Politics in Software Development

Navigating Stakeholder Power and Conflict in Organizations

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About the Author

Peter Wendorff has 25 years of professional experience as an IT consultant focusing on the development of modern information systems with Microsoft technologies. Peter takes great interest in academic research and has presented 24 research papers at conferences. He works as a business consultant and academic adviser through his company Software Research Ltd in the UK. Peter holds master's degrees in software engineering (with distinction, 1999, UK) and business administration (with distinction, 2008, UK), besides corresponding German university degrees.

Introduction

If people say that there are political reasons for a decision in an organization, it usually has a negative connotation. It expresses frustration that the decision-making process does not only depend on rational arguments but also other factors. The interests of influential stakeholders are such factors, and they often dominate decisions in organizations.

Decisions in organizations are a frequent target of political interference, but other aspects of organizational life can become subject to the political behavior of stakeholders too. The term "organizational politics" is used to refer to the political behavior of stakeholders in organizations. Two terms that essentially mean the same are "office" and "workplace" politics.

Stakeholder behavior in organizations is political if it involves the use of power to achieve goals that conflict with the goals of other stakeholders. If stakeholders with conflicting goals engage in political behavior and struggle with one another to achieve their preferred outcomes, they participate in political processes.

Effective participation in political processes requires power. In the case of individuals in organizations, their positions, which give them status and formal authority, are the most visible base of power, but it is by far not the only one. For example, relevant expert knowledge is another valuable base in many political processes. Another one, which is often potent as well as controversial, is suggested by the adage, "[i]t is not what you know but who you know."

Political processes frequently involve stakeholders with very different goals. In such cases, the stakeholders often achieve conflict resolution through an agreement that reconciles the stakeholder goals in a way that is acceptable to all of them. Sometimes the compromise is politically viable but not practicable. It is a serious problem and often leads to software projects which are started but are so under-resourced that they have virtually no chance of success.

The problem has been so prevalent in the software industry that Edward Yourdon (2003) wrote a popular book with the title *Death March* about these projects. In it, Yourdon addresses the puzzling question of why such projects are started in the first place if it should be clear to at least some of the stakeholders that there is no realistic chance of success. As it turns out, the reasons are very often political.

A typical case is a stakeholder who strongly supports a project proposal but is afraid that decision-makers will reject it because the costs are very high. To win approval for the project, the stakeholder might intentionally underestimate its costs, downplay its risks, and exaggerate its benefits. If the decision-makers regard the stakeholder as an expert, they have good reasons to trust the manipulated cost-benefit analysis, and the fraud may well result in the decision to approve the project.

The behavior of the stakeholder in the example meets the criteria for political behavior outlined before. First, the stakeholder uses power based on expert knowledge, which makes others trust the manipulated analysis. Second, the stakeholder uses the power to achieve a goal, which is the approval of the pet project. Third, the goal is controversial, which makes lying necessary.

As its approval is the result of manipulated information, it can be expected that the project will be in trouble later, but by that time, it may be well past the point of no return. Faced with the prospect of a humiliating total loss, many organizations will continue the project, even if the actual costs are much higher than estimated.

The stakeholder who provided the bogus information may face criticism as a result, but the cost-benefit analysis of planned software projects is hardly an exact science. If an estimate turns out to be wrong, it is usually not difficult to invent reasons later that sound plausible and innocent to explain why the analysis went wrong. In this way, it may be possible to disguise the deceit as an unfortunate, innocent mistake.

The example illustrates how competition for the limited resources of an organization can give rise to political behavior of a stakeholder. Understandably, stakeholders tend to favor causes that benefit themselves rather than others, and they routinely use their power and engage in political behavior to get what they want. As other stakeholders compete for the same resources, conflicts arise, and political processes take place.

Many members of organizations find the use of lies to get a pet project approved morally unacceptable. Therefore, this kind of political behavior has contributed to a bad image of organizational politics, which is commonly associated with dishonesty, infighting, backstabbing, and the use of dirty tricks.

While the disdain for dirty politics is understandable, it is equally important to acknowledge the beneficial functions of political processes in organizations. They can also be thought of as arenas where stakeholders with conflicting goals can argue, persuade, negotiate, bargain, and cooperate to address conflicts and find agreements that reconcile differences constructively. In organizations, this regularly happens in an entirely civilized manner, and it helps find necessary solutions to disagreements that are simply a natural part of organizational life.

Political behavior occurs at any level of authority in organizations, and one of the root causes is that most organizations reward individuals based on their perceived performance. The goal is to encourage superior performance through internal competition, and a natural effect of this approach is that ambitious individuals engage in political behavior to obtain rewards and further their careers. Often this happens at the expense of others, and it can easily lead to situations where working against a colleague is more conducive to career progression than cooperation.

At the same time, organizations heavily depend on cooperation, and members need to appear cooperative to be considered for rewards. To reconcile the conflicting demands, some carefully create the impression that they are cooperative while they secretly undermine the work of others they regard as competitors.

Further evidence for the pervasiveness of political behavior in software development is found in Martin (2020). In his book, Martin identifies some current trends in agile software development that he finds worrying. One of them is the increasing emphasis on agile coaches and their resulting power over software development teams and their processes, which appears to conflict with some core tenets of agile software development.

Martin identifies several reasons for this concerning trend. One is an influential training industry, which stresses the importance of coaching to sell training and certifications. Another is the constant need for coaches in organizations to prove that they are indeed needed, not least to secure their jobs and further their careers. An effective way for them to do it is to disempower development teams and make them dependent on coaches. Martin's observations suggest that cases of this kind are all but rare.

It would be too easy to dismiss all such cases as unintended deviations from the right course, which can be avoided through more sophisticated processes or more training for coaches and other project stakeholders. None of these measures can fundamentally change the fact that organizations are also places where stakeholders compete for rewards. For example, for ambitious agile coaches who focus on their careers, there will always be a temptation to highlight and expand their role at the expense of the teams they coach. If coaches act in this way to advance their interests, they engage in political behavior.

In general, the widespread competition within organizations for recognition, status, power, privileges, perks, promotions, money, and other rewards encourages political behavior. Since it is a well-known, important part of organizational life, it has been extensively studied by management scholars as well as practitioners, resulting in a large number of publications on organizational politics.

Software development offers many opportunities for political behavior and has some specific characteristics that encourage it. For this reason, one would expect organizational politics to be a subject in books on the management of software development. Contrary to this expectation, it is covered in very few titles, and only Yourdon (2003) focuses on the subject.

While many authors on software development have described behavior that is clearly political, very few have linked their observations to the literature on organizational politics. As a result, they treat political behavior as individual mistakes that can be avoided through training rather than an unavoidable, natural aspect of organizations. Because of this narrow perspective, much of the literature in the field explains in detail how things should ideally be done but fails to acknowledge that in practice, there are often political reasons why these prescriptions do not always work as intended. This blind spot has led to a significant gap in the literature.

The present book is an attempt to fill the gap in an engaging and credible way. It is written for stakeholders in software development and provides them with an overview of political behavior and organizational politics. While political actors are usually careful to hide their true intentions and disguise their actions, the goal of the book is to make it easier for stakeholders to identify, analyze, and understand political activities in their projects and organizations.

A large number of popular books on office politics shows that many professionals regard political skills as helpful. Decades of research confirm their view and have contributed to a large body of literature on organizational politics available today. It is a valuable resource for anybody interested in the subject, and one goal of this book is to give readers an overview of some relevant literature suitable for further study. To this end, we provide citations in the text where possible.

The book consists of three main parts. Part I constitutes a concise overview of some key concepts related to power and conflict in organizations. Most of the material presented in the first part is general in nature and not specific to software development. Part II is concerned with software development processes. To a large degree, they define the power balance between project stakeholders, and the focus in this part is on how their design reflects stakeholder interests. Part III of the book looks at the skills that characterize successful political actors. While they usually attempt to hide or disguise their political activities, we highlight them in this part and explain how political behavior works.

Power and Conflict

Fundamental Concepts

A meaningful discussion of organizational politics requires a good understanding of some fundamental concepts. The definitions and explanations offered in this chapter clarify their meaning in the context of this book.

Stakeholder

The term "stakeholder" is central to the study of organizational politics and many other subjects. It was already casually used in the introduction to denote participants of political processes. The stakeholders in a political process are the parties that are affected by it or its outcome. They do not necessarily have substantial power in the process, although in practice, they are typically able to influence it to some degree (Yourdon 2003, p. 49).

It is sometimes best to conceptualize a group of individuals in an organization that share similar interests and cooperate to achieve them as a single stakeholder. Accordingly, a stakeholder can either represent an individual or a group of individuals.

There is no single, correct definition of stakeholders in most practical cases. Instead, any choice of stakeholders is a matter of judgement, represents a particular perspective, and serves a specific purpose. It usually also requires

trade-offs, and in some situations, it may be better to regard a group of individuals as a single stakeholder, and in others, it may be better to divide the group up into two or more stakeholders. In any case, a stakeholder representing multiple individuals should always be a meaningful unit of people who cooperate to achieve shared goals.

For the analysis of generic management processes in organizations, it is often sufficient to consider only two abstract stakeholders, managers and subordinates. Likewise, it may suffice to distinguish project managers and developers to analyze the interactions within software project teams. However, if the developers have different roles, it may be necessary to define more stakeholders to represent differences in interests or activities. Moreover, additional stakeholders become necessary if their interactions with teams or their members are of interest.

The members of an organization are the individuals who join it, contribute to its operations, and are subject to its rules. All employees are members of their organizations. In this book, we focus on internal stakeholders, which consist of members only.

Goal

Organizations exist to achieve goals. A goal of an organization is something that it tries to accomplish in the future, and it also represents a commitment to use the organization's resources for the purpose. Organizational goals can exist at different levels, for example, strategic or operational, and they can be more or less formal, for example, explicitly stated in official documents or just implied.

The various goals of an organization also compete with another for the available resources. As the resources are limited, it is not possible to maximize goals such as profitability and staff welfare at the same time. Thus, organizational goals also impact the distribution of benefits among stakeholders, which is a major cause of disagreement. While disagreement among stakeholders is nothing unusual, most organizations achieve broad consensus among their most important stakeholders to support their goals.

To encourage support for their goals, organizations usually provide benefits to stakeholders in exchange for cooperation. The best-known of these benefits is the payment of salaries, wages, and bonuses to their members. While these incentives encourage compliant behavior of stakeholders, the availability of resources limits their use, and often their effectiveness declines the more they are provided.