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Andrew M. Pettigrew

Towards a Political Theory of Organizational Intervention¹

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the neglected theme of the political context of the interventionist's work in terms of the client-consultant relationship and the consultant-consultant relationship. It is suggested that the internal consultant's ability to influence clients will be a function of his possession and tactical use of five power resources: expertise, control over information, political access and sensitivity, assessed stature and group support. Of these, the first three appear to be necessary but not sufficient conditions for consultant power. Once he has the political access and understanding, the consultant's ability to negotiate and persuade depends on his assessed stature with the appropriate figures in his political network.

INTRODUCTION

One of the themes noticeably absent from much of the writing on organizational change is the political context of the interventionist's work. As Rhenman (1973:162) argues, with the possible exception of Jaques (1951) and Whyte & Hamilton (1964) 'there is seldom any mention of a consultant's influence on the political system or his relations with the formal power system' of the organization. That this subject is rarely discussed in academic papers does not detract from its importance to those who have to live with its effects. The choice of project area, the formation of the project team, the development of the assignment and its likely acceptance and implementation by the client are all key transactions bounded by political forces within the organization.

¹ Chris Argyris of Harvard University, Martin Evans of the University of Toronto and Derek Pugh of the London Graduate School of Business Studies have provided helpful comments and criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper. The author accepts responsibility for the views that prevail.

This paper addresses itself to the problems internal consultants have in influencing clients. The organization is here assumed to be a political system. Political processes evolve at the group level from the division of work in the organization and at the individual level from associated career, reward and status systems. Sub-units develop interests based on specialized functions and responsibilities; individual careers are bound up with the maintenance and dissolution of certain types of organizational activity and with the distribution of organizational resources. At various times claims are made by sub-units and individuals on scarce organizational resources. The scope of the claims is likely to be a reflection of the sub-units' perception of the criticalness of the resources to its survival and development. The success of any claimant in furthering his interests will be a consequence of his ability to mobilize power for his demands.

It is the involvement of sub-units in such demand and support generating processes which constitutes the political dimension. Political behaviour is defined as behaviour by individuals or, in collective terms, sub-units within an organization, which makes a claim against the resource sharing system of the organization.

The kinds of resources up for redistribution may vary from situation to situation. They may be salaries, promotion opportunities, capital expenditure, new equipment, and control over people, information or new areas of a business.

Political activity in organizations tends to be particularly associated with change (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Pettigrew, 1973b). Since internal consultants are the initiators of many organizational changes their activities and plans are inextricably bound up with the politics of change. Major structural changes, or even the possibilities of them, have political consequences. Innovations are likely to threaten existing parts of the working community. New resources may be created and appear to fall within the jurisdiction of a department or individual who had previously not been a claimant in a particular area. This department or its principal representative may see this as an opportunity to increase his power, status and rewards in the organization. Others may see their interests threatened by the change, and needs for security or the maintenance of power may provide the impetus for resistance. In all these ways new political action is released and ultimately the existing distribution of power is endangered.

The above analysis has suggested that the consultant-client relationship takes place in the context of organization life where political activity is pervasive and real. Furthermore, the activities of internal consultants, especially in so far as they demand structural changes in organizations, will affect the current balance in the distribution of power and thereby involve both client and consultant in those political processes. If that involvement is not proactive, then it will be reactive, as the political behaviour of others acts as a constraint on the range of behaviour possible for both client and consultant. In this situation, as Bennis (1969) has suggested, if the consultant bases his approach on two sources of influence, truth and love, then it seems likely his plans will remain only dreams. While strategies of influence based on organization development norms may be 'appropriate under conditions of truth, trust, love and collaboration' (Bennis, 1969.77), they may be much less appropriate under the political settings described elsewhere by this and other authors (Dalton, 1959; Crozier, 1964; Pettigrew, 1973b). Part of the 'valid and useful information' not covered in Argyris' theory (1970.17) yet required by the internal consultant is a knowledge of the political processes in his own organization and an awareness of how the particular projects he is working on relate to, and by implication, alter, those processes.

An additional contextual factor which can greatly constrain the internal consultant's interpretation of his role is the stress to which he is exposed. In setting out a rather different theory of intervention from the present one, Argyris (1970.144) emphasizes the importance for the consultant's effectiveness of his ability accurately to perceive stressful reality. This would seem to be a critical yet relatively unexplored issue.

This paper suggests that a principal source of consultant ineffectiveness is their tendency to react to the stresses built into their role and to their relationship with their clients rather than to formulate a proactive strategy based on a full anticipated awareness of their and their clients' position in the political system of their organization. The second major source of internal consultant ineffectiveness stems from their apparent inability to present a unified political force within their organization in dealings with clients. Often major differences in values, work style and career interests disrupt consultancy units and leave clients bewildered about the range and quality of service they can expect. Such uncertainties reflect badly on the

credibility of the consultant (Pettigrew, 1973b). It should be clear then that internal consultant effectiveness is a function of *two* interdependencies. Those between client and consultant and those between consultant and consultant. The nature of the latter relationship has very important consequences for the range of possible behaviour in the former. This point is rarely discussed in the literature on client-consultant relationships.

THE SOURCES AND USE OF CONSULTANT POWER

It should not be assumed from the preceding discussion that political processes in organizations act merely as constraints on consultant activities. In fact, the central theme of this paper is to indicate the political opportunities available to the internal consultant by discussing some of the sources and use of consultant power. As Bennis points out, this has been a neglected approach, 'there seems to be a fundamental deficiency in models of change associated with organization development. It systematically avoids the problem of power, of the politics of change' (1969.78).

Those who do include concepts of power in their theory of changing cannot regard the use of power as a neutral, pervasive aspect of organizational life. Power strategies are discussed as being narrowly coercive. Thus Kotler (1972.183) argues a change agent power strategy involves the use of 'agent controlled sanctions' and Zaltman *et al.* (1972.271) indicate 'power strategies tend to be coercive in nature. They are those strategies in which force and/or the threat of force is used'. While Walton's (1965) description of power strategies is equally dominated by the threat-promise style of interaction he does see a genuine role for power in any theory of social change and recommends that an adequate power base is likely to be important in any attempt to produce attitudinal change.

What is lacking from all these theories of intervention is an attempt to specify likely sources of consultant power and the mechanisms by which such resources are tactically used within the consulting process. The present analysis seeks in part to deal with that deficiency in the literature.

Power is not an attribute possessed by someone in isolation. It is a relational phenomenon. Power is generated, maintained and lost in the context of relationships with others. A power

relation is a causal relation between the preferences of an actor regarding an outcome and the outcome itself. Power involves the ability of an actor to produce outcomes consonant with his perceived interests.

Most actors have power only in certain domains of activity. The scope of their power is limited by their structural position in their organization. This is because the resources which form the base of an actor's power are differentially located by structural position. In this sense, the transferability of power across system boundaries is regarded as problematic.

Power resources, however, must not only be possessed by an actor, they must also be controlled by him. Bannister (1969:386) makes this point succinctly: 'It is immaterial who owns the gun and is licensed to carry it; the question is, who has his finger on the trigger?' Control, however, may not be enough; there is also the issue of the skilful use of resources. The successful use of power is also a tactical problem. The most effective strategy may not always be to pull the trigger.

From this viewpoint, the analysis of organizational power requires some attempt to map out the distribution and use of resources and the ability of actors to produce outcomes consonant with their perceived interests. As we shall see, the main practical problem for the consultant is the movement through the stages of possessing, controlling and tactically exploiting the power resources he possesses. Some consultants are not aware of the potential power resources they do possess. Others are aware of the resources but can neither effectively control nor tactically use them. But what are some of these potential consultant power resources and how and why might they be used?

This writer's research on systems analysts, programmers and operations researchers indicated that there are at least five potential power resources available to the internal consultant (Pettigrew, 1968, 1972, 1973a, b). These are:

1. Expertise.
2. Control over information.
3. Political access and sensitivity.
4. Assessed stature.
5. Group support.

These resources are separated here for analytical clarity; they are, of course, empirically highly interdependent.

Expertise

Singular possession of a valued area of technical competence is perhaps the most familiar source of consultant power. In an early study by this author, 70% of a sample of operations researchers felt they had an influence on company decision-making. Asked how they were able to do this, 55% said 'because we alone have the time and techniques to produce detailed and novel solutions to complex problems of planning.'

The notion of dependency is crucial to the analysis of expert power. Emerson (1962) supplies the initial exploration of dependency. Blau (1964:118) interprets him as follows:

'By supplying services in demand to others, a person establishes power over them. If he regularly renders needed services they cannot readily obtain elsewhere, others become dependent on and obligated to him for these services' unless they in turn can supply services to the former person that he needs. The power of one individual over another thus depends on the social alternatives or lack of them available to the subjected individual.'

The power of consultants over clients is likely to be consequent on the amount of dependency in the relationship. The consultant can maintain a power position over clients as long as they are dependent on him for special skills and access to certain kinds of information. One way that consultants can generate such dependency is to manipulate the uncertainty surrounding their expertise. Crozier (1964) has described this process between engineers and their clients. Pettigrew (1973a) illustrates the same processes between programmers and stock controllers and between programmers and systems analysts in the same firm.

The power of the consultant is unlikely to be omnipotent even with the most technically uncertain problem. Clearly most dependency relationships will be a matter of degree. The relative centrality and substitutability (Hickson *et al.*, 1971) of the consultant group is likely to vary over time. In times of financial stringency the accountant's activities may become more central to the organization's survival. In times of the proliferation of consultant groups all operating from a similar task environment, one group's activities may be seen by client groups to be readily substitutable for another. One strategy used by clients to weaken consultant power is to create another

source of consultant expertise and encourage competition between the two sources. External consultants may be brought in for this purpose. In both these situations dependency relationships may be difficult to generate and maintain.

Control over information

Several authors have mentioned the control over information as a power resource. Mechanic (1962) has argued within organizations dependency can be generated with others by controlling access to the resources of information, persons and instrumentalities. Burns & Stalker (1961) assert that information may become an instrument for advancing, attacking, or defending status. Using the prison as a setting, McCleery (1960) is able to demonstrate how the formal system of authority relations may be considerably modified by the location and control of communication channels. Because all reports had to pass through the custodial hierarchy this group was able to subvert the industrial and reform goals represented by the Prison Professional Services and Industry programs. The head of the custodial hierarchy, the prison captain, for the same reasons was able to exert considerable control over decisions made by his immediate superior, the warden.

This author's research (Pettigrew, 1972) indicates that the structural location of many internal consultants offers them particular advantage with regard to the control over organizational communications. Most internal consultants have roles with high boundary relevance (Khan *et al.*, 1964). They have many significant work contacts across departmental boundaries within their own organization and between that organization and relevant others. In this regard, they are well positioned to take on the role of technical gate-keepers. As such they are potentially able to influence the resource allocation process in their organization through a process of collecting, filtering and reformulating information.

Previous research (Pettigrew, 1972, 1973b) has indicated consultant gate-keepers may be particularly effective at controlling information in the uncertain conditions surrounding innovative decisions. During these decisions, strategies of uncertainty absorption (March & Simon, 1958:166) may enable consultants to produce outcomes in line with their perceived

interests. Counter-biasing by clients in these decisions is likely to be problematic. In the consultant-client relationship where the information passed will be complex, uncertain and rapidly changing, the possibility for clients either to identify bias, or deal with it by counter-biasing, is likely to be that much more difficult.

Aside from their ability as gate-keepers to control the flow of technical information, consultants may have access to other sorts of information which they may be able to put to use. As part of their investigations into other departments, consultants may uncover the inefficiencies and incompetences of others. Even if they do not actually reveal these inefficiencies, the client may perceive the consultant has this information. Some consultants are prepared to use this information against recalcitrant clients. It is frequently referred to as the 'dirty linen strategy'.

The sole reliance on expert power through the demonstration of technical competence is rarely successful against a client probably already very defensive about his own lack of technical expertise. Baker & Schaffer (1969.66) argue that inadequate client-consultant relationships are often made worse 'by the behaviour of the staff consultants, who mask their own unsureness and anxiety with a thick amount of professional jargon and technical talk.'

Few internal consultants can afford therefore to rely exclusively on their expertise and control of information. The consultant's placement in the communications structure needs to be reinforced by other forms of political access. The consultant may not just rely upon the presumed dependency which the mystique of his expertise can give him. He may actively seek support for the demand he is making. His ability to generate this support will be conditional on his possession, control and tactical ability in using three additional power resources. His assessed stature in the locus of power in his organization. The amount of political access he has and its corollary, his sensitivity and use of political information and processes. And finally, the amount and quality of group support he can mobilize from his peers. As we suggested earlier, the ability of an internal consultant to influence a client is a function of at least two interdependencies. That between consultant and consultant and that between consultant and client. Power is a systemic and not just a relational phenomenon.

Political access and sensitivity

To the internal consultant interested in the acceptance and implementation of his ideas, political access is likely to be critical. In the political processes which surround many organizational changes the ideas which remain supreme will not necessarily be a product of the greater worthiness or weight of issues ranged behind them, but rather in the nature of the linkages which opposing parties have to individuals over whom they are competing for support. (For detailed empirical examples of this in a study of computer purchase decisions, see Pettigrew (1973b).) The amount of support a consultant achieves is likely to be conditional on the structure and nature of his direct and indirect interpersonal relationships.

The present discussion of political strategies is based on the assumption that men seek to adjust social conditions to achieve their ends. This view of man does not assume that all behaviour is self-interested. Neither is it assumed that the process of adjusting means to ends is a rational one. Individual choices are limited by their perception of the situation on which they base their strategies. As Kapferer (1969) notes, individuals continually commit errors because of misperception through lack of information or miscalculation. They may also be manoeuvred into committing errors. A final and significant restriction on rationality is the constraints of access imposed by man's location in a network of social relations.

The politically aware consultant is likely to be conscious of the span of his social network, the degree of reciprocity in those contacts and the extent to which the relationship are uniplex or multiplex (Gluckman, 1956; Kapferer, 1969). All interactions are composed of a number of transactions or exchange contents. They might be conversation, personal service, job assistance and social related interactions. The latter in an organizational setting might be spending coffee or lunch periods together and a range of after-work social and sporting contact. Multiplexity refers to the number of exchange contents in any relationship. A relationship becomes multiplex when there is more than one exchange content within it. A uniplex relationship has only one exchange content. The present theory of social power argues that multiplex relationships are 'stronger' than those which are uniplex. Generally speaking the consultant will be able to exert greater pull and influence over the client to whom he is multiplexly tied.

How focused the consultant's network is to the locus of power in the organization is also critical. Clearly there is little political advantage in having a network with an extensive span of multiplex relationships if they are with individuals with little power. The consultant should be sensitive to the relative power of those he endeavours to attract. Along with a reasoned perception must come effective action. Bailey (1969:108) makes this point well.

'Knowledge is power. The man who correctly understands how a particular structure works can prevent it from working or make it work differently with much less effort than a man who does not know these things. This may seem obvious yet actions are often taken without previous analysis, and out of ignorance.'

Assessed Stature

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that the mobilization and tactical use of power rests on the understanding of at least three general elements. A power aspirant with his set of potential power resources. Some mode of interpersonal activity or other communication, and a recipient of the influence attempt. The notion of assessed stature not only seems to be critical power resource for the internal consultant (Pettigrew, 1973b); it also serves as a way of conceptually linking the above three elements of the power process.

Consultants do not merely advise, they persuade, negotiate and exercise the power they can mobilize. Assuming the consultant is both able to successfully identify and has access to the centre of power in his organization, an important constraint on his ability to negotiate and persuade is likely to be his assessed stature, both in that centre of power and in his immediate interpersonal relationships with clients. Assessed stature is defined as the process of developing positive feelings in the perceptions of relevant others.

The development of assessed stature may be linked to what Goffman (1969) has to say about impression management. 'When an individual enters the presence of others, he will want to discover the facts of the situation. Were he to possess this information, he could know, and make allowances for, what will come to happen and he could give the others present as much of their due as is consistent with his enlightened

self-interest' (Goffman, 1969.220). What is critical, yet imprecisely defined by Goffman here, are 'the facts of the situation'. From this author's viewpoint the process of accruing the facts of the situation may be conceptualized as identifying client role saliences.

Before discussing the meaning of role saliences it may be opportune to quote some examples of what occurs when role saliences are not exposed by a party making an influence attempt. Studies by Triandis (1960a, b), on superior-subordinate relationships supported the general proposition that the greater the cognitive dissimilarity between two persons the less effective will be the communication between them and the less satisfied they will be with their relationship.

In a later study, this time of interpersonal relationships in international organizations, Triandis (1967) substantially upheld his hypothesis that work associates who belong to different cultures will experience severe communication problems and low levels of affect towards each other. A less precisely researched but more poignant example of the failure to anticipate role saliences in others is offered by Hall (1968.10-11). He describes a series of unproductive meetings between American and Greek diplomats where the assumptions and behaviour patterns of each side were misunderstood and the result was a slow but inevitable break-up of the exchanges.

Clearly what is established from the Triandis (1967) study and Hall's example of interpersonal misunderstandings in diplomatic negotiations, is that if parties to such relationships are to influence one another they must be in the position to identify what is salient in the other party's perspective and behaviour. The concept of role salience recognizes that different groups of clients and consultants have varying sets of needs, expectations and reference group affiliations. They also relate to others with differing sets of political interests. The present suggestion is that a consultant's ability to anticipate what is salient for the client in these terms is an important component of the process of generating a high assessed stature for himself. Clearly the assessment and anticipation of these saliences will be that much easier for a consultant with a social network with an extensive span and with multiplex rather than uniplex relationships across that network.

Clark (1974) argues that exchange theory can be used to aid this process of anticipation. He suggests monitoring the course

of a project by mapping out power relations, role expectations and pay-off matrices of the various actors in the consultant-client system and intervening to control sources of variance.

In this discussion, the concept of assessed stature is not equivalent to the French & Raven (1966) notion of referent power. The consultant is not trying to 'identify' or develop a 'feeling of oneness' with the client. Rather the consultant is seeking to identify and thereby anticipate what is salient for the client both in task and political terms, so that his proposals may be formulated to receive minimal client resistance and maximal support from the locus of power in his organization.

In the early stages of any client-consultant relationship part of the tactics of generating high assessed stature may involve demonstrating competence in areas salient to the client. This has been described by some consultants as 'the low key approach'. The consultant takes on small jobs perceived to be salient for client needs and whose successful outcome can be priced in pounds sterling. This way the consultant builds up credits for himself with significant others and later is able to generate support for projects whose salience to others is not so readily discernible.

Alongside the consultant's ability to generate high assessed stature must come the ability to perceive when he has high and low stature. Power derived from stature is a variable phenomenon. Political timing, therefore, becomes important. The time and the way a proposal is presented may have a crucial impact on the support it receives. The consultant seeking to mobilize power must be careful to make his assertions at a time when he has the resources to enforce his will. The consultant with low stature does not make demands on the system that threatens him. See Pettigrew (1973b) for a case example of how the Head of Management Services in a company timed his political demands in a competitive decision-making situation to match the points when his stature with the client system peaked.

Group Support

Arguments in previous sections have indicated that expertise, control over information, and political access and sensitivity are necessary but not sufficient conditions for consultant power. The possession and tactical use of these power resources needs

to be considered in the context of the consultant's assessed stature in the social arena he works.

There is at least one other important variable feeding into this system, the amount and kind of group support given to the internal consultant by his colleagues in his own department and in related consultant groups. A major constraint on political activity in all organizations is the amount of time and energy so consumed. In this writer's research experience (Pettigrew, 1973a, b), protracted power struggles between internal consultant groups use up a great deal of the reserves of time and energy these groups might have more profitably used assisting one another in generating support for their ideas with client groups.

The co-ordination problems posed by internal consultant groups such as operations researchers, systems analysts, programmers and financial planners relate particularly to their emergent status (Pettigrew, 1973a). The task environment shared by developing specialities is often poorly institutionalized. That is to say, the system of role relationships, norms and sanctions which regulate access to different positions and sets of activities lacks both clarity and consistency. In the absence of such clarity and consistency a process of role crystallization takes place. Eisenstadt (1965:31). Strauss *et al.* (1964) have described the strategic aspects of this crystallization as the negotiation of order.

Problems of status and power arise as the emergent consultant groups seek social accreditation. Some groups take on expansionist policies, intrude on others' domains and provoke conflict. The process of the conflict between the rival groups may take on the form of a set of boundary testing activities. As one group seeks power and the other survival, each will develop a set of stereotypes and misconceptions about each other. A group declining in status and power may seek to emphasize that part of the core of its expertise which still remains and which may not be covered by the activities of the expanding group. This may be interpreted as a threat by the newer group who are likely to be defensive about their own history of inexpertise in this area. They in turn may retaliate by emphasizing their particular strength. In this way one group's defensive behaviour becomes another group's threat and the cycle of conflict continues.

The *resolution* of such structural conflicts seems question-

able. The conflicts have been *regulated*, however, through a variety of integrative mechanisms. These include creating integrative roles, project teams, project controllers and training in interpersonal skills (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Baker & Schaffer, 1969; Walton, 1969).

However, an additional problem remains. Apparently, some client groups are prepared to encourage conflict between and amongst consultant groups as a way of controlling them more effectively. Wilensky (1967:51) argues Roosevelt's technique for controlling his technical subordinates was to 'keep grants of authority incomplete, jurisdictions uncertain, charters overlapping'. Pettigrew (1973b:145) quotes the example of a Board of Directors' use of this approach.

'By keeping distant from the scene of conflict, by giving the programmers some freedom from the system of bureaucratic rules, and by keeping job assignments uncertain, subject to change at any moment, they prevented the programmers from consolidating in a stable power base, and still managed to extract the knowledge and work necessary for the company's continued prosperity.'

Power conflicts between internal consultant groups are likely to be a continuing feature of organizational life. Issues concerned with the relative share of interdependent activities and the distribution of status and power are only fundamentally defused when the groups are either no longer interdependent or the supremacy of one group becomes so clear that further protest from the other is perceived to be futile. In the continuing absence of either of these conditions, the political position of consultant group *vis-à-vis* client groups will be that much the weaker.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to emphasize the essentially political character of organizational life. Internal consultant-client relationships take place in the context of organizations where struggles for the advancement and maintenance of power and status are pervasive and real. The origins and momentum for these political processes are in part the continual changes that most organizations experience. Major structural changes have political consequences.

Internal consultants have a vested interest in change. This is how they legitimate their presence. Many client groups have a vested interest in relative stability. They have quotas to reach, deadlines to meet and empires to protect. There is no reason to expect them to readily accept changes which are against their interests. That is why the relationship between internal consultants and clients is regarded as a problem one.

The present concern has been to conceptualize the mobilization of consultant power. Power was defined as a causal relation between the preferences of an actor regarding an outcome and the outcome itself. Power involves the ability of a consultant to produce outcomes consonant with his perceived interests. The base of the consultant's power rests on his possession, control and tactical use of five resources. These were expertise, control of information, political access and sensitivity, assessed stature and peer and related consultant group support. Of these the first three appear to be necessary but not sufficient conditions for consultant power. Once he has the political access and understanding, the consultant's ability to negotiate and persuade depends on his assessed stature with the appropriate figures in his political network.

Part of the process of generating high assessed stature rests on the consultant's ability to manage the impressions he creates with others. Given the relatively high levels of stress in the consultant's role and what we know about cognitive and perceptual impairment under stress, this process of impression management is not an easy one. Generating and maintaining stature during a project appears to be associated with the consultant's ability to identify and thereby anticipate role saliences of clients and or key figures in his political network. These role saliences refer not only to the client's values, expectancies and reference groups but also to his political and career interests and how they might be affected by any consultant proposals. Credit can be built up by attending to projects which relate particularly to client saliciencies. This is especially so if the benefits of the project can be expressed unequivocally in financial terms. These credits may then be 'cashed' on projects the consultant has a particular interest in.

Finally, this analysis has highlighted the significance to the consultant of his ability to form multiplex relationships with key figures in his political network. On the development of these relationships depends the consultant's capacity to identify

role saliencies in others and also to assess clearly and accurately when his stature is high and low. It would seem to be important for the consultant to time his influence attempts to coincide with periods when his assessed stature is high. It is suggested that further research using the above concepts will not only help in the analysis of internal consultant-client relationships but also in the development of a political theory of intervention in organizations.

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