

Politics in Organizations

Theory and Research Considerations

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Power, Politics, and Social Networks in Organizations

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“While personal attributes and strategies may have an important effect on power acquisition,... structure imposes the ultimate constraints on the individual” (Brass, 1984, p. 518). If power is indeed, first and foremost, a structural phenomenon (Pfeffer, 1981), it is surprising that so much research on politics in organizations has taken a behavioral or cognitive approach focusing on individual aptitudes and political tactics and strategies (see Chapter 1 in this volume). This chapter attempts to remedy that shortcoming by presenting a structural, social network approach to power and politics in organizations. While not slighting all that has been learned via behavioral and cognitive approaches to politics, it is argued that the structure of social networks strongly affects the extent to which personal attributes, cognition, and behavior result in power in organizations.

A basic introduction to social network analysis is provided, and the social network research relating to power in organizations is reviewed. The focus here is on the context of political activity, the network structure within which political activity occurs. Rather than attempt to integrate the cognitive and behavioral findings with the structural, how behavior and cognition lead to structural positions of power in organizations is explored instead. Rather than focus on political tactics that may be useful or useless within given structures of relationships, the focus is on *social network tactics* that may alter the structural constraints on the acquisition of power in organizations. Moving beyond the interpersonal acquisition

of power, the larger network structures are considered that facilitate the effective use of power to bring about large-scale organizational change.

Following Brass (2002), it is assumed that organizations are both cooperative systems of employees working together to achieve goals and political arenas of individuals and groups with differing interests. Furthermore, it is believed that interdependence is necessary and that political activity and the exercise of power most likely occur when different interests (conflict) arise. Though power is relational and situational, perceptions of power are important, and most employees seem to agree on who has general (across situations) power. Despite the negative connotations associated with politics in organizations and opinions as to whether it is a good or bad thing, it is obvious that it needs to be studied and understood to develop an informed understanding of organizations and how they function.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND POWER

The diagrams in Figure 12.1 (adapted from Brass & Labianca, 2011) are illustrative of social networks and how they might relate to power and politics. A social network is defined as a set of nodes (social actors such as individuals, groups, or organizations) and ties representing some relationship or absence of a relationship among the actors. Although dyadic relationships are the basic building blocks of social networks, the focus extends beyond the dyad to consideration of the structure or arrangement of relationships in addition to the attributes, behaviors, or cognitions of the actors. The pattern of relationships defines actors' positions in the social structure and provides opportunities and constraints that affect the acquisition of power.

Actors can be connected on the basis of (1) similarities (e.g., physical proximity, membership in the same group, or similar attributes such as gender), (2) social relations (e.g., kinship, roles, affective relations such as friendship), (3) interactions (e.g., talks with, gives advice to), or (4) flows (e.g., information, money; Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, & Labianca, 2009). Ties may be binary (present or absent) or valued (e.g., by frequency, intensity, or strength of ties), and some ties may be asymmetric (e.g., A likes B, but B does not like A) or directional (e.g., A goes to B for advice). Most

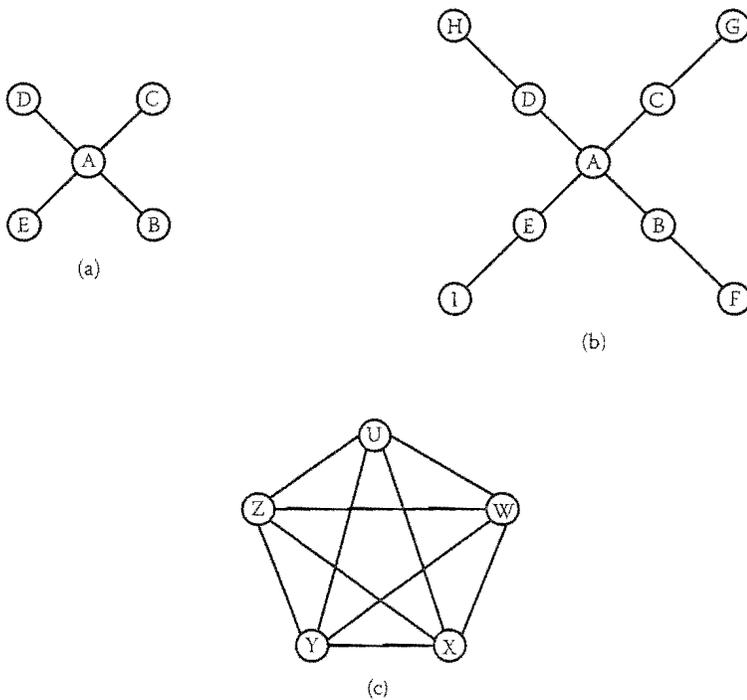


FIGURE 12.1
Networks and power.

organizational researchers explain the outcomes of networks by reference to flows of resources. For example, central actors in the network may benefit because they have greater access to information flows than more peripheral actors. However, networks can serve as *prisms* as well as *pipes* (Podolny, 2001), conveying mental images of the actor's status to others observing the network interactions.

The added value of the network perspective is that it goes beyond individual actors or isolated dyads of actors by providing a way to consider the structural arrangement of many actors. Typically, a minimum of two ties connecting three actors is implicitly assumed to have a network and to establish such notions as indirect ties and paths (e.g., *six degrees of separation* and the common expression *It's a small world*; see Watts, 2003). The focal actor in a network is referred to as *ego*; the other actors with whom *ego* has direct relationships are called *alters*. Social networks have been related to a variety of important organizational outcomes (see Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004, for a review of research findings).

NETWORK CENTRALITY

Considering the simple network diagram in Figure 12.1a, it is not difficult to hypothesize that the central actor (position A in Figure 12.1a) is in a powerful position. That hypothesis is based simply on the pattern or structure of the nodes (actors) and ties, without reference to the cognitive or behavioral strategies or skills of the actors. From a structural perspective, the *patterns* of relationships provide the opportunities and constraints that affect power and politics. The hypothesis that central network positions are associated with power has been confirmed across a variety of setting. These include small, laboratory workgroups (Shaw, 1964), interpersonal networks in organizations (Brass, 1984, 1985; Brass & Burkhardt, 1993; Burkhardt & Brass, 1990; Fombrun, 1983; Krackhardt, 1990; Sparrowe & Liden, 2005; Tushman & Romanelli, 1983), organizational buying systems (Bristor, 1992; Ronchetto, Hun, & Reingen, 1989), intergroup networks in organizations (Astley & Zajac, 1990; Hinings, Hickson, Pennings, & Schneck, 1974), interorganizational networks (Boje & Whetten, 1981; Galaskiewicz, 1979), professional communities (Breiger, 1976), and community elites (Laumann & Pappi, 1976).

Several theoretical explanations can be provided for the relationship between centrality and power. From an exchange theory perspective, actor A has easy, direct access to any resources that might flow through the network (not dependent on any particular actor) and controls the flow of resources to other actors (B, C, D, and E are dependent on actor A). Negotiation researchers might evoke the well-known explanation of relative best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA) determining negotiation power. Actor A has several alternatives, whereas the other actors are dependent on actor A. From a cognitive perspective, central actors have better knowledge of the network than peripheral actors (Krackhardt, 1990). They are more likely to know who knows what or whom to approach or avoid in forming coalitions. From a prism perspective, central actors are viewed by others as more powerful. Whether or not the perception is accurate, central actors may be able to obtain better outcomes or to receive deferential treatment based on that perception.

From a network perspective, actor A in Figure 12.1a is the most central in the network. Measures of actor centrality are not attributes of isolated individuals; rather, they represent the actor's relationship within the

network. Actor centrality has been measured in a variety of ways. For example, the number of relationships, or size of one's network, is referred to as degree centrality. Other things being equal, a larger network is a more powerful network (Brass & Burkhardt, 1992). Also, it can be distinguished as to whether one is the source or the object of the relationship. In-degree centrality refers to the number of alters who choose ego, and it is argued that being the object of a relationship (i.e., being chosen by others) is more prestigious than being the source (i.e., choosing others as measured by out-degree; Knoke & Burt, 1983). For example, Burkhardt and Brass (1990) found that all employees increased their centrality (i.e., symmetric measure) following the introduction of new technology. However, the early adopters of the new technology increased their in-degree centrality and subsequent power significantly more than the later adopters.

STRUCTURAL HOLES

Rather than simply building a large network, Burt (1992) has argued that the pattern of ties is more important than the size of one's network. Burt focused his research on *structural holes*, that is, building relationships with those who are not themselves connected (e.g., actor A in Figure 12.1a has several structural holes because B, C, D, and E are not connected to each other). Structural holes provide two advantages. First, the *tertius gaudens* advantage (i.e., the third who benefits) derives from ego's ability to control the information flow between the disconnected alters (i.e., broker the relationship) or to play them off against each other. Such an advantage is particularly apparent in competitive situations, such as negotiations.

The second advantage is less obvious. By connecting to alters who are not themselves connected, ego has access to nonredundant information. Alters who are connected share the same information and are often part of the same social circles. Alters who are not connected likely represent different social circles and are sources of different, non-redundant information. However, the two advantages of control and access to non-redundant information appear to be a trade-off: To play one against the other, the two alters need to be sufficiently similar or redundant to be credible alternatives. In addition, the irony of the structural hole strategy is that connecting to any previously disconnected alter (i.e., one not

connected to any of ego's alters) creates structural hole opportunities for the alter as well as for ego (Brass, 2009).

For example, in Figure 12.1b, actor A can broker the relationship between actor C and actor B, but actor C can broker the relationship between actor A and actor G. Likewise, actors B, D, and E can broker the relationships between actor A and actors F, H, and I, respectively. In competitive, exclusionary situations (Borgatti et al., 2009), where forming a relationship with one person excludes the possibility of relationship with another alter (e.g., contract bargaining, interorganizational alliances, marriage), actor A's power is substantially reduced by the addition of actors F, G, H, and I in Figure 12.1b (Cook, Emerson, Gilmore, & Yamagishi, 1983).

However, in cooperative, information sharing situations, actor A's position is enhanced by the addition of indirect ties to alters F, G, H, and I in Figure 12.1b. Networks may produce different outcomes contingent upon the competitiveness of the situation (Kilduff & Brass, 2010). Comparing Figure 12.1a with Figure 12.1b also points out the importance of going beyond the dyadic relationships to focus on indirect ties and the larger network. Global, *whole-network* measures of structural holes (i.e., betweenness centrality) have been associated with power in organizations (Brass, 1984), while local, ego-network measures of structural holes have shown robustness in predicting performance outcomes (Burt, 2007).

A third possible advantage to structural holes is illustrated by a *tertius iungens* strategy (Obstfeld, 2005). Rather than "divide and conquer," the broker (e.g., actor A) may connect two alters (e.g., actors B and C) to the benefit of each (e.g., marriage broker, or banks connecting borrowers with lenders). Within organizations, ego may connect two alters with synergistic skills or knowledge rather than mediate the exchange between the alters. Such *tertius iungens* behavior may enhance the broker's reputation, and create obligations for future reciprocations from the alters. Although little research has investigated the exact mechanisms involved, the evidence indicates advantages to actors who occupy structural holes (see Brass, 2011, for a detailed review).

CLOSED NETWORKS

Whereas Burt's (1992) approach to structural holes focuses on the position of individual actors within the network, Coleman (1990) focuses on

the overall structure of the network, addressing the benefits of norms of reciprocity, trust, and mutual obligations as well as monitoring and sanctioning of inappropriate behavior that result from *closed* networks. Closed networks are characterized by high interconnectedness among network actors (often measured as the density of relationships) such as depicted in Figure 12.1c. The actors in Figure 12.1c (U, W, X, Y, and Z) are *structurally equivalent*. In Figure 12.1c, each actor is connected to each other actor, and it is difficult to predict which actor will be most powerful without additional information about the abilities or political skill of the actors. Figure 12.1a presents a strong structural effect, whereas Figure 12.1c represents a weak structural effect on individual power. However, Figure 12.1c represents a strong structural effect on group power (e.g., the effect of unions or coalitions in acquiring power).

Closed networks provide the opportunity for shared norms, social support, and a sense of identity that may prove essential to groups seeking power. In closed networks, such as Figure 12.1c, information circulates rapidly and the potential damage to one's reputation discourages unethical behavior and, consequently, fosters generalized trust among members of the network (Brass, Butterfield, & Skaggs, 1998). However, closed networks can become self-contained silos of redundant, self-reinforcing information that may prove self-defeating in acquiring power in the larger network. For the group, a balance including a local, core group of densely tied, reliable friends as well as external ties to disconnected clusters outside the group may prove most beneficial (Burt, 2005; Reagans, Zuckerman, & McEvily, 2004).

THE STRENGTH OF TIES

Following Granovetter's (1973) seminal research on the strength of weak ties, social network researchers have focused on the nature of the relationship as well as the structure of relationships. Tie strength is a function of its interaction frequency, intimacy, emotional intensity (mutual confiding), and degree of reciprocity (p. 348). Close friends are strong ties, whereas acquaintances represent weak ties. Granovetter argued that strong tie alters are likely to be connected to each other and that weak ties likely extend to disconnected alters in different social circles.

The strength of weak ties results from their bridging to disconnected social circles that may provide useful, nonredundant information. This structural explanation is similar to but preceded Burt's (1992) structural hole arguments, in which he notes that weak ties are a proxy for structural holes. Whereas family and friends may be more accessible and more motivated to provide information, weak tie acquaintances were more often the source of helpful information when searching for jobs (Granovetter, 1973).

Strong ties also have benefits because they can be trusted sources of influence. For example, Krackhardt (1992) showed that strong ties were influential in determining the outcome of a union election. Weak ties are more useful in searching out information, but strong ties are useful for the effective transfer of tacit information (Hansen, 1999). Strong *embedded* ties provide higher levels of trust, richer transfers of information, and greater problem-solving capabilities when compared with arm's-length ties (Uzzi, 1997). Thus, strong ties are more trusted sources of advice and may be more influential in uncertain or conflicting situations. However, strong ties require more time and effort and are likely to provoke stronger obligations to reciprocate than weak ties.

The expected effects of tie strength have been confirmed in research on dyadic level negotiating (Valley & Neale, 1993). Friends achieve higher joint utility than strangers. However, some research suggests that there might be a curvilinear relationship between tie strength and joint utility (e.g., lovers may be overly concerned about avoiding damage to the relationship and be unwilling to press for an adequate resolution to their issues). As Valley, Neale, and Mannix (1995) noted, relationship strength affects not only the outcome but also the process of dyadic negotiation—that is, the quantity of moves available as well as the quality of the interaction.

While friends may prove to be valuable assets in forming coalitions or endorsing controversial changes, negative ties (e.g., enemies or opposing parties) may have more impact than positive ties (Brass & Labianca, 2011; Labianca & Brass, 2006). For example, Labianca, Brass, and Gray (1998) found that strong positive ties to other departments did not reduce perceptions of intergroup conflict but that a negative relationship with a member of another department increased perceptions of intergroup conflict. Moving beyond the strength of the dyadic relationship, it is expected that third-party friends (or enemies) also may facilitate or hinder the acquisition of power. Having a friend with a negative tie to a member of another

group also increased perceptions of intergroup conflict (Labianca et al., 1998). These results suggest that avoiding enemies may be more important than soliciting friends in attempting to influence others.

In addition to the affective strength of ties, social network researchers have debated whether one type of tie (e.g., friendship) can be appropriated for a different type of use (e.g., sales, such as in the case of Girl Scout cookies). Can a friend be counted on to support an influence attempt? Though many employees recognize the sales advantages of establishing relationships with customers, some evidence (Ingram & Zou, 2008) suggests that people prefer to keep their affective relationships separate from their instrumental business relationships. Relying on friends for support of influence attempts may prove defeating in the long run if such tactics damage affective relationships.

TIES TO POWERFUL ALTERS

Lin (1999) argued that tie strength and structural holes are less important than the resources possessed by alters. Following Granovetter's (1973) work, Lin, Ensel, and Vaughn (1981) found that weak ties reached higher status alters more often than strong ties and that obtaining a high-status job was contingent on the occupational prestige of the alters. Similarly, having ties to the dominant coalition of executives in an organization was related to power and promotions for nonmanagerial employees (Brass, 1984, 1985). Sparrowe and Liden (2005) extended these findings by focusing on the nature of the tie as well as the network resources of the alters. While confirming that centrality was related to power, they found that subordinates benefited from trusting (LMX) relationships with central, well-connected supervisors who shared their network connections with their subordinates (sponsorship). When leaders were low in centrality, sharing ties in the leader's trust network was detrimental to acquiring influence.

Actual ties to powerful alters may provide useful information and other resources, but the *perception* of being connected to powerful others may be an additional source of power for ego. For example, when approached for a loan, the wealthy Baron de Rothschild replied, "I won't give you a loan myself, but I will walk arm-in-arm with you across the floor of the

Stock Exchange, and you will soon have willing lenders to spare” (Cialdini, 1989, p. 45). Being perceived as having a powerful friend had more effect on one’s reputation for high performance than actually having such a friend (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994). At the interorganizational level, market relations between firms are affected by how third parties perceive the quality of the relationship (Podolny, 2001). Networks represent prisms observed by others as well as resource flows. Whether accurate or inaccurate, perceptions are relevant indicators and predictors of power (Krackhardt, 1990).

BUILDING POWERFUL NETWORKS

As noted in Chapter 1 in this volume, researchers have focused more on political tactics in organizations and less on the structure or context within which such actions occur. One might view the structure or context as fixed and identify structures within which particular tactics might be effective. For example, it might be hypothesized that political tactics will determine power in a structure such as Figure 12.1c while having little or no effect in a structure such as Figure 12.1a.

In one of the few studies to investigate both network structure and political tactics, Brass and Burkhardt (1993) found that network centrality and political tactics (i.e., assertiveness, ingratiation, exchange, upward appeal, rationality, and coalition formation) both were significantly related to perceptions of power. In addition, political tactics and network centrality each partially mediated the relationship between the other and power. Using network position (i.e., centrality) as an indicator of potential power (i.e., access to resources) and political tactics as a measure of the strategic use of such resources, they concluded that behavioral tactics decreased in importance as network centrality increased. These results are consistent with the introductory diagrams; that is, political tactics will have little importance in Figure 12.1a but will be crucial in Figure 12.1c.

Perhaps researchers and practitioners more practically might spend their efforts on factors that employees can control (e.g., political strategies) rather than on attempts to alter network structure. However, the result of political tactics is not solely within the control of one party because all influence attempts are relational. Similarly, the extent to which individuals

have control over network relationships also must be considered. Even one's direct relationships are in part dependent on another party. Not every high school invitation to the dance is accepted.

If important outcomes also are affected by indirect relationships (over which ego has even less control), the ability of ego to build a powerful network is inversely related to the path distance of alters whose relationships may affect ego. For example, Fowler and Christakis (2008) found that a person's happiness was affected by the happiness of alters as many as three path lengths removed in the network. Human agency decreases and structural determinism increases to the extent that relationships many path lengths away affect ego. With this limitation in mind, social network tactics that may be useful in building powerful social networks are examined next.



SOCIAL NETWORK TACTICS

Much has been written on how to win friends and influence people, but relatively little research has investigated building effective networks. Yet research focusing on predictors of network connections provides some clues on how to build powerful networks. For example, Brass (2011) reviewed several network antecedents.

Spatial, Temporal, and Social Proximity

Despite the advent of e-mail and social networking sites such as Facebook, being in the same place at the same time fosters relationships that are easier to maintain, that are more likely to be strong, and that provide more stable links than electronic touch points. A relationship is more likely to form between people who are close in the social network (e.g., acquaintance of a friend) than three or more links removed. Krackhardt (1994) referred to this as the *law of propinquity*, suggesting that the probability of two people forming a relationship is inversely proportional to the distance between them. To the extent that organizational workflow and hierarchy locate employees in physical and temporal space, additional effects of those formal, required relationships on social networks can be expected.

Homophily

Birds of a feather flock together, and there is overwhelming evidence for homophily in social relationships: People prefer to interact with similar alters (see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001 for a cogent review). Similarity is thought to ease communication, to increase predictability of behavior, to foster trust and reciprocity, and to reinforce self-identity. Feld (1981) extended homophily by noting that activities often are organized around *social foci*. Actors with similar demographics, attitudes, and behaviors will meet in similar settings, will interact with each other, and will enhance that similarity. However, similarity also can lead to rivalry for scarce resources, differences may be complementary, and people may aspire to form relationships with higher status alters. Similarity is a relational concept, and organizational coordination requirements (e.g., hierarchy and workflow requirements) may provide opportunities or restrictions on the extent to which a person is similar or dissimilar to others.

Balance

A friend of a friend is my friend; a friend of an enemy is my enemy. Cognitive balance (Heider, 1958) often is at the heart of network explanations (see Kilduff & Tsai, 2003 for a more complete exploration). However, the effects of balance are limited; in a perfectly balanced world, everyone would be part of one giant positive cluster or two opposing clusters linked only by negative ties. The adage, “Two’s company; three’s a crowd,” also suggests that two friends may become rivals for ego’s time and attention.

Human and Social Capital

As French and Raven (1959) famously noted, human capital in the form of expertise is a source of personal power and likely a source of social capital because those with expertise are sought out by others. Social capital is generally defined as benefits derived from relationships with others (Adler & Kwon, 2002). However, as Casciaro and Lobo (2008) noted, the *lovable fool* is preferable to the *competent jerk*; people choose positive affect over ability. People with social capital also are attractive partners; that is, forming relationships with well-connected alters creates opportunities for

indirect flows of information and other resources. The research suggests the following.

1. Be in temporal and physical proximity by intentionally placing yourself in the same place at the same time as others.
2. Recognize the power of homophily and seek out ways in which you are similar to others.
3. Increase your human capital skills and expertise, and in the process, increase your status (“preferential attachment”).
4. Leverage existing relationships to create new relationships using balance theory tenets (Brass & Labianca, 2011).
5. Perceptions are important and people are not likely to form relationships with others who are perceived as motivated by calculated self-interest.

Emerging Networks

Considering these findings, Krackhardt (1994) proposed a three-dimensional model (i.e., dependency, intensity, and affect) of the fundamental processes by which networks emerge in organizations. Dependency refers to the extent that one person is dependent on another for the performance of tasks, particularly important from the resource dependency framework. Interdependency is a necessary prerequisite to conflict and subsequent political activity and the exercise of power. A high level of dependency refers to relationships that are critical to task accomplishment. Crozier’s (1964) classic study of the dependence of managers and workers on maintenance personnel in a French tobacco plant illustrates the power of dependency. Dependency likely will be affected by formal workflow and hierarchical reporting requirements and is positively associated with temporal, spatial, and social proximity, human capital such as expertise, and social capital such as centrality.

Intensity refers to the frequency and duration of interactions. Intensity may be minimal even in high-dependency situations, and purely social interactions, though low on dependency, may be high or low on intensity. Low-intensity weak ties are low cost in terms of time commitment and may provide useful, nonredundant information from distal parts of the organization. While strong high-intensity ties may be the source of

reliable, trustworthy information, low-intensity ties may be the source of novel, creative information. The third dimension, affect, refers to how a person feels about the relationship, from strong feelings (love and hate) to weak feelings (politely positive or neutral). Affect likely will be associated with homophily and balance. Relationships can be characterized by any combination of high or low degrees on all three dimensions.

Krackhardt (1994) argued that overall patterns tend to emerge over time as a function of these three dimensions. Dependency tends to promote intensity. Employees with task-related needs for information, resources, or permission seek out alters who can satisfy these needs. Connecting with the alter who fills the need will lead to repeat interactions and will increase intensity. When intensity is high, prolonged frequent interactions induce affective evaluations. Frequent interaction leads to strong emotional bonds, whether they are positive or negative.

Over time, employees learn what to expect from each other, resulting in positive feelings of trust, respect, and even strong friendships. Or employees may learn that others are untrustworthy or unlikable. Whereas strong positive affect will reinforce the relationship, strong negative affect will shorten the life of, or destabilize, the tie. In either case, the proposed model suggests that affect will increase with intensity. Those parts of the network that are reinforced with positive affect will form a stable core, and negative ties will be replaced or disappear over time.

The model suggests that the parts of the network that depend on trust will be stable over time, and evidence suggests that the stable, recurring interactions are the ones that employees see and recall. These are the relationships that people as a matter of habit and preference tend to use. These ties are the old standbys that employees have learned to trust and depend on. The low-dependency, low-intensity, low-affect interactions tend to be more fluid and transitory.

These findings and analysis suggest that the central, powerful players in an organization are neither the competent jerks nor the lovable fools (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008) but rather those who are both competent and likable and become the old standbys. Accomplishing tasks in a reliable, trustworthy, and pleasant fashion increases others' dependency, intensity, and affect. Perceptions are key, and being perceived as unreliable, incompetent, or unpleasant to work with defeats any attempts at increasing centrality. Self-interested, calculative behavior often is labeled *political* and remains a perceptual contrast to merit.

Thus, solely self-interested attempts at influence will be perceived negatively and decrease centrality. Such attempts often are dyadic in nature (e.g., ingratiating oneself to powerful others in hopes of obtaining a promotion or a larger raise). Influencing others to bring about positive organization change also may occur one dyadic relationship at a time, but large-scale change requires moving beyond the dyad to consideration of the larger network needed for the effective use of power. The larger network is addressed in relation to forming coalitions conducive to successful organizational change.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Following McGrath and Krackhardt (2003), we begin with the assumption that innovative organizational change begins with a creative idea. Based on the notion that the recombination of diverse ideas leads to creativity, people with diverse networks that span across differentiated clusters of knowledge will be the sources of good ideas. This suggests that weak ties and structural holes (i.e., connections to disconnected sources of nonredundant information) will be instrumental in generating innovative ideas, and research has confirmed this hypothesis (Burt, 2004; Perry-Smith, 2006; Zhou, Shin, Brass, Choi, & Zhang, 2009).

The task, then, is for the creative few to convince the rest of the organization that their ideas are good ones. Innovations that are clearly superior to the status quo will be easily adopted by others, and clearly inferior ideas will be rapidly abandoned. It is the controversial innovations that will likely succeed or fail based on effective or ineffective attempts to influence others. As noted in the introduction, the exercise of power is of greater necessity when conflict occurs.

The task of the creative few is to build a coalition of support for their ideas. We refer to these few as *founders*. Coalitions form around issues and ideas, and politics can make strange bedfellows. The first task of founders is to find someone who likes their ideas. Murnighan and Brass (1991) suggested that founders need a large number of bridging weak ties to accomplish this, although a network of reliable, trusted contacts can provide the template for knowing how people will respond to issues and ideas. Krackhardt (1997) modeled this process, assuming that founders seek out

others close to them in the network for feedback on the value of their ideas. Extensive bridging ties can extend this search beyond local connections.

Based on Asch's (1951) conformity experiments, at least one positive response to a founder's idea is necessary to proceed with the innovation. Founders retain their beliefs if they achieve initial support or abandon them if they are surrounded by people who disagree with them. Knowledge of the network is particularly important, and founders are advised to pick the low-hanging fruit first. As previously noted, avoiding negative ties may be particularly important. Founders must know where others stand on issues and approach those who are likely to agree. Because central, powerful alters may be motivated to maintain the status quo, this may mean approaching peripheral actors who are more likely to be open to the merits of the change. Power may be used by the elite to sustain the status quo or to shape perceptions such that alternatives are not considered and existing roles are viewed as beneficial (Lukes, 1974).

Central actors who disagree with the innovation also will be able to mobilize countercoalitions to block the diffusion process, whereas central actors who agree may facilitate the diffusion. By approaching like-minded alters, founders can build numbers, or advocates who can extend the diffusion process until it reaches the tipping point either by virtue of motivated disciples or the persuasiveness of the sheer number of advocates. Infectious disease may spread via a single contact, but behavioral change may require multiple contacts from different sources (Centola, 2010). Targets are more susceptible to persuasion when approached by different advocates at different times, each reinforcing the behavioral change.

Krackhardt's (1997) computer simulation suggests that founders focus on local clusters on the periphery of the organization with few links to the central core, thus avoiding central core positions until requisite numbers are achieved. When the innovation is controversial, nonadvocates are as likely to convert advocates to remain with the status quo as vice versa; ties across clusters tend to give the advantage to the status quo. Thus, founders first need to establish cohesive clusters of support (e.g., Figure 12.1c) so that nonadvocates are not mobilized. While founders' extensive weak ties or structural holes may be helpful in knowledge of the network and whom to approach, founders must be careful not to approach minority advocates in majority nonadvocate clusters, as the majority will quickly convert the minority advocate.

Having established a base, founders and early advocates can slowly and carefully move to adjacent clusters with sufficient numbers to convert more adopters before attempting to convert the central core or the entire organization. Krackhardt (1997) referred to this as the *principle of optimal viscosity*. Organizational change is accomplished when actors in subunits are minimally connected, and “the seed for change is planted at the periphery, not the center, of the network” (McGrath & Krackhardt, 2003, p. 328).

The optimal viscosity model contrasts with the widely held notion that ideal, flat, maximum density organizations can respond rapidly to change. Although such an ideal type may not be possible or even desirable (Krackhardt, 1994), extensive connections across subunits will result in rapid diffusion only when innovation is accepted as clearly superior to the status quo. However, when innovation is clearly superior, political activity and the exercise of power are clearly unnecessary.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the main objective of this chapter was to demonstrate how a social network perspective might contribute to greater understanding of power and politics in organizations. Organizations are designed to be cooperative systems; however, political activity occurs when conflict arises, and those with power have the advantage. Research was summarized relating power to centrality in the organizational network, noting the advantages of ties to both connected others (closed networks) and disconnected others (structural holes). Generating positive organization change requires both the creative ideas and knowledge of the network provided by bridging ties to disconnected clusters (structural holes) and the support for the diffusion and adopting of these ideas provided by closed networks of trusting ties. Tactics for building centrality in the network were suggested, as were ideas regarding bringing about organizational change. The hope is that these ideas will generate research on political strategies that may be effective or ineffective within the context of the structural opportunities and constraints of social networks in organizations.

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