



Influence and Political Processes in Virtual Teams

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The ways team members choose to influence each other and the political processes that take place within a team have important implications for the team's effectiveness. In this chapter, we investigate the ways both phenomena occur in teams where the dominant mode of communication is technology supported rather than face-to-face interactions. For example, consider the following dilemma faced by the members of an information systems group for two months, using conference calls, e-mails, and a face-to-face meeting at the end of the problem-solving process. The participants in the process come from four countries, and their specific goal was to reach a decision on the choice of a product that will be used as the database for the whole organization. As one of the group members explains:

Even when you discuss things that are technological, it can have an emotional base. For many people, technology is like religion, and that is combined with what product people are most familiar with and what they feel most comfortable working on rather than just taking a neutral look at the advantages and disadvantages. The decision cannot be only rational, and many influence attempts take place at the meetings.

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It was situations like these, where both influence and politics play a part in reaching the final decision, that prompted us to address the topics in this chapter. We address several important questions: What kind of influence tactics are the most prevalent, and do they differ from the ones used in traditional teams? Which are found to be most effective in the eyes of team members? Are political processes, elsewhere termed organizational politics, minimized in virtual teams, or do they just assume different forms? What are the political results of the meeting of different cultures in these teams? And finally, what role does the organization in which the virtual team exists play in all this? Our discussion develops the idea of virtual organizational politics (VOP), which goes beyond conventional organizational politics. We expect our conclusions to aid managers and practitioners working with virtual teams to use their advantages more efficiently and recognize their potential weaknesses at work.

INFLUENCE AND POLITICS: A CASE EXAMPLE

Our suggestions regarding the ways influence and politics manifest themselves in virtual teams rely on the combination of the findings of our exploratory study and the adjustment of existing theories and empirical knowledge on influence and politics to the reality of these teams. Our study relied on ten semi-structured interviews with members of virtual teams. Participants were Israeli employees of two international organizations from the high-tech sector. The headquarters of one organization is based in the United States and has several different locations there, a number of subsidiaries in Europe, and several locations within Israel. The second organization recently merged with a Canadian-based company. The merged organization has subsidiaries in the United States, Europe, and Asia.

Our interviewees were low- to middle-level managers who held a variety of positions in the companies. Seven participants were involved with one virtual team, and the others were members of two such teams. Members belonging to two teams were asked to concentrate on the dynamics occurring in the team that was most central to them in terms of investment of time and significance to their work. For most teams, interactions with all team members actively participating took place in the form of telephone conversations once or twice a week. Teams had face-to-face meetings between one and four times a year. One group, whose members were all in Israel but working in different locations, met approximately once a month. The total number of members in the teams described in the interviews ranged from three to twenty individuals. The teams' main tasks were varied; some existed mostly for the exchange of information and advice, and in others, the proportion of decision making was much higher. All teams consisted of people who were mostly from similar functional areas.

The main part of our interviews asked participants to describe and explain various influential behaviors and political processes relevant to their virtual teams and how they compared with their experiences in face-to-face teams. Significant parts of the interview were also dedicated to the understanding of the organizations the virtual teams were a part of, the defining characteristics of their cultures, and the forms of influence and politics prevalent in the teams' larger environment. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to fill out a short questionnaire in two parts. The first part specifically referred to perceptions of differences in frequency of the use of various influential behaviors between the participant's virtual team and his or her face-to-face work team. The second part asked about perceptions of organizational politics as apparent in the virtual team. Based on this evidence, an interesting image emerges of influence, political behavior, and power relations in situations where people do not interact face-to-face but use various other alternatives to perform their job tasks.

VIRTUAL TEAM INFLUENCE TACTICS

We have witnessed a rapid growth in studies that developed well-grounded models and theories of influence and politics in organizations (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980; Gandz and Murray, 1980; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson, 1980; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1992; Yukl and Falbe, 1990). These theories serve as the basis for this chapter. For our purposes, influence is defined as the intentional attempts to affect another to feel, think, or behave in a desired fashion. We influence someone to the extent our behavior has an effect, even if unintended, on that person. Our success in influencing people is one of the most important determinants of our effectiveness as members in organizations. Influence processes are important in teams as they determine how decisions are made, which strategies and policies are implemented successfully, how motivated the team members will be to achieve the team's goals, and how much cooperation and support will be a significant part of the ways members interact with each other.

There are many possible tactics of social influence, and the choice of specific tactics can depend on the social and physical context, the qualities and status of the individual or group we are trying to influence, the goal of our influence, our own dispositions, and the organizational atmosphere and culture in which the influence attempts take place. Each of these influence tactics has vivid meaning in interpersonal work-life contacts. Table 14.1 summarizes these tactics as they were identified in two seminal studies (Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson, 1980; Yukl and Falbe, 1990).

At first glance, most of the influence processes and tactics also seem applicable to interactions in virtual teams. Yet they are not all used in the same

Table 14.1. Influence Tactics

Rational persuasion	Using logical arguments and facts to persuade another that a desired result will occur
Inspirational appeals	Arousing enthusiasm by appealing to another's values, ideals, and aspirations or by increasing the other's self-confidence
Consultation	Asking for participation in decision making or planning a change when the other's support and assistance are desired; showing willingness to modify a proposal to deal with the other's concerns and suggestions
Ingratiation	Using praise, flattery, and friendly or helpful behavior to get the other in a good mood or to think favorably on you; acting humbly and making the other person feel important
Personal appeals	Appealing to the other's feelings of loyalty and friendship toward you when asking for something
Exchange	Offering an exchange of positive benefits or offering to make a personal sacrifice, indicating willingness to reciprocate at a later time, or promise of a share of the benefits if the other helps accomplish a task
Coalition	Using the assistance of others or noting their support to persuade the other to comply with the desired goal
Legitimizing	Pointing out one's authority to make a request or verifying it is consistent with organizational policies, rules, practices, or traditions
Assertiveness	Demanding, ordering, and setting deadlines
Pressure	Seeking compliance by using demands, threats, frequent checking, or persistent reminders
Sanctions	Preventing or threatening to prevent benefits such as salary increases or job security
Upward appeal	Causing additional pressure to conformity by invoking the influence of higher levels in the organization, such as making a formal appeal to higher levels or obtaining their informal support
Blocking	Attempts to stop the other from carrying out some action by activities such as engaging in a work slowdown or threatening to stop working with someone

manner, at the same intensity, in the same situations, and with the same effectiveness as in conventional groups. For example, Latane and others (1995) suggested that physical space and distance affect social interactions and social influence. Their study was based on social impact theory, which states that physical immediacy and distance affect the effectiveness of influence efforts on the other person. In other words, different geographical location and greater physical distance between people result in less social impact and a lesser ability to influence others. Our own findings indicate that in virtual arenas, people will adjust their use of influence tactics to the physical distance, as well as the types of communication modes that go with it, the unique needs and conditions of the new cyberenvironment, and the differences in cultures.

When people are not seeing each other while engaged in a telephone conversation or in e-mail sessions, they miss valuable information in the others' reactions. One person we interviewed commented, "You only have the voice; you cannot see the body language. Someone says something, and it is not clear how to interpret it." Our related finding, reflected in each of the questionnaires, is that the limited interaction and the lower familiarity and intimacy that come with it serve in most teams as an objective gatekeeper to some of the less popular and less socially acceptable influence tactics (Yukl and Tracey, 1992). Tactics such as pressure, sanctions, and legitimating are used much less in virtual teams in comparison to face-to-face teams, while at the same time the use of rationality and consultation appear more often. Part of the explanation is that when facing our target of influence personally, we can use the checks and balances of face-to-face interactions, for example, by interpreting eye contact, gestures, or body language. Virtual teams do not allow such balances and force us to be more careful.

A potential positive side of teams that interact face-to-face and have a shared history is the creation of a more cohesive group with a strong obligation to group performance and a higher engagement in behavior and interaction patterns beneficial to the task (Jehn and Shah, 1997). Our research tells us, however, that the potential dark side of familiarity is the use of less pleasant and less rational efforts of influence, resulting many times in lowered effectiveness. As we will see, similar logic applies to the existence of politics in virtual teams.

VIRTUAL TEAM POLITICAL PROCESSES

Politics in organizations is best reflected by influential activities and tactics engaged in by members to maximize their interests and goals in the workplace. Most academics and practitioners agree that organizational politics is inherent in most, if not all, organizational processes and that it reflects the structure and

dynamics of influence behavior and power relations inside organizations. Some definitions add that politics involves behavior not formally sanctioned by the organization (Ferris and others, 1996; Drory and Romm, 1988), given that politics is often associated with a variety of negative actions that are harmful and dangerous from the organizational point of view (Mintzberg, 1983; Ferris and King, 1991; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Parker, Dipboye, and Jackson, 1995). Studies that examined the effect of organizational politics on work outcomes concluded that organizations rife with internal politics usually evince low performance on various scales, from attitudes such as satisfaction and commitment to behaviors like citizenship and negligence (Maslyn and Fedor, 1998; Vigoda, 2000a). At the group level, the prevalence of politics has been shown to increase the level of detrimental conflicts in teams and to lower their performance (Elron, 2000). Hence, organizational politics needs to be studied in virtual teams due to its potential general negative impact on team members and the team as a whole. We define political behavior that exists in virtual teams as virtual organizational politics (VOP).

Overall, under the psychological distance created by the greater physical distance, individuals must face and obey different rules of the political game. Moreover, in most cases, it is harder to read the political map from a distance, and the meanings of political processes remain vaguer. One participant in our study described these differences:

One of the most salient characteristics of political behavior inside or outside organizations is that it takes place in inner rooms, in hidden corners, and no one actually knows that it is there. You can't actually see it, but you eventually witness its results. You must be very careful in becoming engaged in such influential behaviors; therefore, virtual teams are a bad place to start practicing organizational politics. You can't see the people, you can't evaluate their power and secret weapons, and you have much less control over the entire process compared with face-to-face teams that are nearby. It is much more difficult to read and understand the political map when people are distributed all over the world.

Another interviewee had similar thoughts:

I am not sure, but it seems that a more personal and face-to-face interaction invites more political maneuvers. When there is a higher level of anonymity, people become more careful with each other and try not to escalate situations that otherwise may easily become political. When such situations occur, we recommend taking them off-line, which means pushing them out of the relevant team dynamic.

Interpreting our interviewees' words, there is more risk involved in the meeting of others we do not know well. Risk and perceptions of risk are highly

related to ambiguity and complexity of information. Because organizational politics is both ambiguous and complex, people tend to perceive their engagement in it as risky. In politics, some individuals gain advantages over others by simply gaining information and knowing better who stands in front of them. Learning the nature of the target person at whom you aim influential activities is a necessary precondition for every strategy of political confrontation. In other words, higher intimacy and familiarity provide reliable and trustworthy information that people need when they plan their moves, positions, and decisions in the group. VOP then is seen as an even riskier business than conventional politics mainly because of the lower levels of familiarity.

To know others' political tactics and the best ways to influence them, it is usually not enough to communicate from a distance, even if face-to-face meetings with other team members do occur once in a while. In support of this, studies have shown that e-mail is more effective in increasing the range, amount, and velocity of information and communication of unequivocal information (McKenney, Zack, and Doherty, 1992), whereas face-to-face communication is more effective in circumstances where levels of ambiguity and uncertainty are high and in socially sensitive and intellectually difficult situations (Nohria and Eccles, 1992). Because influence and political behavior are clearly defined among the most sensitive, ambiguous, and illusive organizational processes, they will be implemented more intensely by face-to-face meetings than by virtual conferencing. The application of political resources for manifesting ideas and obtaining goals in virtual teams carries much uncertainty and pervasiveness, which makes the entire process risky and at times even dangerous. In line with this interpretation, one participant argued:

Usually people do not see politics as a positive phenomenon since it can sometimes and somehow harm them, especially in virtual teams. When you work with others in the same place, you get to know them faster, you quickly understand what behavior is considered appropriate and what isn't, and you let everyone else know the same rules. The risk of working in a multicultural virtual team is that they can whisper one to the other while we are not aware of it, until suddenly, out of nowhere, we get a phone call from one of them saying, "By the way, this guy should not be put in charge of the project since he never sticks to timetables." They know that we cannot verify such information since we do not hold their curriculum vitae or supervisor's evaluations, so we are more easily manipulated.

Another consequence of electronic media, especially e-mail, is that written words can indeed serve as documentation and evidence. People in teams that rely heavily on e-mail are therefore more careful with writing than speaking because of the permanency effect of the written word. Thus, political behavior takes on a more careful and covert form when documented.

An additional consequence of the difficulty of using electronic communication, combined with the lesser familiarity and closeness, is that virtual teams tend to be more task oriented and leave less space for the social aspects of a team's existence. Moreover, the electronic interfaces that virtual teams use are built and expected to operate on a more formal level, so much less informal transaction is conducted in virtual teams. Issues are discussed in order to find solutions for problems, and less time and space are available for lengthy or rich informal conversations to develop. As some of the participants testified, hardly any time is left for small talk or other social gestures among the virtual team members unless in one-on-one interactions. When two people want to talk to each other on a topic that is irrelevant to the task or the topic is of no interest to the other members, they are kindly requested to take their conversation off-line, which means out of the general meeting (often held on the telephone). Because political behavior relies heavily on informal communication and transactions among individuals, virtual teams simply allow less political behavior from this perspective. Noted one participant, "Virtual teams are task oriented. You do not have enough chances to read and understand this politics, if it's there at all. In fact, I don't feel that I actually have enough opportunities to be exposed to such activities in my virtual team. We don't have that much time left for politics; we need to work."

Finally, it is interesting to note that to most of our participants, the virtual team they belonged to was less central than their formal role in the organization. This inherent characteristic of participation in most virtual teams means in practice that the team members spend most of their time interacting on a daily basis with their local environment and usually spend only a fraction of their workday immersed in the happenings of the virtual team (Klein and Barrett, 2001). In general, however, the more the team engaged in decision-making tasks rather than merely information sharing, the more central it became to its members, both formally and personally. The link of centrality to the tendency to engage in politics is direct. Although lower centrality could mean that people are more reluctant to invest time and energy in the team tasks, the lower investment also means less emotional involvement and vested interests and, in turn, less engagement in efforts to influence others and less interest in engaging in politics.

NATIONAL CULTURAL IMPACTS ON INFLUENCE AND POLITICS

Cultures are the deeply ingrained patterns of values, perceptions, assumptions, and norms shared by members of the same group (Schein, 1985). National culture is thought to be particularly potent, and its effects on individuals are perceived to be particularly resistant to change. Most studies on intercultural

interactions conclude that they tend to be especially complex. The differences in the value priorities, goal preferences, and interpretive schema held by members of different cultures have the potential to increase misunderstandings, friction, and even conflicts. In the words of one of the team members, "I think it is a matter of associations. When I say something to someone from my own culture, immediately we have a hundred common words and associations that I don't need to explain. When I say the same thing to someone from a different culture, it takes a lot more effort."

In his review of the literature on cross-cultural interactions, Stening (1979) reports a variety of problems, such as disparities in attributions about causes and intentions of behaviors, communication gaps, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, and prejudice. There may be an added complexity in organizations because the differences in cultural values can be manifested in different attitudes toward organizational practices, such as motivational techniques and leadership styles (Erez, 1993; Erez and Earley, 1987; Hui, 1990). Moreover, the cultural differences that members bring to the organization imply that they are likely to have different assumptions about what a good team is or what constitutes an efficient organization (Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001). These differences have implications for the cohesiveness and integration within organizations and organizational groups. Coordination and control can be difficult to achieve in culturally diverse organizations where individual differences of participants are enhanced by differences in their national cultures (Ghoshal and Westney, 1993). (It should be noted, however, that overall, the literature on group dynamics suggests that multicultural and heterogeneous work teams combine different knowledge bases that promote effectiveness and performance of teams and the organization; Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988; Elron, 1997.) More specifically for the theme of this chapter, because virtual teams are mostly cross-cultural, it is interesting to search for variations in political behavior and influence tactics across members of multinational virtual groups and how these differences affect the functioning of the team.

Several studies on organizational politics have suggested that individuals from different nations are likely to perceive organizational politics differently, as well as react to it differently. Vigoda and Cohen (2002) found that Israelis and Britons react differently to the same levels of organizational politics in their work environment. An earlier study by Romm and Drory (1988) found significant differences in perceptions and exertions of organizational politics between Canadians and Israelis. Thus, what is seen as a negative political or influence tactic by one member of the group can seem neutral to another, and the results can be anywhere from a simple misunderstanding to severe negative emotions and dysfunctioning because influence and politics are such sensitive processes. When it comes to the actual meeting of these different cultures, it has been found that cultural boundaries and differences restrain people from

using extremely aggressive influence and politics when they are contained in organizations (Elron, Shamir, and Ben-Ari, 1999). One of the explanations to the milder use is accountability. Many multicultural team participants try to be "on their best behavior" when in contact with members from other cultures because they feel that they are not only private individuals but also representatives of their country and culture. As a result, they tend to use tactics that are more acceptable socially.

Another explanation goes back to the notions of familiarity and risk. A multicultural team means different cultural norms and codes of behavior for different members, some directly related to the use of influence and politics. The difficulty in understanding the codes of another culture and the accompanying feeling of uncertainty increase the difficulty in achieving high levels of intimacy and familiarity, enhancing the risk effect. The differences in levels of understanding the language spoken in the team can have similar consequences. Some of the participants mentioned the role of language as a barrier for effective political processes to emerge. As one participant framed it:

There is something more mild working in virtual teams. Since we are talking about multicultural groups, there is a diversity in levels of spoken or written English among all members. Although we understand each other pretty well, we sometimes do not express ourselves the same way as we do in Hebrew. We also sometimes do not get the bottom line or the accurate meaning between the lines as expressed by the other unless we have gotten to know him or her personally and relate the words with their face and personality. We therefore feel more limited with how strongly we can come on about things.

Less pleasant perceptions of the consequences of cultural differences also exist. More specific to the cultures involved in this study, Israelis perceived their foreign colleagues as separate cultural groups who behave differently from themselves when it comes to politics, mainly in the form of indirectness. Several participants argued that North American members used milder, gentler, and perhaps more sophisticated and covert influence tactics when compared to Israelis, who tend to be more direct and blunt. As a result, they partly adjusted their influence behaviors, which was perceived at times as an unwanted effort, especially when it was felt that the adjustment was made by representatives of one culture only:

The North American members of our team are frequently indirect in their influential behavior. They will try very gently to convince you, and if you are not convinced, they will try once more, and another try, and another one, and so on and so forth, but all is done in a very civilized manner. We Israelis are different. We are more direct in our approach. We have less time to discuss everything all

over again. Explanations are given only once, and we expect the other side to understand it fast and either accept our position or reject it.

Our influential approach is more overt and direct, but this does not necessarily mean that we do not practice politics in our own way. Israeli politics, as distinct from American politics, is characterized by preparing the background in advance. Prior to the virtual team's meeting, an Israeli will talk with one or two more members to see how they can support his or her idea or position from another angle or something like this. This does not mean that an American will not engage in the same tactic, but she or he will be much more careful not to exceed accepted social norms. We, on the other hand, act differently, although we try to adjust ourselves to the team's codes of behavior. Still, we remain much more direct than others.

The consequence of the specific differences in directness is that team members from a more direct culture can sometimes perceive indirectness as political. An interviewee said that he knows who is more political among the Canadian members because "the person is never direct."

This is just one example of how differences in cultural behaviors can cause misperceptions that at times lead to misinterpretations of a person's political tendencies, which can result in rifts within the team. More generally, our findings suggest that in understanding cross-cultural contacts between members of specific cultures, we need to take into consideration that what may sometimes seem to be a relatively small difference on certain cultural dimensions may be magnified due to the contrast between the focal cultures. Because Israel is a Westernized country and Americanized in many respects, and members of all teams belonged to the same professional communities, had had a similar professional education, and had experience working with members of the other cultural group, the cultural differences that team members describe are surprisingly salient. Hence, to understand the true nature and the effects of these differences, we need to ask members of the culture not only about their values, habits, and practices but also about their culture in relation to the other culture.

Contrary to our expectations and to previous findings on face-to-face teams (Elron, 2000), no coalitions based on country of origin were reported. In fact, all participants reported that the use of stable coalitions in the virtual teams was nonexistent unless tense relationships existed in the larger environment.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS ON INFLUENCE AND POLITICS

The surrounding organizational culture is important as an external source of influence on team culture. It may affect the behavior of team members through its impact on the culture of the team itself and through its impact on the beliefs, norms, and values that individual members bring into the team. As Trice and

Beyer (1993, p. 2) noted, "Cultures provide organizational members with more or less articulated sets of ideas that help them individually and collectively to cope with . . . uncertainties and ambiguities." In our interviews, we found that one of the strongest effects on the norms of the virtual team regarding influence and politics is the culture of the organization it is embedded within. Moreover, in one of our organizations, the culture was so strong that the congruence between team and organizational values was considered crucial for the success of the team. In other words, team members observe the unwritten rule that their participation and behavior should cohere with the general cultural norms of the organizations. Consequently, there is a strong reflection of the organizational beliefs and ideology regarding how organizational members should behave with others and influence behaviors within the team. In other words, there is a direct relationship between the intensity of political processes in the organization and the intensity of these processes in the teams. Moreover, the effect on politics is also through the risk effect. Risk effect in the team is related to the risk effect in the organization: when members of the organization perceive the engagement in organizational politics as riskier, members of the team will have similar perceptions.

Both organizations in our study were knowledge organizations, and there is high esteem for rationality in all their processes and in the behaviors people display, as this participant noted:

There is something called our company's values. These are the organization's values: you have to talk quietly, not have emotional outbursts, not interrupt somebody in the middle, come to meetings on time. You will never hear people shouting at each other. When I enter the building, the culture is very different from the outside world.

This rationality is then translated into the teams' processes:

If you have eight people in the group and two are arguing between them in a telephone meeting for over two minutes, you simply stop it and tell them to take it off-line to sort out their disagreements and find a solution. The rest of the group doesn't need to waste time and be part of this.

In general, then, the specific cultures in our study contribute to rationality being the dominant mode of persuasion. This is not to say that this is the only influence behavior for the team. Participants from the merged organization indicated that beneath some of the rational decision-making processes existing in the Canadian organization, competition prevailed, resulting in pockets of high-level political activity. These activities have invaded the joint virtual team, with members blaming others for incompetencies behind their back through e-mail reports and telephone conversations to the central members of the Israeli part

of the team. It is important to remember, however, that although the virtual teams are more or less the mirror image of their organizations in terms of politics, it is nevertheless a diluted image.

In addition to organizational culture, organizational structure also has an impact on influence and politics in virtual teams. As today's organizations restructure, layers of organizational hierarchies tend to be removed, resulting in flatter organizational structure. This flattening is strongly tied to the trend toward getting work done through teams rather than individuals. As the underlying assumption that fewer layers and teamwork enable better decision making strengthens, it has become the typical organizational structure of high-tech companies, manifested in the organizations that participated in our study. Their virtual teams are a reflection of this structure, characterized by a flat hierarchy, minimization of formal positions, and the movement of authority from the hands of selected individuals to those of the entire group. This has a direct effect on VOP by allowing all members of the team to be equally involved in decision-making processes and the sharing of power. This equality is strengthened through the use of e-mail, which easily allows all group members to participate in sharing information and the discussions that follow. Moreover, e-mail allows easy access to all members, even when they have higher formal positions.

As for the more specific issue of authority, all virtual teams that were globally dispersed in our study had nonautocratic leadership or no formal leadership at all. Usually the groups had a coordinator who was equal to all other members in terms of status, with only one group having a formal leader who had no power in terms of evaluating his team members' performance. Hence, the distribution of formal power and resources among team members is relatively equal, which leads to less diversity and more homogeneity among participants in terms of status. This leads to the minimization of political behavior aimed at powerful individuals (or, alternatively, at the least powerful ones).

Closely related to the low levels of formality (and also to the teams' moderate centrality) is the fact that team members in almost all groups were not dependent on their evaluations or reviews from the group leader or group members. This again resulted in less politics because it decreased both competition among group members and the need to engage in upward impression management:

I think that traditional groups may face more internal politics than virtual groups do. Wherever the direct supervisor who provides a term review is also part of the team, politics will increase. In my team, for example, I do not provide the reviews. Instead, I am one of many others who give feedback, and the direct manager presents the integrated materials to the employee. On the other hand, people pay more attention to you if you are trying to practice organizational politics in your team.

The lack of formal hierarchy or centralized authority in most groups also increases the sense that a relatively high level of collaboration and spontaneous cooperation must be achieved to secure the group's goals and existence. Individuals mostly understand that beyond objective obstacles to acting politically, such influential behaviors in virtual teams may harm the mutual, integrative, and collective dynamics that constitute the core of the group. Perhaps this is another reason that individuals report less and milder political activity in virtual teams.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The preliminary findings of our study explore some interesting prospects of politics and influential behavior in virtual teams. In general, these findings indicate that VOP may be significantly lower than operational politics in conventional teams. Members of virtual teams report lower intensities in the use of influence and political behaviors compared with similar activities of conventional face-to-face groups. In addition, the most dominant influence attempts used are rationality, consultation, and assertiveness, which are considered among the most socially acceptable tactics and also the most effective ones (Yukl and Tracey, 1992). The use of less acceptable tactics such as sanctions, exerting pressures and threats, and blocking information was denied by all our interviewees. Most participants agreed, however, that ingratiation, exchange, coalition, and even upward appeal may be relevant behind the scenes but not directly in overt team dynamics. In other words, politics does exist in virtual teams as it exists elsewhere; however, it is much more restrained and mild than politics in face-to-face groups and takes on a more rational form. Summarizing the explanations we found, we offer the following recommendations:

- *Minimize politics.* A consistent and general finding is that less socially acceptable influence tactics and high prevalence of organizational politics are clearly related to more negative attitudes and behaviors and to deficient performance at the individual, team, and organizational levels (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, and Toth, 1997; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Kacmar and Ferris, 1991; Parker, Dipboye, and Jackson, 1995; Vigoda, 2000a, 2000b). We find that this is also true for virtual teams. There are many difficulties in maintaining an effective virtual team. Establishing a strong team identity is harder, creating desirable group norms may take longer, control of social loafing may take more effort, and the lack of face-to-face social cues results in greater cultural and language barriers. Our study looks at a brighter side: less energy and emotional resources are needed to detect, prevent, and invest in political activities. Good logic presented in a rational manner is almost sufficient to run the group.

- *Conduct a limited number of critical face-to-face meetings.* It is the lack of close familiarity and intimacy that helps the more efficient and socially acceptable influence tactics thrive and prevent political games. It seems that two or three face-to-face meetings a year are the optimal number of meetings to keep team members from complete and problematic anonymity yet keep politics low.

- *Discuss cultural differences openly.* Cultural differences in the team restrain political activity but can also cause misperceptions of the meanings of actions members take. Efforts of understanding the differences in members' cultures have been shown to reduce political activity in teams significantly (Elron, 2000). These findings lead us to suggest that cultural differences in influence behaviors should be discussed openly, and a consensus on a comfortable range of such behaviors that are legitimate within the team needs to be reached.

- *Use flat structures.* The team structure is crucial in determining levels and type of politics. Insofar as the team structure is flatter and even without a manager (with one of the members appointed as the administrator of the team), employees will rely more heavily on rationality, reasoning, and perhaps assertiveness but not on other overt and more vigorous activities such as sanctions, blocking, coalitions, or upward appeals, which are more frequent in traditional teams. Therefore, managers should develop team structures that are as flat as possible and safeguard them, dividing responsibilities and authority equally among team members and allowing the teams to decide on its inner dynamics and procedures. Still, this should not interfere with managers' duty to define goals for virtual teams clearly as well as deadlines to meet these goals and stay in line with the organization's needs and vision.

- *Use an understanding of organizational culture to guide practice.* The political culture of the organization and the influence norms it holds have a strong impact on the intensity of political activity in the team. Because the typical virtual team has relatively low intensity of political activity, when political activity in a virtual team is high, check the organizational culture for signs of similar activity.

A general finding of our work is that organizational politics exists in virtual teams, although in a different manner and intensity compared with traditional work teams. Thus, although there may be a tendency to view the sometimes faceless virtual team members as task performers only, managers need to take into consideration that political activities do occur in virtual teams, even if in a milder or less intense manner. Important tactics for managing virtual organizations' virtual organizational politics can improve the effectiveness of the ever increasing virtual collaboration.

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