

# Reimagining Power and Micro-Politics in Project Organizations

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**Abstract:** The empirically investigated problem of our paper is: What impact do micropolitics and Power have on project management in an organization? Informal Power and micropolitics played a massive role in the projects, and personal and relational knowledge appeared in all projects to achieve the expected results. The project manager uses personal networks, personal relations, and mentor's network with cognitive, affective, and emotional influence as Power and politics if needed to achieve expected results. Power and micropolitics were necessary skills and tools for a successful project manager. The findings relate to the manager's intentions. The informal power and micro-politics process are reused in every project because informal Power and micropolitics are a part of project work. Power accumulation and wise handling are essential leadership tools for every manager. Employees work for managers who have Power over those who do not. The former can get them what they want: visibility, upwards mobility, and resources. Micropolitics and Power represent a unique competence (i.e., knowledge, experiences, and attitudes) and tool for handling any project. Power is significantly underrated as a tool to control and govern projects. Micropolitics is a part of that tool to get the decisions the project leader wants, maybe with future promises. A democratic and consensus-oriented decision process opens for power games and micropolitics rather than hedging them in more hierarchical organizations. A complex matrix organization involving employees in many projects is also open to micropolitics and Power. Micropolitics and Power might prolong and complicate decisions processes in ordinary projects and improve processes in fast-track projects. Micropolitics and Power both increase and reduce the effectiveness and efficiency of an organization. The higher complexity, the higher returns on using Power and micro-politics to get the expected project results.

**Keywords:** Power, Micropolitics, Project management, Power games, Power model, Influence

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## 1. Introduction

Norway has a corporate culture for consensus and compromises, fostering micropolitics and Power. However, Power and politics are considered non-issue in Norwegian project management. This peculiarity is that the Norwegian organization's image is democratic and equal, involving all employees (Olaisen & Revang, 2017). Project management is the temporary leadership of teams and the management of working groups compared to more permanent organizational forms. To succeed in project management, you need both to deliver results and be reappointed by your peers for new projects. The project manager role fosters micropolitics and Power in the role intentions and experiences, even if not included in any of the four investigated companies' role descriptions. The rules of the project management process are learned on the road as streetwise project tools and attitudes and by that as critical success factors (Olaisen and Revang 2017, 2018).

There is a knowledge gap in project management between what we know and what we need to learn about the function of micropolitics and Power. Micropolitics and Power represent what we formally do not know. However, everybody sees the importance of handling micropolitics and Power, and we may then say our problem represents what we need to know. The practical usefulness of micropolitics and Power for project management is evident, and the theoretical need for knowledge about the concepts is thus also overdue.

The problem with the paper is:

What impact do micropolitics and Power have on project management in an organization?

The research problem has resulted in four research questions:

- How do Power and micropolitics appear in projects?
- How does the project manager use Power and micropolitics to influence the result of his project?
- How are the findings related to the actor's intentions in the projects?
- How do the employees regard the manager's use of Power and micropolitics?

The paper is further organized in a methodology, a literature review, findings, a discussion, a conclusion, practical implications, limitations, and further research.

## 2. Methodology

We reviewed the literature as the basics for an open survey study of twelve managers to answer the research questions. We followed up the knowledge from the survey study with twelve in-depth interviews with project

managers in four Norwegian companies in the oil and gas business, where all activities are based on project management.

The methodological approach has been conducting a survey study as fundamental knowledge for interviewing twelve project managers in four Norwegian hydro, oil, and gas companies. We need more theoretical knowledge about the role of Power and micropolitics in projects. The questionnaire survey was done to get a knowledge base of Power and politics in projects. We started by surveying the twelve project leaders in a 25 questions questionnaire. The knowledge from the questionnaire was used to make an interview guide with ten questions for a 90-minute personal interview. The sequence of 10 questions is set up in the following way: Question 1 seeks to clarify formal/informal power and micropolitics' definitions to proceed from a joint base. Questions 2 and 3 evaluate the perceived importance of formal vs. informal power/micropolitics. Questions 4 and 6 try to determine the interviewee's level of knowledge and ability to handle the subjects. We designed the questions to uncover potential gaps between the rated importance of questions 2 and 3 and our skills. Questions 5 and 7 evaluate whether the interviewees are happy with their answers to questions 4 and 6 or would like to learn more. Questions 8 and 9 are phrased as open questions and ask for their experience. Question 10 concerns personal incentives and reward mechanisms for participating in the power and micropolitics game. We conducted a 90-minute follow-up meeting with all twelve managers to discuss the findings.

The questionnaire and interviews were combined to secure better validity and reliability for the results. All the companies practice project management throughout the whole organization. We got access to twelve project managers, each handling projects averaging three billion NOK (i.e., 250 million EURO). The interviews were done in 2016 as a spin-off through an executive education offer in project management by BI Norwegian Business School. Access to the project managers was secured through the executive program. The empirical investigation represents the best-conducted investigation of the importance of Power and micro-politics in project management.

### **3. A Selective Literature Review**

#### **3.1 The Game Concept**

Crozier and Friedberg (1979) assume that formal structures will never sufficiently describe or predict individuals' behavior in an organization. The behavior runs in contradiction to traditional theoretical approaches. Assuming that an organization can only be successful by its individuals' combined activities, Crozier and Friedberg's thesis (1979) implies that its success is finally not dependent on structures, processes, and procedures. As professional as it might be, this framework always has uncertainties, which individuals will use for their interests. Each actor's primary goal is to increase his control over uncertainty areas, i.e., to become less controllable or predictable. In other words, each actor seeks to accumulate Power over others to push through his agenda, which can but must be outside the organization's goals since Power and micro-politics are informal processes (Kieser & Walgenbach, 2007, p. 57). Two fundamental thoughts are hedging the game:

The game's essential rule is that no actor seeks to destroy what he is an integral part of the game. Instead, he must accept a particular organizational framework like a project. The second important parameter is that all actors seek to stay and preferably rise in the organization. The effect of such a structure we do not negate. This ambivalence seems to meet practical experience: a company or a team needs structure, but only partial renunciation of the given framework and the acceptance of uncertainties provide room for change, adjustment, and efficiency according to the formal and informal needs of the stakeholders (Fischer, 2005, p. 89).

Significantly, this is eminent in project teams, which require a high level of flexibility and whose matrix - organizations have fundamental conflicts of authority. So, when looking at Power and micropolitics in projects, the thoughts mentioned above describe the team's underlying theory and the surrounding organization. The main question is how an actor can best explore and use uncertainties to extend Power. The extension of Power will be reused in new projects and strengthen the use of micropolitics and Power in projects. The more agility and flexibility, the more Power and politics. Delegation and involvement are essential parts of the Norwegian equality model, and equality in this respect offers a paradox of more informal Power and politics in addition to rumors and backstage decisions (Olaisen & Revang, 2017) Olaisen and Revang (2018) found that "some of the stakeholders had been talking to each other and the decisions were already taken before the formal meetings."

#### **3.2 Power**

*"Power defines and governs all human relations, including all organizations" (Foucault, 2005, p. 103).*

*"Power is the potential to allocate resources and to make and enforce decisions" (HBSP 2005: xi)."*

*"Power dressed as a cognitive authority delivers all the results you need (Olaisen, 1984, p. 47)." The more bullshit you deal with as a manager, the more you need to bend the processes your way" (Olaisen & Revang, 2017, p. 149).*

*"When you are standing to the shoulders in the dirt, it is important to keep your head high" (Interviewed manager)." The master of the power game is the master of the project" (Interviewed manager)." You do what you must to get the results needed, and using your Power is the only way to deliver on time (Interviewed manager)." Power implies keeping your position and getting better positions and projects (interviewed manager)."*

We find essential insights about how Power constitutes itself in French and Raven (1968). The authors state that seven bases of Power exist:

- Legitimate, which is solely based on role, position, or title
- Coercive Power to negatively sanction a behavior
- Reward power to grant another person what that person desires
- Expert Power administers information, knowledge, or expertise
- Information powers are based on the potential to utilize the information
- Referent power is often regarded as the admiration or charisma of a role model
- Incentive power as bonuses, positions, resources

Often, several power bases constitute themselves in the same actor, either openly assigned or hidden (Martin, 2003, p. 154). Several individual power bases lead to a further elaborated differentiation of Power into formal and informal sections in conjunction with the initial definition. However, no transparent allocation can be made since they are mixed. We may add coalition power, network power, and rhetoric communication power (Olaisen & Revang, 2017). Jevnaker and Olaisen (2022) reimagined the organizational world and found that traveling less traveled roads for success involved handling relationships and role clarifications through Power.

According to Foucault (2005), relationship power influences today's knowledge society. Foucault stresses the importance of the career pipeline and network relationships on the road to the top. "As a manager, you want to come as close as possible to the top, and you do what you must do to come there" (Interviewed manager). Foucault (2005) defines Power as the essential tool in all relationships, especially in all leadership and management forms. Nonaka (1985:203) concluded in his book "The knowledge-creating company" that personal and relational knowledge handled through Power and politics are the key for managers. Olaisen and Revang (2018) concluded that having a leader as a team member of the top management group will secure the transfer of explicit and tacit administrative knowledge needed for resources and decisions. The skills of politics and Power are tacit but explicit in their consequences. Any leadership position involves Power, and not using Power in a leadership job is not the essential tool you have. Without Power no leadership.

### **3.3 Micropolitics**

As per definition, Power is a potential that, to be realized, needs a form of expression. Power often expresses itself as micropolitics in organizations: the ability to change, direct, or influence others' behavior without openly ordering or threatening them. In other words, micropolitics describes using formal and informal Power to push through our agenda.

The intended outcome is encouraging other people to do what we want them to do, preferably - but not necessarily- through the semblance of their own choice (Bosetzky, 2010). Micropolitics might help, but if not, we do what we must to achieve decisions and results (Nonaka, 1985; Foucault, 2005; Olaisen & Revang, 2018). Power and micropolitics in projects are often two sides of the same coin. However, they might also be applied with a Janus face where we both see the smiling face and the revolver face." Tacit and explicit pressure are used in any relations to get what we want" (Foucault, 2005, p. 129). "You get an offer so good for your career possibilities that you cannot reject the offer" (interviewed manager)." Somebody is talking to each other at the back office, and what is discussed at the front office is already decided" (Interviewed manager).

### **3.4 Influence and Persuasion**

Influence and persuasion are two elements of micropolitics: Influence is a mechanism through which people use Power to change behavior or attitudes. Unlike Power, influence can produce an effect without the apparent exertion of force, compulsion, or direct command. The strength of one's influence is generally a function of one

or another form of Power and others' level of dependencies. However, to influence others, one must be open to influence from them; the key is to understand what others want or value (HBSP 2005, 43).

Persuasion is a process that enables a person or group to change or reinforce others' attitudes, opinions, or behaviors. It is essential for success in all relationships - personal and business alike. Persuasion has four elements: credibility, an audience understanding, rhetorical argumentation, and effective communication (HBSP 2005, 73). Credibility is a cornerstone of persuasion. Influence and persuasion are linked to cognitive, affective, and emotional reasons (Olaisen, 1984). Knowing when to show loyalty and when to raise one's voice is a part of persuasion.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Appearance of Power and Micropolitics in Projects**

As one result, all twelve interviewees agree with the definitions of Power, informal Power, and micropolitics (Question 1). Nothing is added or changed. Hence, we conclude that a common understanding exists and forms the base when answering the subsequent sections.

In all cases, formal Power is rated as necessary for controlling the project (Question 2). In 8 out of 12 cases, informal Power and micropolitics are rated as very important, and in 4 cases, they are rated as necessary (Question 3). In general, informal Power and micropolitics are deemed more important or at least as necessary as formal Power. Our finding aligns with the theory; Kotter (2012:181) evaluates organizations empowering employees, resulting in extended use of the accumulated Power. Wong (2007:226) conclude that informal Power and micropolitics are essential but limited by the hierarchy. Our finding is that the top management does not limit Power and micropolitics but encourages it based on their belief in the efficiency of Power and micropolitics in project management. Also, it leads to the question of what precisely the formal Power among project managers represents.

The experience of using informal Power and micropolitics ranges from 4 x good and 8 x perfect (Question 4). The 100% confidence in applying informal Power and micropolitics is higher than the knowledge level. The knowledge level about the effect of Power and micropolitics ranges from poor (3 cases) to good (3 cases) to 6 outstanding cases (Question 6). Considering that "People generally distrust and fear power and those who seek it" (HBSP 2005:14), the results are remarkable as they could be expected to be lower. On the other hand, the interviewees' group consists only of project managers, each with many years of experience. These managers must have had closer contact with the subject than a randomly chosen group. They are all seeking more competence (Questions 5 and 7 wholly answered with No) and support the conclusion that mastering is vital for the perception and project result. The results show that the knowledge about Power and micropolitics is good and that the project managers are ready to use micropolitics and Power whenever needed. The managers rank it as their most effective project management tool.

We use preciseness together with expert Power to overcomplicate things. The managers agreed, "It is better to be roughly precise than precisely wrong. «If these experts are contractors, the personal agenda is often to justify their positions and extend working contracts. The project manager must restrictively adopt the practical framework to move his project forward and not end up in inefficient theoretical expert exercises. He must rely on his knowledge, experience, and skills to consistently make his project's target priority. To do this successfully, he needs to have support from key stakeholders. In all the interviews, the support of key stakeholders is essential for running the project and getting enough resources to handle the project's milestones. The stakeholders might represent other companies than the project manager, but these companies might also be the project manager's next job.

Power must be investigated in how far a culture of "democracy and consensus" is open to power processes and micropolitics. The research monograph of Pahlke and Alexander (2009) characterizes Norwegian companies by:

- Flat hierarchies with a consensus and harmony orientation
- Low expression of formal Power or strong decision making
- Avoidance of open external conflicts but allowance of internal conflicts
- Decision processes involve many people, and decisions can permanently be changed.

The findings are entirely in line with the results of our interviews. Accepting that organizations need the Power to exist, it can generally be anticipated that their informal counterpart's lack of formal Power will be compensated. The more unclear who will finally make the call within a considerable team, the more room opens

for micropolitics. Consensus-oriented discussions "at the coffee corner" replace open conflict management. The longer the process takes or, the more often it changes, the more unclear why decisions are made. These appearances might honorably be called signs of a democratic process. However, in capitalism, a company is, per se, not set up as a democracy. Leaders are neither elected nor the opinion of the majority, finally dominating. Instead, when benchmarked internationally, the processes are time-consuming (i.e., costly) and create uncertainty for partners and suppliers. Both aspects have the potential to damage efficiency and effectiveness seriously.

The issue was described as "no badmouthing on my project! All must propose a way forward for success". Alternatively: "We do behave externally in our project, but we are fighting hard internally," and: "We have to hire communication people for managing the stakeholder politics." Handling the politics decide upon what resources we get," and "We must use our authority for what it is worth. «All the interviewees supported formal and informal politics and Power as essential to handling projects.

Most interestingly, the interviewees proposed a new power base: endurance. For a long time, it seems to lie within persons in the same organization that everybody anticipates they "must somehow be important." As a result, they are being followed without any visible reason or conspicuous achievement. They are, over time, accepted as cognitive authorities owing to their long experience and the stories of what they have accomplished. In a way, their personal story gives them endurance. The project manager uses these storytellers to convince the project members and stakeholders that "this is the way we are doing business, or "this is business as usual" (interviewed managers).and "this is the way we have achieved our success" (Interviewed manager). The storytellers are however instructed by the project managers about what stories to tell in different settings. Any disagreement might be settled by "this is the way we are doing it around here" or "we have always tried innovative and new ways of doing things. » As a manager expressed, "There is a story for everything, and a good storyteller works like a wandering cognitive authority for any project."

#### **4.2 Active Handling of Power and Micropolitics**

Essential points mentioned in the interviews about the usage of informal Power and micropolitics are

- The ability to phrase things and the rhetoric to convince
- The knowledge of whom to ask and whom to use
- Acting by example externally and by Power internally
- One-on-one conversations within the exemplary network
- Using pipeline networks given on the road up as a manager
- Identifying and using upward mobility among employees
- Using personal relations and stakeholder coalitions
- Using endurance as corporate stories of historical success
- Using political compromises to get a best possible result
- Finding the mix that works for the actual project and actual case

Formal power exertion must be backed up by informal Power to work. What is needed is multiple skills and tools found in coalitions and networks. The attitudes and strengths to use the experiences, skills, and tools are required for success. A title, education, or position does not help in a project where the outcome for the members and the project are the two most important factors. That outcome judges a project manager and must do what is necessary to achieve the outcome if that is accepted in the corporate culture. All interviewees believed consensus does not finally drive decisions but is often created to push through an agreed-upon decision. Decisions are often taken because "Somebody has talked together in the back office where everything is decided. «There might be hefty discussions when the project leaders met the stakeholders, but the decisions remained as anticipated.

The most successful actor is the institutional project manager, who controls his stakeholders and makes decisions that he and not necessarily his team can finally justify. The institutional manager knows the game and how to play his cards and knows the team will appreciate his results. He must keep his career in mind and cannot act independently, but informal Power and micropolitics are significant assets used all the time. This institutional manager is the team's hero, and members are lining up both to be on his team and support him. The team members are followers working their way up the pipeline. The followers will always remember who gave them a reward and a position and will keep together throughout their careers and protect each other. There needs to be more conservatism in how to handle the project business. However, there is a possibility for change and innovation simultaneously since managers protect each other from risk and punishment. Balancing stability and

creativity might be the reason for high effectiveness and efficiency in Norwegian oil and gas production. All the managers mentioned the fast-track projects that aim to finish a project in half of the planned and required time. Firstly, all these managers denied managing fast-track projects, and then the managers proposed that half of the projects should be fast-track projects and the other half ordinary projects. The fast-track projects were better planned and staffed, and there was less time for micropolitics but more time for Power. The balancing act of ordinary and fast-track projects was also the balancing act of leadership and management through Power and micropolitics.

#### **4.3 How are the Findings Related to the Actor's Intentions**

The actors' intentions raise the following four questions, which are answered elaborately:

- How does Power constitute itself (formal/informal), and how does the actor apply it?

In its entirety, Power constitutes a sum of formal and informal parts. An actor primarily applies it as a mixture: Pure application of formal Power is not sustainable in consensus-driven teams, and informal Power alone needs more authority. A project manager is more on the "informal side." A high level of situational awareness must carefully balance the elements of Power to push through a case.

- What kind of Power - is the manager the actor? What motivates him when applying Power?

The affiliative manager who wants to be liked rather than apply Power to succeed is often found. Avoiding conflicts would be in line with Pahlke and Alexander (2009). The project manager applies Power open and directly and indirectly, and hidden. What is his agenda, and how does he influence and persuade?

Within these corporations, Power is often applied indirectly and hidden. It can take considerable time for a new person in the organization to understand how and why decisions are made, crucial parameters, and who has the authority. Influence and persuasion are often "low profile" and long discussions in long meetings, including virtually everybody. The manager's agenda is often consensus and team harmony, giving him informal Power to proceed even though he does not fully comply with his team's opinions. It is fascinating how far these rather time-consuming processes move the organizations in a more competitive position than the market or whether the opposite is the case.

- How does an actor express micropolitics?

Actors want to rise in the organization or at least secure their position. The position is often secured by exerting expert or information power, which is used to drive discussions and decisions in a specific direction. In Norwegian organizations, where everybody is heard at length, an expert or information holder has a strong position that can be used for his agenda (i.e., delaying decisions, influencing the allocation of resources, and making himself essential). An institutional manager might use cognitive authority to speed up or delay a process and get the decisions the manager wants. The process might be time-consuming and challenging to understand since hidden agendas exist. The institutional project manager muddle through formal and informal Power and micropolitics.

*"Power for me is friendliness and the explanation of expected results and the contributions to get the results. There is a reward for a contribution and a penalty for not contributing. If you want to grow and to get new possibilities, you will be contributing and you will do your utmost to get the project to deliver on time for cost and quality."*

#### **4.4 How are the findings Related to Answering the Remaining Research Questions?**

- How do Power and micropolitics appear in projects?

Informal Power and micropolitics played a massive role in the projects, and personal and relational knowledge appeared in all projects to achieve the expected results. Power and micropolitics appear through main coalitions of stakeholders and project managers talking together in the backroom or forming alliances.

- How does the Project Manager use Power and micropolitics to influence the result of his project?

The project manager uses personal networks, personal relations, and mentor's network with cognitive, affective, and emotional influence as Power and politics if needed to achieve expected results. All the project managers use micropolitics and Power as critical success factors and, as such, a tool for successful project management.

- How do the employees regard the manager's use of Power and micropolitics?

Employees would work for managers who have Power over those who do not. The former can get them what they want: visibility, upwards mobility, and resources. In contrast, subordinates of bosses who have no power are usually dissatisfied with their situation. The upward pipeline is open for those supporting the power and micropolitics practice. The staffing of fast-track projects is based upon loyalty, long-term knowledge, and practice of Power and micropolitics. The division into ordinary and fast-track projects is based on the availability of project members trained in using Power and micropolitics to achieve their results.

- What organizations foster and hinder Power and micropolitics?

A democratic and consensus-oriented culture opens for power games and micropolitics rather than hedging them than more hierarchical organizations. Informal micropolitics and Power mean a high potential to prolong and complicate decision processes and significantly reduce or increase efficiency and effectiveness. The Norwegian democratic consensus model and a complex matrix organizational model participating in many projects foster a power and micropolitics game essential for project management. The result fosters a higher degree of effectiveness and efficiency in the projects based upon long-term professional attitudes, experiences, and knowledge, developing a unique competence for handling Power and micro-politics in projects.

## **5. Conclusion**

The findings relate well to the manager's intentions. The power and micro-politics process is reused in every project in the way that formal and informal Power and micropolitics are a significant part of project work. Actors with a leadership role and cognitive authority power are the primary beneficiaries. The accumulation and wise handling of Power and politics are essential leadership exercises for every project manager. Political influence, persuasion, and compromises are also used in all projects. Handling large projects requires balancing leadership and management and understanding Power and micropolitics as craft tools. All project managers accepted Power and micropolitics as critical success factors. The managers have developed a unique competence (i.e., knowledge, experiences, and attitudes) in handling Power and micro-politics as an essential tool for handling stakeholders, project members, and the end project results. The training in Power and micro-politics keep the managers together as a project manager tribe. They secure the recruitment of further project managers and project members trained in handling the tools of Power and micropolitics. These are used in new fast-track projects (i.e., projects taking half the time of ordinary projects), serving sound project effectiveness and efficiency.

Although it could be assumed that a flat hierarchy and consensus-oriented decision processes prevent power games, our paper concludes that the opposite is true. Strong informal power bases exist within all four investigated companies, positively affecting the efficiency and effectiveness of a project. The main reasons are a need for more discipline and urgency in the Norwegian consensus model for decision-making and a complex matrix organizational model. The result might positively and negatively affect the four companies involved since the companies need more costs (ordinary projects) and fewer costs (fast-track projects) to come to the same conclusions as other companies.

## **6. Practical Implications**

Which recommendations can be given for handling the daily project management work subjects? The project manager should make the following clear for his project:

- What does the game look like, who are the actors, and where are the areas of uncertainty?
- Which power and micropolitics bases do each actor have, and how do they constitute?
- What are the relationships (coalitions, dependencies) between the actors?
- Which types of managers are involved, and what drives them?
- Which hidden agendas can be assumed, and how will they be pushed through the project?

In parallel, it is essential, to be honest about one's situation and define the following success factors:

- What is our personal goal? Is it in line with our project's goal?
- What is the minimum/maximum achievable outcome independent of our work order?
- What are our power bases, dependencies, and coalitions?
- Who do we need to influence or persuade, and what is the best way to succeed?
- How do we create a sense of urgency and healthy pressure on the stakeholders?

## **7. Limitations**

The study is done in a Norwegian branch context for oil and gas producing companies, and there is undoubtedly a cultural and branch bias. Temporary project organization is vital to how these corporations organize their activities which might imply a much higher degree of micropolitics and power games than in more permanently organized organizations. Norwegian organizations are flat and democratic and might invite micropolitics and power relations more than hierarchical organizations. The respect for solution-based equal professionals versus more position-based elite professionals might also invite more micropolitics and power games.

## **8. Further Research**

We need to investigate if the Norwegian model for project management fosters micropolitics power and micropolitics while the hierarchical model hinders micropolitics and Power. What are the consequences of different models concerning micropolitics and Power? Likewise, we should investigate the corporate culture's Power and micro-politics in project management. We should also investigate the costs and benefits of power and micropolitics games in project management.

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