influential the project manager must carefully select the right tactic for the situation. For example, many who consider themselves adept at influencing others prefer face-to-face settings rather than using the telephone or leaving messages to request support. They know intuitively that it is harder for others to refuse to offer help when the request is made in person rather than through an impersonal medium. If the tactics selected are not appropriate to the individual and the situation, influence will not work.

Finally, and closely related to the fourth point, successful influencers are socially sensitive, articulate, and flexible. For example, in a face-to-face meeting, a clever influencer knows intuitively how best to balance the alternative methods for attaining the other manager’s cooperation and help. The adept influencer can often read the body language and reactions of the “target” manager and may instinctively shift the approach to find the argument most likely to succeed. Whether the approach selected employs pure persuasion, flattery and cajolery, or use of guilt appeals, successful influencers are often those who articulate their arguments well, read nonverbal signals, and tailor their arguments and style to take best advantage of the situation.

Develop your negotiating skills. An often neglected aspect of project managers’ jobs involves negotiation. They are forced to negotiate daily with a variety of organizational members and external groups. Nevertheless, with the exception of some seasoned project managers who have developed their skills the hard way, through trial and error, most project managers are inherently uncomfortable with the process. Further, because they find it distasteful, they have never sought
to actively improve their negotiation skills or learn new techniques and approaches.

**Negotiation is a sometimes distasteful part of the project management process.** All project managers, as part of their understanding of the use of influence in their job, must hone their negotiation skills. As part of this task, learn to recognize the tricks and ploys of those who sit across the table from you. By learning to anticipate and recognize their techniques, it becomes easier to develop appropriate responses. The key is to use a form of negotiation in which you search for fairness [7]. Win-win outcomes and mutually acceptable solutions are the guiding principles. A negotiation is not an opportunity to take advantage of the other party. It is a chance to gain the best terms possible, while seeking to address the other party’s interests as well. As such, all negotiations should be treated as long-term deals, whether or not this is the case. When we recast a negotiation as a bargaining session between long-time colleagues, it changes the dynamic from one of manipulation and coercion to one of mutual problem-solving.

**Conflict is a natural side effect of project management.** Many managers react to conflict with panic. They view any squabbling among team members as the first step toward team disintegration and ultimate project failure. This response is natural and understandable; after all, it is ultimately your responsibility if the project fails. As a result, the most common reaction to intra-team conflicts is to do everything possible to suppress or minimize the conflict, hoping that if it is ignored it will go away. Unfortunately, it almost never does. Conflict, left to smolder beneath the surface, is a time bomb that will almost always go off at the worst possible time in the development process. If willful ignorance does not work with conflict, what does?

Project managers need to better understand the dynamics of the conflict process and recognize conflict as progress [8]. The natural result of individuals from different functional backgrounds working together is professional tension and personality friction. Suggesting project managers adopt a more sanguine attitude about conflict does not imply that all conflict should be ignored. Nor does it imply that all conflict must be either immediately suppressed or addressed. Instead, it is at the discretion of the project manager how best to handle the problem. Each situation must be dealt with as a unique and separate event. There is no one best method for dealing with conflict, and project managers need to be flexible.

**References**


Jeffrey K. Pinto is assistant professor of management in the School of Business at Penn State-Erie, the Behrend College. He has authored or edited nine books and over 50 articles in a variety of professional journals.